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Arctic Circle Student Briefing

Arctic Circle Student Briefing About the Arctic development

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The Arctic Circle Conference 2021 was a welcome post-COVID get-together event with many different voices heard – both outside and inside the arctic territory – of what does the Arctic future may look like. Development, many times associated with a sustainability notion, was the single word maybe most commonly heard on and off stage in different speeches and discussions. But very little was actually debated about the concept itself and what does development actually mean to all the different actors present.

Common for several stakeholder views was that despite of all the different environmental or social issues we are confronting at the moment and the urgency in solving them, in the horizon there can still be seen some kind of a brighter future, a better way forward. This concept was presented on different viewpoints. Development was mentioned in relation to material efficiency: how the cod skin is a valuable part of the fish nowadays while thrown away only some decades ago. Development was mentioned in relation to accessibility: how e-planes or improving the transport infrastructure will open up new geographic areas for more opportunities hopefully leading to wealthier and more unified Arctic communities. Development was mentioned in brave multi-sectoral initiatives and increased collaboration with indigenous people and youth for making the unheard voices to be heard. Development was mentioned in relation to financing sector's more sustainable approach for profitable investing opportunities in the region.

However, when we looked into environmental or social data related to the Arctic, we see a completely different type of development: temperatures in the region are rising rapidly - and the Arctic nations themselves are not least to blame, being responsible for 22% of global carbon footprint¹. Arctic sea ice is melting at alarming rates, and in addition to having potential for creating new geopolitical concerns, it also has serious natural effects, e.g. through rising global sea levels and making the lives of the ice-dependent species, like polar bears, more difficult. Climate change and globalization are also dominant drivers of diverse societal impacts in the Arctic: for example in Greenland, along the economic development, ecological grief is increasing with medical and psychological issues alike.

So, how can we connect these two fundamentally differing views of development? Personally, I think that if we are truly respecting the notion of sustainability when defining the term, development must mean that before we create something new and brilliant, we think first what to do with the old things still around. When we see a fish, we treat it as a sentient animal and try to think ways of how not to exploit the whole stock just for our short-term benefits.

¹ <https://arcticwwf.org/newsroom/the-circle/arctic-tipping-point/arctic-nations-are-responsible-for-22-of-the-worlds-carbon-footprint/>

When we create new innovations related to transport, we realize how accessibility is also related to environmental degradation by creating just more infrastructure and transport. When we talk about unheard voices, we understand why these unheard groups have become voiceless in the first place and give them the recognition they deserve in the decision-making processes. When we discuss about financing the opportunities, we understand what kind of global influence our profit-seeking approach is having in the world. But this is just my definition - the notion needs to be discussed fairly and openly with all the different actors involved before we agree on “developing” the Arctic any further.