



Lessons Learnt

A review of the cross-programme collaboration between EU cooperation programmes in the Arctic covering the period 2016-2021

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Executive summary

The Arctic Cooperation officially started in 2016 after the publication of the EU's Joint Arctic Communication, "*An integrated European Union policy for the Arctic*". However, in the years preceding 2016, several activities and events were organised to achieve a greater coordination between actors involved in regional development in the Arctic.

Cooperation in the Arctic area was deemed of growing strategic importance towards the end of the 2007-2013 funding period. To explore and develop the Arctic dimension of the NPA Programme, several preparatory projects and the so called "Bodø process" were launched to identify the scope for a more systematic and strategic coordination between different European and other programmes within the Arctic area. The European Commission took this work further and gave a mandate for the Arctic Cooperation network between the programmes in their Joint Arctic Communication from 2016.

After a range of consultations, the NPA Secretariat drafted a road map for the further coordination between the programmes in the Arctic. Following the publication of the roadmap, informal discussions and a range of workshops were held during the period 2015-2016. It then became clear that a core group of programmes was prepared to continue the increased coordination and cooperation. This included Interreg Botnia-Atlantica, Interreg Nord, Kolarctic CBC, and Karelia CBC.

In practice, the cooperation started with the roadmap, and coordinated communication efforts, including a joint logo and a joint website message. This was later expanded with a joint factsheet, and joint Facebook page, as well as joint events.

On a project-to-project level, the Arctic Cooperation organised several clustering events, bringing together projects in the themes of e-health, bioeconomy, energy efficiency, and entrepreneurship. The purpose was to capitalise on synergies between funded projects of different programmes, and where possible, encourage clustering projects, where the NPA programme funded actual cooperation activities between the project actors. In total, 4 Arctic clustering projects were funded.

In the spring of 2017, the first edition of the now widely recognised Arctic Awards project competition was launched. The award is an annual project competition designed to highlight exceptional projects focusing on topics of particular relevance to the Arctic area. In testimonials, regional, national, and European representatives, as well as projects themselves have mentioned the Arctic Awards as one of the best ways to promote results, put Arctic issues on the agenda, and raise the profile of Arctic projects.

Regular physical and online meetings have been held with the aim to ensure a more fluent exchange of information between the programmes. To prevent potential overlaps between funded projects, a practice was set up to exchange project summaries during assessment processes, to receive specific feedback from other programmes. This exchange was also very useful during the programming process for 2021-2027. When it comes to events organised by the European Commission, the Arctic Cooperation participated more than once in the EU Arctic Stakeholder conferences and EU Arctic Forum. In addition, the annual EU Regions Week has been a platform for the Arctic Cooperation. The most high-level and largest stand-alone

event organised by the Arctic Cooperation was a conference in September 2019, entitled “What can cooperation do for the Arctic”. The event focused on showcasing the results of the Arctic Cooperation, through concrete project presentations, videos and an exhibition. The agenda included keynote speeches from the European Commission, and a panel of regional representatives. Besides this, the Arctic Cooperation has participated in many Arctic themed events organised by other Arctic networks.

What characterises the Arctic Cooperation is the pragmatic approach to cross-programme coordination and organising joint activities, based on openness, good will, and trust. It was understood that the joint activities should stay within the remit of programme administrations, and not enter into the domain of policy makers.

No dedicated resources were allocated for the Arctic Cooperation, when the mandate was given in the Joint Arctic Communication. The programmes were already up and running since 2014, when the Arctic Cooperation started in 2016. This is why it was decided to organise joint activities as much as possible in line with ongoing programme activities, such as organising workshops as back-to-back events with regular programme events. Still, some financial efforts were required for the organisation of bigger events, on average 10.000-15000 EUR per programme per event. The return on investment for these resources is viewed as enormous, looking at the increased visibility, better coordination and synergies, and knowledge sharing in everyday work.

Each Arctic Cooperation programme has its own geographical area in which they are operating. These areas are partly overlapping, but the cooperation has very clearly shown that each programme has its own purpose, and the overlapping should not be seen as a negative issue, but rather like a fact that enables the building of wider partnerships across programme borders and better a flow of information and ideas from programme to programme.

Besides this synergetic and networking effect, the cooperation has also clearly raised the visibility and awareness of the programmes, the projects, and of Arctic regional development issues more generally. The cooperation has lifted the profile of each programme and its projects to new audiences, including decision makers. The fact that the cooperation can exist without a macro-regional or sea-basin strategy is seen as a novelty, also described as a “soft cooperation”.

For this report, perspectives and testimonials were gathered from regional and national representatives, as well as projects, and representatives from the European Commission. Highlighting different aspects of the cooperation, they all support the view that the Arctic Cooperation has proven to be a useful and flexible structure for achieving visibility, better coordination, and synergies beyond what each individual programme could hope to achieve. The objectives set out in the roadmap were largely achieved. It has been recognised that the Arctic Cooperation adds a regional development aspect to the EU Arctic Policy.

Going forward, there is scope for a deeper cooperation, more involvement from the Monitoring Committees, more synergies for stakeholders, and more outreach to other networks, also outside the EU. The lessons learned from the 2016-2020 experience put the cooperation in a strong position going forward to address the objectives set out in the new Joint Arctic Communication from October 2021.

1. A brief history

The Arctic Cooperation officially started in 2016 after the publication of the Joint Arctic Communication by the European Commission¹. However, in the years preceding 2016, several activities and events were organised to achieve a greater coordination between actors involved in regional development in the Arctic. This chapter outlines activities that took place in the years preceding the Arctic Cooperation, laying the groundwork for the more established coordination work that followed.

1.1. Coordination Efforts between 2007-2013

Cooperation in the Arctic area was deemed of growing strategic importance towards the end of the 2007-2013 funding period. Arctic cooperation takes place in a number of international fora, for example, the Arctic Council, the Barents Council and the EU ARCTIC Forum.

The interest of the EU in the Arctic Region was in 2012 addressed in a joint communication from the EU Commission and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The communication, "Developing a European Policy towards the Arctic Region: progress since 2008 and next steps" (2012), identifies a number of themes where EU wants to contribute, for example, concerning climate change, the environment, sustainable development and shipping and maritime safety.

As well as the major economic interests, an opinion formulated by the European Economic and Social Committee from 2013 addressed the globally emerging interests in the Arctic Region seen from the civil society's point of view. This opinion highlighted the importance of involvement of the civil society, including the indigenous people.

To explore and develop the Arctic dimension of the NPA Programme a preparatory project, *Arctic Dimension in the Northern Periphery Cooperation*, was carried out in 2012-2013. In parallel, the so-called "Bodø process" took place. This initiative was taken by the Norwegian and Scottish members of the NPA Programme Planning Group with the overall aim to contribute to regional development and cooperation through a strategic and coordinated use of different European and other programmes within the Arctic area. A number of workshops and seminars were held with this purpose with a view to explore a more systematic way of cooperating between the programmes that cover the Arctic area.

The European Policies Research Centre was hired to assist, and the result was the "Arctic collaboration mechanism" report. Apart from discussions in the NPA Monitoring Committee, Norway and Scotland also had meetings with the European Commission, (DG Regio, DG Mare and DG Near), and organised a couple of stakeholder dialogue meetings, e.g. in Tromsø back-to-back with the Arctic Frontiers in January 2014. In addition, there were plans in Norway for start-up financing, and a node in Tromsø, to build on and connect with other nodes, e.g. in Rovaniemi and Inverness. The EPRC report was presented at a seminar in Scotland House in Brussels in 2015. The European Commission took this work further and gave a mandate for the Arctic Cooperation network between the programmes in their Joint Arctic Communication from 2016.

In conjunction with the 2015 NPA Annual event in Kuopio, a workshop was organised, where the concluding report from the NPP Arctic Preparatory Project and a report made for the Barents Euro-Arctic Council were presented. The reports and the following discussions once again underlined the needs and the

¹ "An integrated European Union policy for the Arctic", 27th April 2016, The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the EU Commissioner for Environment, Fisheries and Maritime Affairs. [Link](#)

potentials for cooperation across programmes and other policy initiatives within the Arctic Region. However, there was no substantial consensus among the participants how exactly the needs should be met and how the potentials could be realised.

Afterwards, the NPA held a number of consultations with other programmes: The Baltic Sea and the North Sea transnational programmes, and the Interreg Botnia-Atlantica and the Nord cross border programmes, as well as the Kolarctic CBC programme. All programmes were interested in cooperation, but due to some programmes starting later, there was insufficient scope for clustering activities. It was viewed that coordination with the transnational programmes could be achieved through a joint thematic event, for example on Blue Growth. In February 2016, a further meeting took place with the cross-border and ENI programmes, to discuss the scope for clustering and other joint activities, ahead of the publication of the Joint Arctic Communication.

1.2. The EU's Joint Arctic Communication

The Joint Communication on an integrated European Union Policy for the Arctic was launched on 27th April 2016, by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and the Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries.

The Communications has three main chapters:

- Climate change and Safeguarding the Arctic Environment
- Sustainable Development in and around the Arctic
- International Cooperation on Arctic Issues

Under the Sustainable Development chapter, the different Interreg and Neighbourhood Instruments are mentioned, and that the EU should work to strengthen collaboration, synergies and complementarity between these programmes and other funding sources in the region. This will be done primarily through two initiatives; setting up a European Arctic stakeholder forum and in parallel with that the NPA shall lead a pilot activity aiming bringing together a network of managing authorities and stakeholders. The communication did not specify the frames and conditions for this pilot initiative.

During 2016, a number of activities took place in the NPA to cooperate with other Interreg programmes, not just in the Arctic, but also with the Baltic Sea Region and the Atlantic Area transnational programmes. An ad-hoc working group was established in the Monitoring Committee for the NPA programme. As part of the activities of the working group, the NPA Secretariat drafted a road map for the further coordination between the programmes in the Arctic.

Following the publication of the roadmap, informal discussions were held with DG Regio, DG MARE and EEAS. Outreach took place to the Northern Dimension, the Arctic Circle and the BEAC Secretariat.

The NPA joined the European Commission's Arctic Stakeholder Forum and Arctic Stakeholder Conference.

It was discussed whether to use the EU "Smart Specialisation Platform" organisation, where an Arctic group of regions could be established:

- Coordinated calls were discussed, but this idea was abandoned at some point, mainly due to the fact that by 2016, all programmes were at different stages of implementation. In addition, the benefits for potential applicants of coordinated calls were not clear.
- Development of common set of assessment criteria in relation to the “Arctic dimension” of the programmes.

At the NPA Annual Event in September 2016 in Akureyri, Iceland, a discussion was organised between different programmes and Arctic policy initiatives. Following this workshop, it became clear that a core group of programmes was prepared to continue the increased coordination and cooperation on the basis of the roadmap. This included Interreg Botnia-Atlantica, Interreg Nord, Kolarctic CBC, and Karelia CBC.

2. The Arctic Cooperation in practice

2.1. What was achieved together and how

Roadmap

The first joint activity of the Arctic Cooperation was the development of a joint roadmap of activities. As described in the previous chapter, the first draft roadmap was made by the NPA Programme, and it was further developed in a series of meetings with the Arctic Cooperation network.

The roadmap organised the work in a number of strands:

- Operation of the Arctic programmes
- Strategic and thematic initiatives
- Preparation for the post-2020 programming

For each strand, the roadmap set out the objectives of the Arctic Cooperation, the means available to achieve the objectives, responsibilities, the involvement of stakeholders, as well as a series of joint activities and their expected results. Besides this, a number of Arctic criteria were defined, which were among other things used as a basis for the Arctic Award project competition.

Joint communication activities

Besides the roadmap, the programmes agreed in 2016 on a logo, and a joint message about the Arctic Cooperation, which was displayed on each of the programme websites. The message was targeted to programme stakeholders, projects, and potential applicants, and focussed on the benefits they could expect to experience as a result of the increased coordination between the programmes.

The objectives of the Arctic Cooperation were summarised as follows:

- more informed/coordinated project selection and thereby a better allocation and better use of the programme funding
- clearer and more integrated information for potential applicants about funding opportunities, and a wider network of potential collaboration partners
- more concrete and relevant project outputs meeting the needs of Arctic stakeholders, and better involvement of these stakeholders.
- better promotion of results; more targeted, on a more aggregated level, and to a wider audience
- more efficient programme management, by pooling resources and achieving a wider impact

- a more strategic approach to impact policy development, positioning the programmes for the post-2020 period, and potentially having a common priority based on Arctic values.

Further joint communication measures included the development of a factsheet about the Arctic Cooperation, which was used to promote the cooperation at meetings and events. Besides this, a Facebook page was set up for the Arctic Cooperation to promote joint activities, but also to highlight programme specific news relevant for an audience of Arctic stakeholders.

Clustering events and projects

One of the first events jointly organised by the Arctic Cooperation was a project clustering event in Skellefteå, Sweden, in May 2017. This event gathered projects from the different programmes around the following themes: e-health, bioeconomy, energy efficiency, and entrepreneurship. The purpose of the event was to capitalise on synergies between funded projects of different programmes, and where possible, encourage clustering projects, where the NPA programme funded actual cooperation activities between the project actors. In the first round, the NPA programme funded two clustering projects, and following a second clustering event in Rovaniemi, in November 2018, two further projects.

Events

The most high-level and largest stand-alone event organised by the Arctic Cooperation was a conference in September 2019, entitled “What can cooperation do for the Arctic”. The event focused on showcasing the results of the Arctic Cooperation, through concrete project presentations, videos and an exhibition. The agenda included keynote speeches from the European Commission, a panel of regional representatives, and reflections on the Arctic Cooperation compared to similar collaborations between programmes across Europe. Approximately 105 people participated, from 12 countries, representing national, regional and local public authorities, including diplomats and senior officers from Foreign Affairs ministries. There were also members of the parliament, as well as members of the EU Commission DG Regio, and research organisations.

When it comes to European events, the Arctic Cooperation participated more than once in the EU Arctic Stakeholder conferences and EU Arctic Forum. In addition, the annual EU Regions Week has been a platform for the Arctic Cooperation.

During the 2017 European Week of Regions and Cities, the Arctic Cooperation organised a joint workshop in Brussels, entitled “Delivering results through a collaboration between Arctic EU programmes”. The Heads of the different programmes held a joint presentation about the Arctic Cooperation, the similarities between the programmes, but also the specificities of each programme. This was the first presentation of Arctic Cooperation to a Brussels audience of approx. 80 participants. The workshop aimed to demonstrate how the political decisions in the Joint Communication were followed up with concrete actions, including an Arctic project clustering event, Arctic project awards, and other joint events. It also highlighted the unique aspect that this cross-programme collaboration operates without a macro-regional or sea-basin strategy.

During the 2020 EU Regions Week, the Arctic Cooperation organised an online Q&A session to demonstrate how to set up a cross-programme collaboration, focusing on coordination and synergies. This became a virtual session, presenting a brief history of the Cooperation, the benefits and success factors of the cooperation from a programme’s perspective, Arctic clustering project’s perspective, and finally an evaluator’s perspective. The session was attended by approximately 44 participants, including participants from DG Regio and other Interreg programmes.

Besides own events and European events, the Arctic Cooperation has through the years also been presented at Arctic themed events organised by international organisations and policy initiatives, such as the Arctic Futures Symposium, the Barents Cooperation Forum, the Arctic Circle Assembly, and the Arctic Frontiers Conference.

Arctic Awards

In the spring of 2017, the first edition of the now widely recognised Arctic Awards project competition was launched. The award is an annual project competition designed to highlight exceptional projects focusing on topics of particular relevance to the Arctic area. The objective of the Arctic Award is to identify good practice, promote Arctic cross- border collaboration, and raise awareness among projects of each other. The awards are to highlight innovative projects with a clear Arctic dimension, which are viewed as inspirational in their participating regions as well as being seen as creating real, measurable impacts on the ground, and being of direct benefit to Arctic Communities. Projects funded by all 5 programmes are eligible to apply. The categories of the Arctic Award competition rotate yearly. Based on the decision of the Judging Panel made up of representatives from all five Arctic programmes, the winners are chosen.

The award is normally handed out during a dedicated festive ceremony, as part of an Arctic Cooperation or programme conference. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to have a physical award ceremony in 2020. For this reason, it was decided to skip the 2021 edition, and instead use the opportunity to evaluate the Arctic Awards, and receive inspiration for the future format of the award.

The purpose of the evaluation was to assess if the Arctic Awards are a suitable tool for the designed objectives, and if the application and selection process was adequate. The evaluation involved interviews with programme staff, Arctic Award winners and a survey among projects of the Arctic Cooperation programmes. In total, 11 interviews took place and 62 people responded to the survey. The conclusions are summarised below for each of the guiding principles of the evaluation.

Fit for purpose

The award succeeded in raising awareness about territorial cooperation in the Arctic area among important institutional stakeholders such as the European Commission and EU External Action services. The Arctic Award winners also reported increased visibility as the main added value from receiving the award. The winners appreciated the recognition received with the Award, acknowledging the hard work and success of the partnership. According to some projects, this has contributed to engaging new partners in project applications and unlock new funding opportunities from EU programmes within and beyond Interreg. This indicates that the Arctic Award also contributed to further promoting cooperation across borders in Arctic regions. The evidence collected indicates that the Awards are serving the objectives and are therefore fit for purpose.

Easy to process

There was overall agreement among all interviewed and surveyed participants that the award would benefit from a simpler application and selection process, thereby also reducing expectations of a “big reward for a big effort”. The evidence collected suggested that the Arctic Award procedures are not easy and this is valid for both applicants and assessors. Different approaches for future awards were considered and the following options recommended: to leave more freedom to the applicants to decide what is the best part of their project to showcase, to allow flexibility in the format of the entry (text, as well as audio and visual material submission), to base the selection on the capacity to engage with end users, e.g. with a public choice award.

Attractive

There is consistent evidence across all surveyed participants that the Arctic Award is an attractive recognition for projects, there is still wide interest in participating to future editions as the Award is seen as effectively increasing projects' visibility. Quoting one of the 2020 Arctic Award winners: "*We who work in projects seldom get this type of attention*". The high response rate and proactive contribution to the evaluation from the Arctic Award winners demonstrates an increased "loyalty" and "ownership" from their side which could be harnessed by the programmes in their initiatives such as conferences, partners' search events, P2P trainings, testimonials, ambassadors etc.

Impactful

There is also consistent evidence that the Arctic Awards generate benefits for the projects. First and foremost, in terms of appreciation for the work done, which increases the partners' confidence to continue the work started. The award also builds a reputation of the project and partners, who then become more attractive to other partnerships for grant applications or can more easily involve end users in their project work. The reputational aspect might have also influenced the possibility of receiving additional grants from other EU programmes.

Right on focus

It was found that main cause for a low number of entries was to be assigned to a certain hesitation towards the categories (Cold Climate Opportunity, Arctic Entrepreneurial Spirit, Overcoming critical mass and Sustainable use of resources). In some cases, the categories were felt too limited and thereby excluded some projects that are Arctic in nature or approach. But the opposite was also pointed out. A change of focus is therefore desirable, moving from a thematic approach in direction of the projects' capacity to engage with end users and demonstration of impacts.

To conclude, the Arctic Award is a recognised "label of excellence" among the territorial cooperation community in the Arctic regions. It should be continued in the future with the same objectives, however, with a different format and focus, allowing for more creative expressions and direct engagement with project end users.

Day-to-day coordination

Regular physical and online meetings have been held with the aim to ensure a more fluent exchange of information between the programmes. To prevent potential overlaps between funded projects, a practice was set up to exchange project summaries during assessment processes, to receive specific feedback from other programmes.

In addition, depending on the joint activity under preparation, ad hoc working groups were set up between different members from the programme administrations and their counterparts at other programmes, for example, in connection with communication, clustering, conferences, or the Arctic Awards.

2.2. Resources

What all the programmes in the Arctic Cooperation have in common is a shared interest in sustainable regional development in Arctic regions. Many of the themes addressed by the programmes are similar, but each programme has its own approach to these common themes, and own dynamic. The synergies between the programmes, and the common interests formed the basis for the cooperation.

Early on, it was clear that there was no consensus to establish a more formal structure for the Arctic Cooperation. Instead, the programmes adopted a more pragmatic approach to coordination and organising joint activities, based on openness, good will, and trust. It was also understood that the joint activities should stay within the remit of programme administrations, and not enter into the domain of policy makers.

No dedicated resources were allocated for the Arctic Cooperation, when the mandate was given in the Joint Arctic Communication. Besides this, the programmes were already up and running since 2014, when the Arctic Cooperation started in 2016. For this reason, the joint work had not been budgeted for. This is why it was decided to organise joint activities as much as possible in line with ongoing programme activities, such as organising workshops as back-to-back events with regular programme events.

Most resources allocated were in the form of staff resources from the programme administrations, and travel costs. Still, some financial efforts were required from the programmes for the organisation of bigger events, on average 10.000-15000 EUR per programme per event. All programmes agree that the return on investment for these resources was enormous, looking at the increased visibility, better coordination and synergies, and knowledge sharing in everyday work.

3. Lessons learnt about the added value

This chapter outlines the lessons learnt about the Arctic Cooperation from different perspectives.

3.1. Programme perspectives

The most intense coordination and collaboration in the Arctic Cooperation happened at the level of the programme administrations; the Joint Secretariats and Managing Authorities of the 5 programmes involved.

Overall, the cooperation between the Arctic programmes has been a useful platform for exchanging experiences at different levels. The programmes have shared information and experiences related to programme management, regulatory requirements, etc. This has shown us that things can be approached and organised in many different ways. This dialogue has been particularly fruitful and interesting because Interreg and ENI CBC programmes have operated in different regulatory contexts.

In addition to the exchange of experiences related to programme management, the dialogue concerning the thematics of programmes has been useful. We have discussed about the thematics for example for the Arctic Awards, and have seen different types of projects apply from all five programmes related to different award categories. This has inspired the programmes to think about how projects and concepts implemented in multilateral contexts could be taken to a bilateral level, and vice versa. And even to widen the thinking: how could these projects operating at different levels but with same thematics benefit each other?

Each Arctic Cooperation programme has its own geographical area in which they are operating. These areas are partly overlapping, but the cooperation has very clearly shown that each programme has its own purpose and the overlapping should not be seen as a negative issue, but rather like a fact that enables the building of wider partnerships across programme borders and better a flow of information and ideas from programme to programme. For individual projects this makes it possible to take their experiences into a

wider context and this way also the regional impacts of these projects – as well as programmes - can be improved. This is the cooperation area in which there are huge opportunities, that have not yet been fully utilised. Nevertheless, the cooperation between the Arctic programmes has been a good start.

Besides this synergetic and networking effect, the cooperation has also clearly raised the visibility and awareness of the programmes, the projects, and of Arctic regional development issues more generally. The cooperation has lifted the profile of each programme and its projects to new audiences, including decision makers. The fact that the cooperation can exist without a macro-regional or sea-basin strategy is seen as a novelty.

Over the years, it can be noticed that the cooperation has matured and deepened, which has made the programmes more familiar with each other, and has led to an easiness when contacting each other for day-to-day business and collegial support. During the preparations for the 2021-2027 programmes, these regular exchanges have been very beneficial for a greater awareness of the direction of the future programmes, a better understanding of new themes or new elements in the regulations, and the development of a common approach to the objectives of the new joint Arctic communication from October 2021, *“A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic”*.

3.2. Project perspectives

The Arctic Awards project competition and the clustering projects were the two main activities of the Arctic Cooperation, in which projects were actively involved. The text below reflects the opinions of Arctic Award winners and Arctic clustering project participants.

Arctic Award winners

Projects considered winning the Arctic Awards as a great sign of appreciation, and a way to raise the profile of the project.

In the case of the NPA project BusK, winning the award was noticed inside the Lead Partner organisation, LUKE, in Finland, as well as in the regional media. BusK project manager Seija Tuulentie describes a further impact, *“the network as such helped in getting a H2020 project ArcticHubs and of course the award was a kind of emblem among participating organisations that the previous project has been well managed.”* She also suggests that the award helped lowered the threshold for getting a new project application approved, and suggests that such an option might could increase the interest in the competition.

Project manager Peter Fischer from the Kolarctic project BRIDGE explains that winning the award gave an extra motivation to the participating students and the partner organisation. The project has been able to use the process to boost the community spirit, and the partners felt they can really contribute to Arctic development and achieve visibility for the good work that they are doing. Writing the application was of course an extra job for the project manager, but not unreasonably time-consuming for someone motivated to apply. Besides this, the award offered a sense of continuity, because a previous award winner, Visit Arctic Europe (Interreg Nord), was based in the same region of Norway, Troms and Finnmark. In Peter Fischer's own words, *“all in all, the Arctic Awards are greatly appreciated. It is a great tool for project management to motivate people. There is an element of continuity and community to it.”*

Clustering projects

Arctic clustering projects consist of at least 3 projects from 3 different Arctic Cooperation programmes. The Lead Partner is always an NPA project, as the NPA is the programme that funded these 4 projects, which had a total budget of approx. 45.000 and a runtime between 6-12 months.

In the words of ARCTIC PACER project manager Jose Manuel San Emeterio from ERNACT (Ireland), *"by participating in ARCTIC PACER, the partners were able to have a much higher reach than with their respective project on a single basis. This allowed us to discuss on common challenges and opportunities and propose solutions that took into consideration an aggregation of complementary inputs and expertise, which really enriched the process. In our opinion this is a very effective instrument to tackle common issues and propose solutions considering the inputs of a high number of relevant stakeholders."*

"We believe that ARCTIC PACER must be considered a very good value for money project. The cooperation of the 4 Lead Partners representing 5 projects made possible to have a manageable project that indirectly involved 30 partners from 20 regions and 7 countries. This was translated into effective focused sessions that took into consideration the inputs of a significant number of organisations across the Arctic."

The networking effect was also highlighted by ARCTIC CLUSTER project manager Ianire Renobales from ERNACT (Ireland), the partnership (consisting of 15 partner regions from Atlantic Canada, Northern Europe and Russian Federation) had a new opportunity to learn more, not only from the funding programme where they usually participate because of their geographical location, but also from the other programmes that are integrated in the Arctic Cooperation. This also resulted in being able to reach a wider audience at large Arctic and European conferences.

Niko Hänninen from Oulu University (Finland) on behalf of the project Champions for Climate Action identifies as the main benefit *"the introduction of different project outcomes to new partners and through them to new regions, beyond their original geographical scope. One of the projects had been implemented quite a long time ago, so old outcomes were updated. Re-introducing them to a partially new audience fell on a fertile ground. Clustering projects are a good and tool to for bringing outcomes to a wider audience, which is very valuable, also for reaching the programme aims."* He points out that clustering projects also make programmes more aware of what is already funded in other programmes, and therefore reduce risk.

On behalf of project Northern-European Energy Network, project manager Antti Haapalahti, highlights that *"experts and stakeholders attending the events were very keen and interested about presentations which created fruitful discussions and good atmosphere to extend their network and get potential partners for their upcoming activities or projects."*

As potential areas for improvement, the projects mention that a higher budget and a longer runtime would allow for more clustering activities and monitoring of the process.

3.3. Perspectives from Arctic regions

Ms. Päivi Ekdahl from the Regional Council of Lapland (Finland) was involved from the very beginning of the Arctic Cooperation, representing the Kolarctic programme in the start phase since 2016. She notes that *"it has been great to notice that the practical cooperation between the programmes is now part of the programme implementation, and that the programme authorities are better aware of each others' activities and contents of the programmes. Joint work has become an asset and shall continue when the implementation of the new programmes starts."* Among the benefits of the cooperation are a higher visibility of project results, avoidance of unwanted overlaps, and a stronger positioning for the 2021-2027 period. As something that has worked particularly well, she identifies the trust built up between the programmes, which has formed the basis for all other activities. The launch of the new programmes could be an opportunity for media attention. More generally, Ms. Ekdahl would like to see the benefits and results of the Arctic Cooperation communicated more widely, also to those stakeholders that are not the usual participants in these programmes.

Mr. Rickard Carstedt from Region Västerbotten has been a member of the Interreg Botnia-Atlantica Monitoring Committee for several years. As chair of the cohesion policy group for Europaforum Northern Sweden, which brings together the four northernmost regions in Sweden to influence EU policy, he has a strong commitment to Arctic cooperation. Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA) is a network that works to influence the development of EU regional policy so that it is designed to best support the development of the sparsely populated areas in northern Europe. He is also part of The Arctic Investment Platform (Interreg Nord project) steering group, which is a common effort of the Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA) of Finland, Sweden and Norway to explore the potential and demand for setting up a structured funding cooperation between the regions involved.

Mr. Carstedt further notes that *"the Arctic faces complex challenges that require active policies at several levels with several different perspectives. Political processes for the development of the Arctic have to a greater extent taken place on a global level, at the same time as all development takes place locally, in one place. In order to create sustainable and attractive living environments, the development work must therefore be based on the region's unique conditions, and that we cooperate with each other."*

As main achievements of the Arctic Cooperation, Mr. Carstedt recognises that the Interreg programmes in the north have become closer, and are more aware of each other, both of the similarities and differences between the programme. The cooperation has been an opportunity to have an overview of the projects and make them aware of projects addressing a similar field in another programme. The Cooperation offered the opportunity for cooperating on communication, visibility and mobilising stakeholders, in particular inside the same geography. Besides that, the network has promoted good examples of cooperation, offering visibility to Arctic actors and projects, for example through the Arctic Awards, and increased awareness of the good work being done in the Arctic Interreg programmes.

Among the things that worked particularly well, Mr. Carstedt mentions the visibility that the Arctic Awards and Arctic events have created, and to be seen as programmes working together, also being recognised at big events. Furthermore, he sees a scope for the Arctic Cooperation to create meeting places for more actors to be involved in the discussion on the sustainable development of Arctic cooperation, for example by influencing the national level to create better conditions for regional, local and Sami representatives to participate in issues of regional development, promoting place-based development, and the capacity for innovation. An area of improvement is better knowledge about stakeholder needs.

Ms. Lisbeth Nylund from the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation in Norway has been a member of the Interreg NPA Monitoring Committee for many years. She participated in the very early stages of this work, some years before it materialised as Arctic in 2016. It started more concretely, as a follow up after a meeting in Bodø in 2013. Norway worked with Scotland and other NPA countries as well as Russia, to explore the scope for a closer cooperation in the Arctic. She explains that the idea was an Arctic coordination mechanism, between the EU, regional and other relevant programmes and networks in the Arctic, contributing to synergies, and (even) better results. The work resulted in the “Arctic collaboration mechanism”, compiled by the European Policies Research Centre, which was presented at a seminar in Scotland House in Brussels in 2015. Apart from discussions in the NPA Monitoring Committee, Norway and Scotland also had meetings with the European Commission, (DG Regio, DG Mare and DG Near), and organised a couple of stakeholder dialogue meetings, e.g. in Tromsø back-to-back with the Arctic Frontiers in January 2014. In addition, there were plans in Norway for start-up financing, and a node in Tromsø, to build on and connect with other nodes, e.g. in Rovaniemi and Inverness. The European Commission took this work further and gave a mandate for the Arctic Cooperation network between the programmes in their Joint Arctic Communication from 2016.

Ms. Nylund notes as the main achievements of the network, many of the benefits identified by Ms. Ekdahl and Mr. Carstedt, such as a greater awareness among the programmes, the networking effect that connects potential beneficiaries from different programmes, the synergetic effect of clustering projects, as well of the increased visibility of the programmes in the EU and at larger Arctic events, as well as the visibility of project actors through the Arctic Awards.

As areas of improvement, Ms. Nylund would like to see the Arctic Cooperation be even more active and visible, strategic and also even more inclusive of the MCs, regional representatives and stakeholders, but also other networks and programmes both inside and outside the EU (BEAC, Nordic, Horizon Europe, Erasmus etc.). The network should help to communicate the good work being done, and the stakeholders benefitting from it.

3.4. European perspectives

This section is based on the input of different (former) programme managers at the European Commission, DG Regional and Urban Policy. They were involved with one or more of the Arctic Cooperation Interreg or ENI CBC Programmes.

From their perspective, one of the main achievement of the Arctic Cooperation was the concrete cooperation and coordination among different types of cooperation programmes that share the same territory and vision. The cooperation itself could help to spend funds more strategically through coordinated calls and project clusters. From the perspective of the desk officers, a better promotion of the results was clearly noticeable, for example through the Arctic Awards.

For the 2021-2027 period, it was viewed that *"the new period provided an opportunity to integrate even better the internal cooperation programmes and the programmes having external dimension (cooperation with Russia) in the Arctic. However, following the Russian military aggression against Ukraine and in line with the Commission's decision to fully implement all EU restrictive measures, the Commission has suspended the cooperation with Russia in all Interreg 2021-2027 programmes²."*

² [At the time of writing, it is expected that the cooperation programmes with Russia, Karelia and Kolarctic CBC, will not continue in the 2021-2027 period. This means that the Arctic Cooperation will be taken forward by Interreg Aurora and Interreg Northern Periphery and Arctic.](#)

Another main achievement of the Arctic Cooperation were the increased information and collaboration opportunities for stakeholders, and improved promotion of results and communication about key issues and synergies. What worked particularly well was the promotion of the EU's presence through the programmes in the Arctic by *"strengthening a Joint European Arctic identity"*, as well as the promotion of Arctic issues.

When it comes to the mandate provided to the Arctic Cooperation in the 2016 Joint Arctic Communication, it was viewed that *"Arctic Cooperation is developing along the lines of the mandate provided in the JAC – although at this stage I would say that this mandate is not fulfilled. Ultimately, the collaboration should enable the development of common research and investment priorities in the Arctic. It was believed that work towards achieving this mandate will be further consolidated in the next programming period."* In general, the mandate was seen to have been fulfilled *"to a high degree within the limits of financially small programmes. The Arctic Cooperation has contributed to priority area 3) International Cooperation on Arctic Issues, and to an extent to 1) Climate Change and Safeguarding the Arctic Environment, through investments in capacity building in the European Arctic, relating to research and innovation, SME competitiveness and supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy."*

For the future, there is potential to deepen the cooperation, to clarify more strongly the focus of each programme in order to minimise overlaps and to deliver *"more return on investment"*. A focus on concrete cooperation, on deepening synergies, and on more efficient programme management would strengthen the EU's presence in the Arctic.

The Arctic Cooperation was seen as effectively promoting the benefits of cooperation to solve the challenges in the Arctic.

For the future, improved cooperation and synergies with mainstream cohesion policy programmes were mentioned. The Arctic Cooperation should focus on climate change, sustainable development, Sami population needs, bringing more information to a wider audience on the critical issues in the Arctic. Other topics were green transition, and youth. This should be achieved through *"efficient communication, strong and carefully curated project selection and capacity building for local stakeholders."*

Other expectations for a future Arctic Cooperation are a *"stronger coordination on overlapping themes in the different programmes during the programming stage and on the project calls and project implementation during the implementation stage."* This would allow for synergies to be explored.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

What follows below are considerations from the point of view of the programme practitioners, does not reflect the formal viewpoint of the respective Monitoring Committees.

4.1. Conclusions and lessons learnt

In order to conclude on the lessons learnt about the Arctic Cooperation and evaluate its added value, the performance of the network is measured against the main objectives the network set out to achieve.

- more informed/coordinated project selection and thereby a better allocation and better use of the programme funding
- clearer and more integrated information for potential applicants about funding opportunities, and a wider network of potential collaboration partners
- more concrete and relevant project outputs meeting the needs of Arctic stakeholders, and better involvement of these stakeholders.
- better promotion of results; more targeted, on a more aggregated level, and to a wider audience
- more efficient programme management, by pooling resources and achieving a wider impact
- a more strategic approach to impact policy development, positioning the programmes for the post-2020 period, and potentially having a common priority based on Arctic values.

It is the conclusion of the programme administrations involved in the Arctic Cooperation that the objectives set out above have been achieved to a large degree. As a minimum, it is viewed that the cooperation has positively contributed to all points listed above to varying degrees.

As pointed out in the many testimonials gathered for this report, one of the main achievements was a better promotion of results, for example through the Arctic Awards. However, besides reaching a wider audience together, it is viewed that the Arctic Cooperation has achieved so much more by actually putting Arctic regional development issues on the map, and contributing to a European Arctic identity. It has been recognised that the Arctic Cooperation adds a regional development aspect to the EU Arctic Policy, and that the programmes are a useful tool for Arctic networks to fund their initiatives.

Similarly, the Arctic Cooperation has not only managed to better involve stakeholders, but it has also created real synergies at the stakeholder level, for example through the clustering projects. It has also raised the profile of Arctic projects that went on to secure other funding.

More efficient programme management and positioning the programmes for the 2021-2027 period were among the objectives, but again, being able to exchange with each other during the programming process has been invaluable, and it exceeded our expectations.

In conclusion, despite few resources available from the start, the Arctic Cooperation is viewed by all programme administrations as incredibly valuable, both from the perspective of programme management, but perhaps even more so in terms of the benefits for our Arctic stakeholders.

There is room for a deeper cooperation, more synergies for stakeholders and more outreach to other networks, also outside the EU. The lessons learned from the 2016-2021 experience put the cooperation in a very strong position going forward.

4.2. Opportunities for the future cooperation

The lessons learnt and the feedback provided from different angles have sparked a number of ideas about the future of the network.

Broadly, these ideas can be divided in those that relate to increasing the strategic impact of the network, and those that relate to bringing the benefits of cooperation to the level of stakeholders.

Strategic impact of the Arctic Cooperation network

One idea expressed by MC members and European Commission programme managers alike is the wish to expand the Arctic Cooperation to national and regional programmes with overlapping geography in the Arctic, and even other Arctic policy organisations. Among the benefits are a more comprehensive coordination and more efficient use of EU funds, and the possibility to benefit better from synergies among stakeholders. In addition, it might establish some sort of a communication platform for those working with the Arctic.

However, there are a number of important considerations and drawbacks that could outweigh the benefits of expansion.

First of all, very practically, expanding the cooperation significantly would require more resources, whilst the current outlook is a smaller budget. In fact, a wider network may even require dedicated staff resources to maintain and work actively with the network.

There is also the question exactly which national/regional programmes to include (what geography), and whether the Cooperation should focus only on ERDF, or also ESF, agriculture, and other programmes (e.g. regional development). Depending on how large this new group is, the organisation as well as the goal for the cooperation will differ. In line with the current practice of consensus and good will, it is important that all current Arctic Cooperation members agree how the cooperation should move on, with whom, and in what direction.

In a report by the European Policies Research Centre, drafted for the NPA impact evaluation in 2018, it is highlighted that the current “soft cooperation” and its ability to react to changes is one of the main strengths of the Arctic Cooperation. The programmes agree that this is a very important aspect, and they would prefer to continue the cooperation without the need for a more formal structure, which might be necessary if the network was expanded significantly.

That being said, some areas for further development of the current Arctic Cooperation can be identified. For example, aiming communication activities in a more structured way at other Arctic networks and policy initiatives (inside and outside EU), as well as mainstream programmes, for example through events. This would allow the Interreg programmes to share their cooperation skills with the mainstream programmes, which will receive a greater mandate for cooperation in the 2021-2027 period.

In general, the Arctic Cooperation will be included in the respective programme communication strategies, with a focus on improved branding, messaging, and a more streamlined online presence. Possibly a name change can help to more precisely define what the network really is, namely a network of Interreg programmes, for example “Interreg Arctic Cooperation”.

Other ideas to increase the strategic impact of the programmes were expressed in the research for this report, including the wish for Monitoring Committees to be more involved. One idea could be regularly bringing together the Monitoring Committees from the different programmes, and organising a transparent process for involving national representatives in defining the aim, mission, and justification of the future Arctic Cooperation.

Bringing coordination and networking to the stakeholder level

On operational level, the EPRC report suggests that the Arctic clustering projects could be used as a method to start working with national and regional programmes, and potentially even non-EU programmes. The programmes consider this to be a very good and practical suggestion. For example, mainstream projects could be invited to a clustering event, and get familiar with projects funded by the Interreg programmes, and even start working together with the support from small project funding. That way, synergies on project level could be taken advantage of, which has very much been appreciated by projects in the past, without making the Arctic Cooperation itself too expensive. It is envisaged that multiple programmes can fund clustering projects in the future.

Besides this, the profile of the Arctic Awards project competition could be raised, and it might be possible to be expanded to include a wider range of programmes, both EU-funded and Non EU programmes. Other suggestions for updating the format can be found in chapter 2.1.

Other suggestions for bringing the coordination and networking to the level of stakeholders are joint partner search events and joint programme launch events, regularly bringing stakeholders and projects together to coordinate on common themes (green transition, climate change, etc.), involving regional representatives to reach more stakeholders beyond the usual participants, as well as connecting the networks of regional/national contact points.

It should also not be underestimated what a big improvement it is to be able to include the Arctic Cooperation in our respective Cooperation Programme documents from the start of the 2021-2027 programme period. This was not the case in the 2014-2020 period. It would also allow the programmes to focus more, and it would give better possibilities for enabling the cooperation between Arctic actors and projects. In short, this would allow the Arctic Cooperation to be more ambitious.

Finally, the objectives highlighted in the new EU Joint Arctic Communication³ from 2021, *“A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic”*, offer good opportunities for synergies, in particular in the area of tackling climate and the green transition, as well as supporting the inclusive and sustainable development of Arctic regions.

³ Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, *“A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic”*, 13th October 2021, The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission. [Link](#)