

Commentary

When opportunity lags: human development policymaking in Arctic regions

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ABSTRACT. The popular narrative of Arctic development continues to dwell on melting sea ice, untapped oil and gas reserves, an icebreaker arms race and the perils and potential of rapid industrialisation. Rarely is the welfare of Arctic populations considered in a holistic sense and with a precise call for policy change. The recently released *Arctic human development report II*, echoing the more widely distributed human development reports generated by the United Nations, does just this. Unfortunately, despite the laudable efforts of the authors to embrace the more systemic drivers of poverty and marginalisation, the report fails to account for governmental and policy shortcomings which continue to limit health and opportunity, while obscuring tangible pathways to prosperity for Arctic populations. This comment is intended as a call, amongst the fervour of Arctic exploitation, to refocus attention on the unmistakable disparities in public health and well-being that persist in the Arctic regions of otherwise wealthy countries, and to incorporate globally practised perceptions of human development, including the role of social and political marginalisation in explaining health and prosperity discrepancies, which have been largely lacking in Arctic development discourse, and practice.

Introduction

Amid the clamour over untapped oil and gas reserves that has come to dominate coverage from afar over Arctic affairs, an important moment for Arctic regional policymaking came and went in early 2015. The second *Arctic human development report* (or *AHDR-II*, sub-titled *Regional processes and global linkages*) was released in February and, as anticipated, is a *tour de force* of regional expertise, insight and analysis on critical issues facing the circumpolar north (Larsen and Fondahl 2015). Unfortunately, what *AHDR-II* accounts for in scope and breadth it lacks in putting forward a coherent theory of change for human development in the Arctic, or sustainable development more broadly, at what is clearly a critical juncture for the region. This commentary, while taking nothing away from the individual and collective contributions that constitute *AHDR-II*, isolates several key themes that would strengthen a future *Arctic human development report*, but more importantly, would serve those committed to bettering the health, dignity and well-being of Arctic region inhabitants.

Refocusing on human development

This commentary also approaches human development through the prism of an individual's capacity, his/her 'capabilities,' according to Amartya Sen (1992), or the toolbox with which each individual or community can utilise to live a full and prosperous life, and notably, avoid early and preventable morbidity. This toolbox is enhanced when access is assured to robust education, affordable health care and adequate, nutritious food. Globally, those countries that score worst by the UN's Human Development Index (HDI) are most often those

that deprive sectors of their population from these key resources, whether purposefully (though caste, overt racism or civil conflict, for example), or inadvertently (through a lack of state capacity, frequently complicated by remote desert or mountainous terrain).

In both cases, the toolbox with which certain groups have to maximise their livelihoods are more complete than others, and disturbing discrepancies in health and well-being emerge between ethnic groups or distinct regions within a country. Of note, many of the best performing countries by HDI score are Arctic countries, Canada, the U.S. and especially the Nordic countries. And yet discrepancies between well-being in Arctic and non-Arctic regions persist, sometimes to shocking degrees. Examples include levels of addiction, tuberculosis rates, or hunger in the Arctic regions of Canada and the U.S. (Alaska) compared with southern tier counterparts (Council of Canadian Academies 2014; Lee and others 2015; Olsen 2014).

Relative gains versus inequities within countries

Through this prism, *AHDR-II* falls short of grasping the key drivers of these discrepancies. Too frequently within the report, for example, Arctic regions within one country are compared against those from other countries across any number of metrics, from demographics to GDP and life expectancy. While a valuable exercise on one level, disparities across international borders reflect more the systemic characteristics of national economies and demographic trends, the oft-cited differences, for example, between the 'mature' economies of Fennoscandia versus the more rural 'frontier' economies of North America, or

Russia's still ongoing post-transitional and energy-based economy.

Essential from a human development perspective would be to compare systematically Arctic regions with their non-Arctic counterparts within-country. Discrepancies then force an explanation as to the precise cause. This happens on some level in the report, but the results can be misleading, especially when drawing conclusions based on GDP, much of which infamously flows outside Arctic regions to industrial centres, or to where corporate headquarters are located. Any overlap between identity, or geography, and weakened capabilities (high rates of chronic hunger for instance) forces a more serious exploration of economic and social policymaking. For example: how do we capture and steer GDP growth, from whatever source, into more localised public health gains? How do we create educational institutions that are inclusive, effective and meaningful in more remote communities? How do we reconfigure our understanding of rural economies so that the push-pull tensions between subsistence and wage earning are minimised for stress, and maximised for food security and health?

The report's would-be flagship contribution, meanwhile, the Arctic social indicators (ASI), does in fact deserve special recognition for incorporating progressive and context-sensitive metrics into their calculus, including 'fate control,' 'cultural integrity' and 'contact with nature' (Larsen and Schweitzer 2010). But the ASIs are subsequently overwhelmed by the rest of the report, and otherwise compartmentalised into irrelevance by *AHDR-II* itself. In fairness, individual contributors allude to these complications tangentially, if not explicitly, but they are never woven together into a cohesive message, nor even focused on human welfare, which points to another limitation.

Take down the silos

If there were ever an opportunity to integrate more fully the many strands of Arctic research into a 'theory of change,' or a guiding philosophy of Arctic development that merges the many disparate, but rich, research agendas, *AHDR-II* is it. Instead, each chapter reconstitutes its more narrow framework, revealing a patchwork of exceptional, but otherwise un-integrated work. Unlike the United Nations, whose development reports must skirt political considerations given a constituency of nation-states that range from authoritarian and even monarchical to social democracies, no such limitations hamstring *AHDR-II*. But as the UN's emerging sustainable development goals (SDGs) illustrate, an integrated understanding of climate, culture and political viability through inclusion are fundamental to human development, and must be addressed simultaneously and in coordination in order to make sustainable gains against poverty, hunger and substandard health or education (the SDGs, will replace the concluding millennium development goals, which

have steered in some way global development policy making over the last decade).

The Arctic is unique of course, and indeed there are shared challenges throughout the circumpolar north which justify an Arctic approach to development, but it is also valuable to incorporate development thinking, theory and practice as utilised elsewhere; and to merge more fully natural and social sciences and more forcefully incorporate the social and political determinants of inequalities into our models of Arctic development.

Re-imagining governance

An example of this shortcoming is in the report's exploration of governance. Peculiarly, the governance chapter (Chapter 5) is, however encyclopedic in its depth, limited to a focus on formal institutions. Subsequent chapters on legal systems (Chapter 6) and resource governance (Chapter 7) more fully flesh out the reality, and thus the strength, I will note, of governance in the Arctic, which is frequently *de facto* an innovative mix of formal and informal leadership and institutions. The division of governance into separate chapters is therefore misleading, but also diminishes the analytical and pragmatic power of what might have emerged had all three chapters been more creatively synthesised.

Governance, after all, is the process of collective decision-making that allocates resources and that steers communities through time in order to maximise collective well-being. This means that all actors, state, regional, local, formal and informal, collectively influence this process, sometimes unintentionally. *AHDR-II* could more accurately depict governance as the fraught and contested process that it is. Within this process some actors are prioritised, or simply have more muscle. But in some questions, or in some communities, an individual's knowledge, skill or standing is most important. More fully understanding this process, and utilising its strengths, is essential for development. Of note, the role of non-state, but highly influential actors like transnational energy companies, was not incorporated into the analysis. This oversight dismisses the role of an especially important agent that influences the well-being, for better or worse, of entire communities and regions.

Conclusion

The above comments are critical when taken together, but stem more from what is seen as a lost opportunity to channel an exceptional degree of knowledge and expertise into an aspirational, but still pragmatic, vision of Arctic development, and one that puts the region's diverse inhabitants first. *AHDR-II* is an exceptional culmination of region-specific knowledge. But if, as the name implies, it hopes to encourage a cohesive strategy to improve the lives of the region's inhabitants, it needs to take a more forceful normative stand on inputs to human prosperity

in the Arctic and the barriers to their attainment, which are political, economic and environmental in nature. I also recommend a more forceful revision of *status quo* development thinking when it concerns the Arctic, one which challenges resource dependency, including on carbon assets, while exploring the potential for innovation and technology to redefine Arctic economic opportunities. Finally, the myriad, apparently disparate strands of investigation, as presented, need be interwoven into an Arctic development logic, and one that ultimately supports opportunity, and human flourishing, whatever the means may be.

Editorial note

If you wish to enhance correspondence on the subject matter, please feel free to submit a rejoinder to *Polar Record*.

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