

PEACE AND SECURITY

MAPPING THE ARCTIC MAYORS' FORUM

Local Governments in Arctic Governance
and International Discussions

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The Arctic Mayors' Forum (AMF), founded in 2019, was set up to include local government perspectives in Arctic governance. It addresses common challenges faced by Arctic communities, advocating for sustainable development and resilient societies.



As the only platform for circumpolar collaboration among Arctic local governments, the AMF promotes dialogue and coordination among municipalities and vertical engagement with national and international actors, aiming to bridge local and global governance.



The AMF challenges the traditional narrative of the Arctic as a fragile, remote region by emphasizing the human and community dimensions. It prioritizes public health, sustainable development and depopulation, while balancing environmental concerns.

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MAPPING THE ARCTIC MAYORS' FORUM: LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN ARCTIC GOVERNANCE AND INTERNATIONAL DISCUSSIONS

INTRODUCTION

In October 2019, 11 mayors from some of the world's northernmost cities founded the Arctic Mayors' Forum (AMF) with the mission to 'ensure local government participation of mayors and elected community leaders in all levels of Arctic governance to safeguard that the values, goals, and interests of the Arctic peoples are voiced and considered in achieving good lives, sustainable development and resilient communities in the Arctic' (Arctic Mayors' Forum 2021). Although the forum is locally rooted, it has emerged in an international context. In recent decades, the Arctic region has been gaining global significance because of climate change concerns, potential economic opportunities, and the possibility of ice-free shipping routes. Consequently, both Arctic and non-Arctic states and actors are showing growing interest in the region. This has implications for the region's governance system as an increasing number of stakeholders are eager to participate in the international conversation about the Arctic's future.

Given the international attention being paid to it, it is perhaps unsurprising that local governments would like a voice in the increasingly globalized discussions about their own region. This report aims to introduce the AMF and situate the forum within the existing Arctic governance landscape. Rather than focusing on the forum's performance, challenges and effectiveness, the report highlights the potential contributions this new local initiative could make to the region's governance system and international conversations on the Arctic.

GOVERNANCE IN THE ARCTIC

International governance can be understood as the creation and operation of rules of conduct that define practices, assign roles and guide interactions in dealing with collective problems (Young 1994). The term is used to describe how various actors and cooperation mechanisms work together to manage issues that arise across borders. The Arctic region is characterized by diverse governance mechanisms that regulate different issues (Gómez-Mera et al. 2020). There is no comprehensive regime for the region; instead, the governance system resembles 'a mosaic of issue-specific arrangements' (Young 2005: 10) or a patchwork of formal and informal arrangements operating at various levels (Stokke 2011).

International frameworks are essential for the governance of the Arctic. Several 'hard law' mechanisms, particularly within the UN system, are particularly important for the region. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982) serves as the primary governance mechanism for the Arctic seas. Furthermore, international frameworks also encompass challenges specific to the polar regions. Article 234 of the Law of the Sea Convention affirms coastal states' right to regulate shipping in ice-covered waters, and the Polar Code (2017), developed by the International Maritime Organization (IMO), outlines safety and environmental protection standards for vessels navigating in polar waters. Additionally, as the Arctic sea ice continues to melt, concerns about accessibility and overfishing have prompted ten Arctic and non-Arctic states to sign an international treaty that bans unregulated fishing in the Arctic Ocean's international waters until 2030 (CAOFA 2018).

Also, among the Arctic states, steps have been taken to address and cooperate on a number of regional issues. At the regional level, the Arctic Council is recognized as the primary forum for Arctic issues. Established in 1996 by the Arctic states, the Council aims to foster cooperation and offer scientific advice on environmental and climate issues, as well as sustainable development. The Council includes the eight Arctic states and six permanent Indigenous organizations, along with numerous state and non-state observers. Work in the Council mainly provides political guidance, but it has also negotiated three binding agreements on search and rescue (Arctic Council 2011), oil spill response (Arctic Council 2013), and scientific cooperation (Arctic Council 2017). In addition to its scientific work, the Arctic Council serves as a high-level political forum in which senior officials meet to set agendas, assert national viewpoints and promote Arctic interests (Rottem 2019).

In addition to the Arctic Council, several 'soft law' mechanisms have been established to foster cooperation and dialogue on issues related to specific Arctic subregions. The Barents Euro-Arctic Council (1993) was established as a platform to enhance regional stability, people-to-people cooperation, and cultural exchange in the Barents region after the Cold War, while the Northern Dimension was established in 1993 to strengthen dialogue and cooperation between the EU and the European Arctic states.

As evident in this overview, Arctic governance is shaped largely by the involvement of the relevant states. However, there are also mechanisms that facilitate cooperation among subnational local governments and non-state actors. For instance, the Saami Council has fostered cooperation among Indigenous groups across national borders since 1956, while the Inuit Circumpolar Council has been doing the same since 1977. The first initiative to facilitate cooperation among local governments in the 'North' was the establishment of the Northern Forum in 1991. On its founding, the forum included 19 local governments from nine states, and it received observer status in the Arctic Council in 1998 (Hasanah 2012). Mechanisms have also been established to support cooperation among local governments within the subregions of the Arctic. The Barents Regional Council, established in 1993, and the Northern Sparsely Populated Areas Network, established in 2004, foster collaboration among the northern regions of Arctic European states. Similarly, the Arctic Caucus operates with the same aim in North America.

ARCTIC MAYORS' FORUM

Amid this multitude of mechanisms designed to tackle Arctic issues, the AMF emerged in the late 2010s. The idea of formalized cooperation among municipalities in the region was initially proposed by mayors from Arctic cities in Fairbanks, Alaska in 2017. This led to the signing of a declaration that highlighted the 'unique challenges' faced by Arctic communities and their 'intent to work toward formalizing [...] communication and collaboration' (Arctic Mayors' Forum 2017). Two years later, on 10 October 2019, in Akureyri, Iceland, mayors from eleven municipalities across seven states signed the founding document that established the Arctic Mayors' Forum. The municipalities involved were Iqaluit (Canada), Tórshavn (Faroe Islands), Oulu, Kemi, Rovaniemi (Finland), Sermersooq (Greenland), Akureyri (Iceland), Arkhangelsk¹ (Russia), Bodø, Tromsø (Norway), and Anchorage (the US). The AMF was established to serve a purpose across two 'dimensions': First, to be a collaborative platform for 'horizontal' cooperation and coordination between the member municipalities of the forum, and second, to support 'vertical' cooperation between these municipalities with national, regional and international institutions (Arctic Mayors' Forum 2021). The first dimension is predicated on the notion that Arctic municipalities face common challenges and opportunities, stemming from specific local features, such as remote location, interest in natural resource extraction, and a climate that is changing significantly faster than in other regions of the world. Therefore, Arctic communities can benefit from coordinating and sharing experiences on issues such as climate change, infrastructure, transportation, education, energy and natural resources (Schreiber 2019; Tømmerbakke 2019). The second dimension is grounded in the fact that 'the current Arctic governance system offers no formalized and/or structured

procedure for local communities to be involved continuously in Arctic policy decision-making processes' (Arctic Mayors' Forum 2021). The AMF's message is clear: 'For too long, political decision-makers based south of the Arctic have dominated the Arctic agenda' (Bereng et al. 2021).

Although the founding document was signed in 2019, additional measures had to be taken to further formalize the forum. In 2021, the forum adopted the Rules of Procedure, which formalized the existing organizational structure. This structure includes a General Assembly held every two years, comprising all member municipalities, at which the Executive Committee and the forum's chair are elected (Arctic Mayors' Forum 2021). The Executive Committee, comprising one representative from each participating country, oversees the forum's work in between the General Assemblies. The chair rotates to a municipality in the state currently holding the Arctic Council's chairship. Additionally, the Rules of Procedure adopted in 2021 outlined plans to appoint a secretary general and to set up a permanent secretariat in Tromsø, Norway. Later that same year, the forum was registered as a non-profit organization under Norwegian law. In 2022, Canadian Patti Bruns was appointed as the forum's first secretary general, and in 2023, a permanent secretariat was established in Tromsø, funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, allocated through the end of 2024 (Arctic Mayors' Forum 2022; Johansen 2023).

Since its inception, the AMF has also evolved in terms of both membership and selection of the issues the forum seeks to address. Collaboration with Russian municipalities was halted after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022² and founding members Tórshavn and Iqaluit have withdrawn from the forum.³ However, the forum has grown from 11 founding members to include 19 municipalities, with the membership of Umeå and Luleå, which joined in 2020, thereby introducing Swedish representation into the forum. Today, the AMF represents approximately one million Arctic inhabitants in seven of the eight Arctic states, and membership of the forum is permanently 'open to mayors and elected leaders of local governments located in the member states of the Arctic Council' (except Russia) (Arctic Mayors' Forum 2021), whether they represent cities, towns, villages or Indigenous communities (Brunns 2023).

Regarding the issues the forum aims to address, it has refined its focus from the broad concept of 'cooperation on unique challenges faced by Arctic communities' to five key areas by 2024: public health and well-being, attractiveness

1 Although Arkhangelsk did not formally sign the AMF founding document, it is listed as a member in all press releases and is acknowledged by other members as a full member (Kristoferqvist 2021).

2 Even prior to 2022, Russian municipalities encountered challenges in fully participating as formal members of the forum (Kristoferqvist 2021). Mayors from Arkhangelsk, Naryan-Mar, Severodvinsk, and Murmansk occasionally attended meetings and discussions, with Arkhangelsk and Murmansk participating in the forum as observers. This situation was likely a result of Moscow's centralization policies, which underscores a primary issue for subnational entities in international engagement: the level of participation allowed by their national governments.

3 These changes are likely related to the fact that the forum's participants are elected mayors, with their involvement often depending on how much individual mayors prioritize the forum, as well as their local governments' human and financial resources and priorities.

and retention, sustainable development, young people, and ‘working with partners’ (Arctic Mayors’ Forum 2024a). Additionally, the forum has published its first strategic report covering the period of 2023–2027, detailing its strengths, goals and challenges for the future (Arctic Mayors’ Forum 2024b).

List of AMF’s members, 2024

Community	Country
Akureyri	Iceland
Anchorage	USA
Bodø	Norway
Fairbanks	USA
Harstad	Norway
Kemi	Finland
Luleå	Sweden
Oulu	Finland
Qeqertalik	Greenland
Rovaniemi	Finland
Salla	Finland
Sermersooq	Greenland
Sortland	Norway
Sør-Varanger	Norway
Tornio	Finland
Tromsø	Norway
Umeå	Sweden
Utqiagvik	USA
Yellowknife	Canada

AMF’S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ARCTIC GOVERNANCE SYSTEM

With the AMF now operational and its main objectives defined more clearly, this section examines what the forum can offer the multifaceted Arctic governance system. It highlights the AMF’s contributions to the existing governance framework, focusing on its role in fostering horizontal cooperation among local governments, its aim of vertically engaging in higher levels of governance, and the local perspectives it brings to the broader international conversation on the Arctic region.

CIRCUMPOLAR COOPERATION BETWEEN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

The AMF aims to be a ‘forum for debate and an open channel of communication for member communities’ to ‘cooperate and share best practices on preparedness to the changes taking place in the region’ (Arctic Mayors’ Forum 2021). As

observed, most cross-border cooperation in the Arctic takes place between states, and although governance mechanisms facilitating cooperation and coordination between local governments in the Arctic exist, none of them are as extensive as the AMF.

Other subnational mechanisms in the Arctic have tended, rather than be circumpolar, to cover only subregions of the Arctic, such as the Barents Regional Council, facilitating collaboration in the European Arctic, and the Arctic Caucus, facilitating cooperation in the North American Arctic. Furthermore, some of the subnational mechanisms are linked to larger frameworks connected to the state level, such as the Barents Regional Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the North Calotte Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers, and the Northern Sparsely Populated Areas Network and the EU framework. In this regard, the AMF is distinguished from many other subnational mechanisms by serving as both a platform for circumpolar cooperation and an autonomous initiative driven by the local governments themselves. Furthermore, the Northern Forum, which was once a circumpolar mechanism, has experienced low membership numbers since the early 2010s (Tsui 2016). Its membership further declined after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which means that the forum now predominantly comprises Russian members.

Thus, currently the AMF is the only platform facilitating circumpolar cooperation and coordination among Arctic local governments. The fact that the local governments themselves initiated the forum and have continued to invest both human and financial resources in its establishments and development suggests that subnational cooperation is seen, at least among the local governments themselves, as a valuable addition to the region’s governance system when addressing shared Arctic challenges on the local level.

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN INTERNATIONAL GOVERNANCE

Since its inception the AMF has emphasized efforts to influence higher levels of governance and bring local ‘realities onto the international stage’ (Tømmerbakke 2019). This emphasis needs to be understood within the broader context of the Arctic governance landscape.

First, as the AMF aptly notes, there is a notable lack of representation on the part of local governments when Arctic politics are discussed at the international level. This is notably evident in the Arctic Council, regarded as the foremost forum for Arctic affairs. The Arctic Council is composed of eight Arctic nations, six Indigenous organizations that serve as permanent participants, and 38 observers, including non-Arctic states and international organizations. However, the local governments – aside from through the observer status of the declining Northern Forum – are not represented in the leading forum for Arctic affairs. In its early years, obtaining observer status in the Arctic Council was a primary goal of the AMF. However, this objective has been post-

poned by the forum itself due to the disruptions in the Council caused by Russia's aggression in 2022.

Secondly, over recent decades, the Arctic region and its governance system have garnered more international attention. Consequently, there has been rising interest among various actors, including non-Arctic states and international actors, to participate in its governance processes and discussions about the region's future. This has implications for the local governments, the focal point of this international attention. Since the establishment of the AMF in 2019, the fact that conversations about the Arctic's future frequently take place outside the region has been a recurring issue. On the day the AMF was founded, Charlotte Ludvigsen, then mayor of Sermersooq in Greenland, highlighted this concern, noting that she only learned about then US president Donald Trump's alleged interest in purchasing her country from an article in *The Guardian* (Tømmerbakke 2019). Additionally, Kristin Røymo, then mayor of Tromsø, emphasized the challenges of increased international attention on local communities, noting, 'we know it is next to impossible for an international political or Chinese businessman to understand what needs that need to be met' (ibid).

Since its inception, the AMF has worked to be included in conversations about the Arctic at higher levels, establishing connections upwards to the national and international levels. In its opening statements before assuming the chair of the Arctic Council, the Norwegian government identified the forum as a partner for collaboration (Huitfeldt 2023). Coupled with financial backing from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this demonstrates recognition at the national level, at least in Norway. Additionally, the AMF has forged ties with the Arctic Council and the Arctic Economic Council, participates in EU projects, and is present at and engages in international conferences, thus incorporating the viewpoints of local governments into international conversations about the Arctic (Arctic Mayors' Forum 2024b).

However, the AMF consists of local governments, which often lack the authority to engage in international relations independently. Local governments often require support from national access to international institutional frameworks, and the extent of their international engagements typically depends on the approval of national governments (Lecours 2002; Kuznetsov 2014). Therefore, to engage with and influence a higher level of governance, the AMF depends on the willingness of other governance mechanisms – and of the (state) actors already involved in these mechanisms – to include the forum in its activities. Whether the AMF will be able to have a meaningful impact on national and international actors remains to be seen.

Nevertheless, the AMF's aim to engage local governments in Arctic governance is a strong signal that the local population, governments and communities seek a greater say in the international conversations that shape the future Arctic. The inclusion of local perspectives could improve understanding of the complexities of the Arctic and enhance overall decision-making processes in the region.

NEW PERSPECTIVES IN ARCTIC GOVERNANCE

A third contribution of the AMF to the Arctic governance system is the distinct perspectives it brings. With growing global awareness of the link between climate change and Arctic regional conditions, the Arctic has increasingly become associated with climate issues. The narrative of the 'fragile' and 'remote' Arctic, often perpetuated by non-Arctic actors, may neglect to capture many everyday realities for local Arctic communities. This has led to a gap between global conversations about the Arctic and the actual issues and priorities of its inhabitants, which encompass a broader range of concerns for the region. As expressed by Cathrin Alenskär, manager of international affairs in the city of Umeå, the 'EU tends to put Indigenous people and polar bears on all the pamphlets. But we have so much more to offer' (Kristoferqvist 2021).

While the Arctic Council concentrates primarily on environmental and climate change research, the AMF has broader scope. Although the AMF, too, addresses climate and environmental issues, it focuses on climate adaptation, green transition and sustainable development, thereby addressing the impacts of climate change on Arctic communities. Additionally, the AMF addresses issues such as depopulation, housing, infrastructure and business opportunities. Two of the five key areas of cooperation within the forum – attractiveness and retention, and sustainable development – are directly linked to the need to build robust societies that balance environmental protection with economic growth. In sum, the AMF brings to the broader Arctic conversation the perspective of the Arctic as a 'populated' and 'inhabited' region that also relies on economic and sustainable development. This counter-narrative, which focuses on the human and community aspects of the region, contrasts with the view of the Arctic as merely a remote, fragile expanse that needs to be preserved.

CONCLUSION

Since the AMF's inception in 2019, it has emphasized the need for cooperation among Arctic municipalities and more integration of local governments into Arctic governance. The communities in the Arctic are at the centre of growing international attention, and thereby also those most directly affected by the consequences and changes this attention brings. While it is not surprising that the Arctic population and communities want to participate in discussions that directly affect their lives, it remains to be seen how influential the forum will be. The forum is facing several obstacles that are typical of subnational entities seeking to engage on the international stage, including limited human and financial resources, as well as limited freedom to act without access to and approval from the national governments. Therefore, the AMF should be seen primarily as a signal that local governments are eager to participate more actively in the increasingly crowded Arctic governance system and to bring local perspectives to the growing globalized discussions about the Arctic region's future.

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