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SDWG Plenary Thematic Discussion on Youth Engagement in the Arctic Council

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SDWG Event Summary

Event Name: Strengths, Well-being, and Engagement of Youth in the Arctic & SDWG Plenary Thematic Discussion on Youth Engagement in the Arctic Council.

Date of Event: September 10th & 12th 2019

Event Location: National Museum Reykjavík/The Edinburgh's House Ísafjörður

Lead Arctic Council State(s) and Permanent Participant(s): Icelandic Chairmanship

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Brief event overview:

<https://ams.hi.is/en/2019/08/16/strengths-well-being-and-engagement-of-youth-in-the-arctic/>

A thematic conference was held in Reykjavik on 10 September in connection with SDWG meetings taking place in Reykjavik and Ísafjörður from 10-12 September 2019.

The Arctic has come into global focus because of climate change and its impacts on nature, economy and society. However, young people's well-being and perspectives on community sustainability and the way in which they are impacted by change is seldom analyzed. Issues such as education, employment prospects, migration, or health issues, such as mental health and high suicide rates among youth – merit prioritization in terms of research, dialogue and policy.

The conference explored youth perspectives through engagement and research, with emphasis on protective factors and social inclusion. The strengths and well-being of youth were presented through knowledge translation from research to real life situations, with an emphasis on preventive psychiatric care (trauma informed care, TIC) with youth involvement and respect for cultural diversity and sustainability.

The themes addressed at the conference form part of the priorities of the Icelandic Chairmanship of the Arctic Council related to the well-being of people and communities of the Arctic.

The conference was organized by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in cooperation with the Icelandic Arctic Cooperation Network, the University of Iceland Institute for International Affairs, Centre for Arctic Studies and the University of Akureyri.

The conference was complemented by a thematic discussion about Engagement of Youth in the Arctic Council at the SDWG plenary meeting in Ísafjörður on 12 October.

Rapporteurs at the conference and SDWG plenary meeting were Embla Eir Oddsdóttir, Eydís Kristín Sveinbjarnardóttir, Tukumminnglaq Nykjær Olsen, and Anastasia Ulturgasheva.

Key themes and issues discussed:

Session 1 on Youth Perspectives Through Engagement and Research, chaired by Sigurður Ólafsson, Secretary General, West Nordic Council.

GWEN HEALEY AKEAROK. Founding Director of Qaujigiartiit Health Nunavut presented on *Youth Engagement and Leadership in Research in Nunavut*. Gwen is Fulbright scholar, an epidemiologist and public health researcher at Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre.

- It is necessary to engage with youth to ensure success in research and suicide prevention.
- Engaging youth in research and intervention development in their community appears to strengthen a sense of agency and encourage initiative resulting in youth-to-youth mentorship conducting their own research and acting and building on youth's strengths. For example, belonging to a holistic community with pride of identity.
- Using alternative creative methods - such as through the arts - for communication of well-being is a good way to engage youth (loss, grief, pride in identity, togetherness/holism.); using photography; museum and online exhibits; communicating emotions and wellbeing. Ranging from climate change to housing conditions.
- Youth should be more involved in decision making processes.

JÓN HAUKUR INGIMUNDARSON. Senior Scientist, The Stefansson Arctic Institute and the University of Akureyri.

- Qualitative research, semi- structured interviews, on young adults in the Arctic, 18-28 years of age. 35 focus group interviews across the circumpolar world - mostly in more populated areas and bigger towns.
- Arctic Youth and Sustainable Futures; followed up on recommendations in the AHDR; to address gaps in knowledge concerning youth.

Themes including: Material well-being, Health and well-being, Cultural well-being:

- Material well-being: Young people want education and housing - especially in the rural north.
- Health and well-being: Generation Perfect. Especially pressure on the girls. Sleep and anxiety disorder affects girls more than the boys. Girls seek help from Social Media more than the boys. Using prescribed drugs – helps them to function. Need more mental health specialists working in the rural areas.
- Cultural well-being: Girls caregiving professions – pressure to be educated. Boys more materialistic.

Some concerns from this research is that there are different challenges with youth in different countries, like Greenland, which has rural areas with scarce population - need for entrepreneurs and role modeling for youth in those remote places.

JÓN SIGFÚSSON. Director, The Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analysis (ICSRA) presented on *Evidenc-Based Primary Prevention: The Icelandic Model* in which he discussed methods of reducing teen substance abuse; specifically in three areas: 1) consumption of alcohol, 2) smoking of cigarettes, and 3) having tried cannabis. The presentation did not include information or discussion on hard drugs or prescription drugs.

- The Icelandic model is predicated upon three pillars:
 - Evidence-based practice
 - Using a community-based approach - alcoholism in younger youth has rapidly decreasing
 - Creating and maintaining a dialogue among research, policy and practice
- Risk factors looked at include:
 - Extracurricular activities, sports: Organized activities vs. unorganized
 - Family factors: Time spent with parents, Support, Monitoring, Control
 - General Well-being: Inside and outside of school, at home, bullying etc.
 - Peer group effect: Positive and negative effects. How we as parents approach the peer group. Staying out late. Hanging out in malls.

Some concerns were raised that this research is top-down research not in collaboration with youth.

Panel Discussion Highlights after session 1:

Participants in the panel: **Yuri Sumokorov**, Head of Department of International Cooperation, Northern State Medical University, International School of Public Health in Russia; **Anastasia Ulturgasheva**, Researcher, Icelandic Arctic Cooperation Network, Stefansson Arctic Institute; **Tinna Hallgrímsdóttir**, United Nations Youth Delegate of Iceland on Human Rights; **Dagbjört Ósk Jóhannsdóttir**, Member of the Icelandic Youth Council on the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals.

- Mental health is a concern - to varying degrees - across the region. Similarities exist but risks are different, for example in relation to types of substance abuse.
- Issues of gender are an important factor to consider, not least in terms of education and employment opportunities. Racism and nationalism are, however, also very important challenges for youth, for example in Siberian city environment.
- Emphasize real participation of young people regarding climate change where recent developments show a very vocal youth, stating clearly what changes they would like to see.
- An Arctic-wide policy on how to include youth to a greater extent is needed. This should include a toolbox providing guidance on how to better engage youth in the region.
- Youth representation in events concerning youth is inadequate. Youth need to be involved from the very beginning, through the development stage and in the event itself. Although some youth are involved in this seminar, only one individual is under 20 and it seems quite pointless to have a discussion about youth, rather than among youth and adults. Real participation, as opposed to tokenism, must be ensured, while it is also necessary to understand that such efforts may be dampened by limited resources, not least financial. Collaboration should not be one-sided but a two-way street.
- One way of better reaching young people is to go through youth councils and use social media (Instagram, for example). At the same time, it is necessary to be mindful concerning the different realities facing youth across the Arctic. Realities facing youth in Siberia are not the same as those in Greenland, Norway or Iceland; an example would be different conditions that encourage the formation and work of youth groups or councils, where various challenges may be met depending on location. Freedom of speech is the absolute prerequisite for effective youth engagement.
- Using technology to reach youth can be very useful although it must be kept in mind that in some cases this may require special care, such as in the case of issues of suicide. The value of face-to-face meetings and conferences should also not be underestimated and continue to be an important part of connection and dialogue.
- Young people must be heard and should be consulted with on how they themselves wish to contribute to each forum - asking young people how they want to be heard and included in projects and events. There are numerous topics and political challenges young people are both willing and able to engage with (f.ex. climate change, equality). Youth can also find ways to engage themselves and provide information on how they would like to be engaged. Young people are truly concerned with equality issues and climate change. The questions concerning funding still remain however. A practical guide for what measures can be taken would be useful.

Session 2 on Youth Strengths and Well-Being Through Knowledge Translation, chaired by Kristinn Schram, Associate Professor, Folkloristics and Ethnology, University of Iceland.

ALLISON CRAWFORD Professor/Psychiatrist, Department of Psychiatry, University of Toronto, presented on the Project CREATES which discusses Circumpolar resilience, engagement and action through storytelling. Crawford shared with us their methodology and conclusion.

- Crawford suggests that youth feel validated by actively promoting festivals, music festivals, etc.
- It is important to include youth in development and leadership of projects and research, from the beginning in community-driven research centers.
- It is important to include youth in analysis and publication of research and continuously build on their strengths in all phases of research - for example, belonging to a holistic community with pride of identity.
- Storytelling and sharing is an important methodology to hear from and engage with youth and build resilience. It was found to be meaningful for youth to talk about suicide.

- Digital storytelling can build strength in youth for the individual but also for a group when sharing stories between individuals and groups. Youth when supported in leadership, things happen, increased confidence, feeling rewarded, more aware of the problems that they have control over and even more strong in helping other people and youth.
- Two stories were presented through video: 1) A story on intergenerational trauma, social issues and identity 2) A story of abuse and the road to recovery.

Traditional storytelling is very relational, and concerns were expressed regarding the relevance of digital storytelling for elders as well as for individuals and communities without adequate access to electricity or internet connections. However, indigenous communities are not living in the past making digital and oral traditional storytelling a good combination.

ARLEIGH REYNOLDS, Director at One Health, University of Alaska Fairbanks, presented on building resilience through transfer of traditional knowledge and engagement in cultural activities, i.e. using traditional knowledge and nature in working with youth who have been negatively affected by change resulting in suicide being the number one cause of death.

- Traditional cultural activity and transfer of historical knowledge (hunting, fishing, dog basking) helps to strengthen well-being and build resilience and can reduce prevalence of suicide.
- A holistic community approach, including Intergenerational communication (elders to young people) and knowledge transfer can re-build strength and improve self-esteem and self-efficacy.
- Community approaches can transform communities by decreasing substance abuse, violence and suicide rates.

SIGRÚN SIGURÐARDÓTTIR, associate professor at the University of Akureyri presented on trauma informed care and the ACE method.

- Life experiences impact well-being requiring trauma informed approaches. It is necessary to move away from *What is wrong with you?* to *What happened to you?*
- Need to find the root (the trauma) of the problem – not just deal with the symptoms.
- Health care providers and non-clinical communities, such as the police, need to move from treaters to healers and build trust by involving people into their own care.
- In trauma measured by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) there is a correlation between the number of ACE factors (accumulated trauma) a person has and physical and psychological well-being, i.e. the greater the trauma, the greater the risk (f. ex. suicide).
- It is important to prevent re-traumatization, including through engaging with the health care system.
- A comment from the audience suggest that ACE may be somewhat rigid and needs to be contextualized.

Panel Discussion Highlights after session 2:

Participants in the panel: **Jenny Ingudóttir**, Directorate of Health Violence Prevention; **Birgir Örn Steinarrson**, Pieta House; **Tukumminguaq Nykjær Olsen**, Inuit Circumpolar Council Greenland; **Pétur Halldórsson**, Icelandic Youth Environmentalist Association; **Sigrún Sigurðardóttir** and **Allison Crawford**.

- The storytelling is good in itself – it will survive without technology. Storytelling is very relational – then you have digital storytelling. One has to prevent institutional re-traumatization through health care, educational systems and welfare systems (police).
- High scoring in ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences). We do not have the resources for individual therapy for everyone. One needs a companion to the ACE, i.e. there is a need to develop a measure to go with it. ACE is very static instrument used as standalone measurement in research. If one experiences childhood trauma one is more likely for re-traumatization later on in life. Trauma during pregnancy can affect the life of the child. We also must remember that a lot of people get through trauma without therapy.
- Emphasize that we are in this world together - youth, family and society. The healthiest families in Greenland are often the hunters' families. We need to connect to our roots and give youth a voice. Internet is not always working in Greenland. Story telling participants can help each other. In light of potential connectivity issues in

parts of the Arctic, the internet should be considered the only means of communicating.

- On all policy levels one needs to include youth. The SDWG needs to work closer with youth in their project. In Iceland new law on youth will be implemented soon. Climate and quality of the culture – interconnected. National policies must reflect that. Informal collaboration for social inclusion. Iceland has an experience of previous colonialism. One needs to face the truth on the connection between colonialism and suicide.
- One must be aware of colonial influences and ongoing colonialism in projects in the Arctic.
- Self-empowerment is an important part of youth empowerment.
- An Arctic-wide policy on systematic, strategic social inclusion of youth should be developed. The Icelandic government is reviewing youth-related law; a much-needed initiative. We need to have national oversight, how we are addressing the bigger picture. Strategies for social inclusion of youth could also be used in schools.
- Taboos need to be broken to help youth. If youth are not included in the development of initiatives and projects adapted to the needs of youth, these initiatives will not succeed.
- UN Indigenous youth caucus experience reflects youth willingness to be heard; to have their voices included. Important to make seminars **with** youth, not like this, **about** youth. Without youth participation from the start there is no holistic approach.
- Hunter families one of the healthiest families in Greenland, spend a lot of time in nature, have a role, makes them feel responsible, helps them develop self-awareness.
- Behavioral therapy and mindfulness techniques may be helpful tools for mental health improvement and prevention of suicide.
- Nature and adventure-based therapy are an interesting approach to relieving issues of mental health. The same can be said for creative work, such as story-telling, regardless of whether there are internet connections or not.
- It is important to remember that we are all in this together, let us not divide into two categories.
- A comment was made about the need to not look past impacts of colonialism, still present today. Let us not revert to euphemisms but rather be straight forward in the way in which we speak about histories. For example, medicine was often an agent of colonialism; this is not just a thing of the past. People still to this day face structural inequalities. If there is anything that is important in this work, it would be this. Look at current colonization taking place in the Arctic.
- The audience was reminded of ICASS being held in Arkhangelsk in 2020, titled *Arctic Generations*.
- The WWF representative, also the founder of the Icelandic Environmental Youth Association and the Arctic Youth Network, will be participating in the SDWG meeting in Ísafjörður and is looking forward to exploring how youth inclusion can be normalized within the AC.

CLOSING

Stefán Skjaldarsson, chair of SDWG. The most thought-provoking question is: How to involve young people themselves? Storytelling is a part of Icelandic culture. Not about young people but with young people. That is the way to go forward into the future. Breaking taboos around suicide is a way of preventing suicide. Initiatives need to be adapted to youth.

Thematic Discussion on Engagement of Youth in the Arctic at the Plenary meeting of SDWG with participation of youth representatives in the Edinburgh's House Ísafjörður.

SDWG delegates focused their attention on seeking guidance from the invited youth representatives on how to better engage youth in the work of the SDWG. Ideas included:

- Formalize a process in each chairmanship to involve youth. Create a platform where youth is invited meaningfully participate.
- Find appropriate method of dialogue – both verbal and written – to reach youth. Everyone even those who are shy to be able to meet their needs, listen to them and engage them – Nothing about us without us is important to have in mind.
- Recognize that the meeting environment can be intimidating for young people. Necessary to find effective means/instruments/methods for engagement.
- Not just affluent youth participating in Arctic discussion and suggestion of contribution. Alienated groups and drop-outs from schools must be included as well.
- Informing youth on the objectives and aims of the SDWG (Arctic Council). Prepare and brief youth better before

meetings and participation in Arctic Council matters. Otherwise hard to relate to many issues that are being discussed – climate change etc.

- Focus groups of youths to get their opinions on important issues within the Arctic Council.

Recommendations/advice for SDWG from event and meeting:

From the conference in Reykjavík:

- Develop an Arctic wide policy on how to include youth to a greater extent, **including a toolbox providing guidance on how to better engage youth** in the region.
- Develop and normalize strategic **social inclusion of youth in the work of the Arctic Council** and its working and expert groups.
- Generally, encourage inclusion and participation of youth, especially when discussing issues of concern to youth, from inception to conclusion, in research and projects alike. Consulting with youth **is perceived as being a greater predictor of success**, for example in relation to suicide prevention and issues related to mental health.
- Youth emphasis and involvement should not exclude continuing **intergenerational collaboration**, which is needed for different generations to work together and create a shared vision on the challenges ahead in the Arctic.
- Provide **logistical and financial support** to youth-led initiatives themed around empowerment and social inclusion of youth

From the thematic discussions with the youth in Ísafjörður:

- Put youth into the protocols for policy making within the working groups of the Arctic Council.
- Establishing a special Coordinator for Youth within the Arctic Council.
- Identify a Circumpolar network or networks of youth that the Arctic Council can connect with when seeking to engage youth in Arctic Council events, activities and initiatives (Arctic Youth Network; Youth Arctic Council; Youth Advisory Board; Local Youth Councils).
- Secure funds for inclusion of youth in the Arctic Council.

Recommendations from both the conference in Reykjavík and the thematic discussions in Ísafjörður lead to the same conclusion i.e. it is important to involve youth more into the Arctic Council's strategic planning and policy making. They are the future. The "take home message" from the young people that participated was "Nothing About us Without us."

Potential follow-on projects or activities for SDWG:

- Evaluation of previous Arctic Council projects related to youth.
- Concentrated effort to improve the engagement of youth in the activities of the Arctic Council and its work groups.

Attached documents (e.g. agenda, presentations, rapporteur notes, participant list):

Link to the event where information about the program, speakers and panelists can be found, in addition to some further readings - <http://ams.hi.is/en/>