

# Sustainable Urban Development in the European Arctic (SUDEA): Towards enhanced transnational cooperation in remote regions

## Research motivation

At first glance, sustainable urban development may not seem to be a priority area when it comes to saving our planet. However, cities account for 70 per cent of energy use and cause 75 per cent of emissions worldwide. Two-thirds of the global population is estimated to be living in cities by the year 2050. Thus, it really matters that regions like the Arctic, which are of unique importance in the global climate system and already experience a strong urbanization trend build up city environments that match with the global goals adopted in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in the Paris Climate Agreement.

To encourage sustainable urban development worldwide, our research project seeks to identify pathways for enhancing the harmonization of urbanization policies transnationally in and beyond the Arctic. We argue that policy alignment across all governance levels is needed to avoid contradictory actions and gridlock – ideally among all regions, irrespective of their remoteness. From our current research, we consider the strengthening of local governance structures and participatory approaches as central keys. In this way, much can be learned from the European Arctic, where these keys are already in use for quite some time.

## Research question: How can sustainable urban development in the Arctic be steered more effectively and in alignment with local and global policies?

We understand cities as transnational actors with a relevant role to tackle transboundary challenges and argue that more attention needs to be paid to the local level. At the same time, local views will be more impactful at the global level if they are aligned transnationally. Our main research hypothesis is that urban development in the (European) Arctic will be more sustainable if simultaneously the positions of local stakeholders are reflected in decision-processes and policies are aligned across the national and regional level. What does that mean in practice? For the local embedding of global arrangements, transnational cooperation is critical to develop more holistic policy approaches and to connect local with global processes. Therefore, the diverse local population of Arctic cities (including Indigenous people) needs to be part of decision processes and to inform policymaking.

## Methodological approach

In our research, we are looking at seven Arctic cities in five different countries. These cities (Rovaniemi, Kolari, Nuuk, Akureyri, Tromsø, Kiruna, Luleå) display different geographical and economic circumstances. Consequently, they have very individual priorities and approaches to ensure sustainable urban development in their respective environment.

To find out more about the consequences of these distinct approaches, we look closely at the governance of planning processes: approaches to urban development are influenced to a large extent by planning laws and bylaws on the local and national levels. These set up procedures can allow (or potentially hinder) participation and thus, have a big influence.

We are also looking at the main norms that allow for participation (or limit it) to identify potential challenges in their implementation. Which of those could be addressed on the national level? And can it be improved by cooperation between Arctic cities, also across countries?

## Related open access publications from the team

- [How to save the Oceans? The value of transdisciplinary and collaborative ocean research](#)
- [COVID-19 in the Arctic: How the EU's new Arctic policy should take account of the pandemic](#)
- [Look North: the Arctic Council as an example for the management of transboundary challenges?](#)
- [Developing a framework for the analysis of Arctic indigenous institutions in a rapidly transforming region](#)
- [The Arctic Council as a success case for transnational cooperation in times of rapid global changes?](#)

## What can we learn from the Arctic?

We notice significant differences between the states located in the Arctic or those having territories there. The states often have different understandings, policies and approaches to the Arctic areas. At the same time, we can observe many joint activities, especially among the Nordic countries, which share the “Nordic model” of governance. One of the Nordic model pillars features a network approach based on the inclusion of stakeholders coming from various sectors – public, private and social – into decision-making processes. Due to different priorities, the cooperation of Indigenous people, politicians, administrators and NGOs is not always easy but still according to Nordic values it constitutes a great advantage. In our perspective, this is an important message coming from the Arctic to all of us – the only way to solve ‘wicked problems’ is to cooperate.

## What does SUDEA seek to achieve?

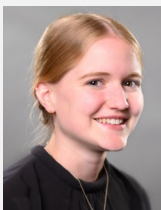
Firstly, we strive for a better understanding of the situation and challenges of cities located in the European Arctic that relate to urban development in the region. We also seek to discover how transnational cooperation and civic engagement can result into creative synergies, to strengthen social and environmental systems in the Arctic.

Secondly, we want to contribute to in-depth theoretical reflection and multidisciplinary knowledge about sustainable development and transnational cooperation by studying the particular characteristics of remote regions.

Our third aspiration is to use our research results to inform political perspectives and actions, both on local and international levels. It is our ambition to support a transformation that will meet people’s needs and improve their lives with respect for the environment.

# SUDEA

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