

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

## Urban development: A catalyst for climate change

In times of prolonged and multiple crises, sustainable urban development is rarely considered 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. This strong urbanization trend requires the building up of city environments that match with the global goals adopted in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in the Paris Agreement.

To encourage sustainable urban development worldwide, the interdisciplinary SUDEA research project explores how policies for sustainable urban development can be more effective in remote regions. We argue that **policy alignment across all governance levels is needed to avoid contradictory actions and gridlock, to “localize” the global goals and to develop effective and just frameworks**. Our results show that **the strengthening of local governance structures and participatory approaches are central keys**. In this way, much can be learned from the European Arctic, which is of unique importance in the global climate system, already experiences a strong urbanization trend and where these keys have been in use for quite some time.

## “Leaving no one behind”: How to integrate local perspectives?

We understand **cities as actors with a relevant role to tackle transboundary challenges** and argue that more attention needs to be paid to the local level to develop **effective approaches to sustainable urban development**. Our research shows that local views will be more impactful at the regional and global levels if they are aligned transnationally. Vice versa, 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 peoples) needs to inform policymaking and to be represented in decision processes**.

## Seven cities: Exceptional circumstances, similar challenges

In our research, we are looking at seven European Arctic cities in five different countries. These cities (**Rovaniemi, Kolari, Nuuk, Akureyri, Tromsø, Kiruna, Luleå**) display different geographical, societal and economic circumstances. They have very individual political 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 allow (or hinder) participation and shape the extent to which local perspectives are integrated in national, regional and global frameworks. We also analyse the main **norms** that allow for participation (or limit it) to identify 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?

## Selected open access publications

- **The Arctic Council as a success case for transnational cooperation in times of rapid global changes?**
- **A rights-based approach for implementing the European Green Deal**
- **From Rovaniemi to Tromsø spirit?**
- **Governability of regional challenges: the Arctic development paradox**
- **Constructing ocean and polar governance**
- **What future for cooperation in the Arctic? Scenarios after Putin’s war on Ukraine**
- **COVID-19 in the Arctic: How the EU’s new Arctic policy should take account of the pandemic**

## What can we learn from the (European) 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 actors coming from various sectors – public, private and social – into decision-making processes. Due to different priorities, the cooperation of Indigenous peoples, 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 develop a shared understanding as a basis for cooperation.**

## Scopes for adjustment: Towards more cooperation

Five main findings from our research are:

- 1) In local participatory processes, **economic perspectives are overrepresented** while perspectives of minorities are often outvoted.
- 2) **Participatory approaches are often overloaded** in terms of content and decisions tied to them.
- 3) There is an **imbalance between and among actors** at the local level (horizontal dimension) and actors at other governance levels (vertical dimension),
- 4) **Local capacities** to cope with urban transformation processes **are not sufficient.**
- 5) The local population describes a **strong external domination** on urban development processes and their lives.

This exemplary quote from our fieldwork shows, there is a huge potential that is still untapped:

“**We’re trying to engage ourselves much more in our Arctic future** in our framework conditions, we’re understanding much more that if we want to have a say and if we want to have ownership and responsibility for our own lives, our own futures then we do need to understand that **our existence is not just local, regional, or national. It is international and it is pan Arctic.**” (Municipal administration, Tromsø, 24/03/23)

Based on these findings, we propose:

- 1) **More context-sensitive and inclusive participatory processes** to avoid dichotomous discussions, misunderstanding and social exclusion.
- 2) **Local capacity building** to ensure more local independency and local ownership of ideas on sustainable urban development.

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SUDEA



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