Barents region: cooperation and dialogue towards sustainable development

Multilateral cooperation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR) was launched in 1993 when all five Nordic Countries, the Russian Federation and the EU Commission signed a Declaration that established the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) at a Foreign Minister’s Conference in Kirkenes, Norway. At the same time the Barents region’s county governors together with the representatives of indigenous peoples signed a cooperation protocol that established the Barents Regional Council (BRC). Thus the cooperation in the region of the Barents Sea has been set off on two levels: the BEAC is a forum for intergovernmental cooperation and the BRC is a forum for cooperation between the 13 regions of the Member States. The Working Group of Indigenous Peoples has an advisory role to both Councils and is closely cooperating with them.

Cooperation between nations

The member countries of the BEAC are Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russian Federation, Sweden and the European Commission. The Chair of the BEAC rotates biannually between Finland, Norway, Russian Federation and Sweden. Between the biannual ministerial meetings the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) meets approximately three times per year. Observer states are Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Poland, United Kingdom, United States of America.

The Russian Federation holds the BEAC Chairmanship from November 2007 to October 2009. The BEAC chairmanships select the main priorities for its chairmanship period respectively. The priorities of the ongoing Russian Chairmanship are:

- To ensure sustainable development in the Barents Region with emphasis on social and economic factors, linking it closely to the compliance with environmental requirements, and also to support for the indigenous peoples.

- To enhance the effectiveness of the architecture of multilateral cooperation in the North, the division of labor among the regional councils both in substance and geography, synchronization and coordination of their activity on rational use of the existing resources and avoidance of unnecessary duplication of efforts.

In October 2009, the BEAC chairmanship rotates to Sweden for the next two year period. Environmental issues will be the number one priority of the Swedish chairmanship.
Cooperation between regions

The Barents Regional Council consists of the Heads of the 13 counties, regions or similar sub-national entities. The Norwegian member regions are Finnmark, Nordland and Troms, the Swedish member regions are Norrbotten and Västerbotten, the Russian members regions are Arkhangelsk, Republics of Karelia and Komi, Murmansk and Nenets Autonomous Okrug, and the Finnish member regions are Kainuu, Lapland and Oulu. In 2008 North Karelia of Finland was approved observer status.

The Oulu County, Finland, holds the chairmanship of the Barents Regional Council from November 2007 to October 2009. The priorities of the Oulu chairmanship:

- implement the reorganisation of the Barents cooperation
- start the sector programmes according to the Barents strategy
- add visibility of the Barents cooperation and integrate it to other regional and EU-level cooperation, including EU financing programs

In 2008, the Regional Committee prepared the *Barents Program 2009-2013*, which lists the visions and priorities of the regional cooperation for the next few years. The Regional Council approved the Barents Program in November, 2008. The goals of the Barents Program 2009-2013 are:

- To ensure a peaceful and stable development in the region
- To consolidate and further develop the cultural ties between the peoples of the region
- To encourage the establishment of new, and expansion of existing bilateral and multilateral relations in the region
- Lay the foundation for an environmentally sustainable economic and social development in the region with emphasis on an active and goal-oriented management of natural resources
- Contribute to a development that takes the interests of the indigenous peoples into consideration and promotes their participation in the cooperation.

In the EU program period of 2007- 2013, there is for the first time a program including all of the 13 Barents regions, namely the European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument (ENPI) Baltic Sea Region Program. In 2008 and 2009, the Regional Committee, with the Swedish region Västerbotten as the lead partner, worked hard to make all the 13 regions to come together on an application for project funding in the framework of the Baltic Sea Region Program with the aim to have a tool for implementation of the *Barents Program 2009-2013*. Due to the failure of the EU Commission and the Russian Federation to agree on financial aspects of the Baltic Sea Region Program, the Russian regions are so far not eligible for funding through the ENPI. Though the talks on this issue between the EU Commission and the RF continue, the final version of the application only includes the Nordic regions. The results of the call for applications will be official in fall 2009.

Barents geographic features

The area of the Barents Euro-Arctic Region is roughly 1 755 800 square kilometres which is equivalent to the combined surface of France, Spain, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, with a population of approximately 6 million inhabitants. The region is very rich in natural resources such as fish, timber, minerals, oil and gas. It also has important processing and engineering industries as well as high-quality universities, research institutions and science centres. The Barents region is characterised by harsh climatic
conditions, vulnerable environment and long distances which pose challenges to people, business and authorities alike.

Barents cooperation structure

The Barents cooperation framework has developed successfully in various fields and it combines experts and specialists from various sectors. The main tools for implementing policies of both BEAC and BRC are working groups and task-forces some of which are based on joint national and regional representation, some only on national and some only on regional representation.

Project implementation through EU financial schemes – such as the Baltic Sea Region Program and Kolarctic - is of significant importance within the Barents cooperation. However, full scale participation of the 5 Russian Barents regions requires that the EU Commission and the Russian Federation agree on all terms of the ENPI.

Cross-border regional cooperation is the main orientation in the Barents co-operation. However, the calls for emphasising on cooperation with the three neighbouring multilateral councils are increasing: the Arctic Council (AC), the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM). During the previous Finnish BEAC Chairmanship, two pilot projects were initiated with the NCM. The projects focused on the indigenous peoples and the impact of climate change on biodiversity in the Barents region. The cooperation on project level between BEAC and the NCM will continue and there is a possibility that it could be expanded into other fields where BEAC and NCM share interests.
The renewed Northern Dimension supports the multilateral cooperation within the Northern Regional Councils and aims to maximize their synergies. The Northern Dimension focuses on issues of specific relevance in the North, such as its fragile environment, public health and social issues, culture and indigenous peoples’ issues.

The International Barents Secretariat

The International Barents Secretariat (IBS) opened in Kirkenes, Norway, in January 2008. The IBS is expected to bring new dynamism and continuity to the cooperation. The IBS serves both the governmental and regional levels of the cooperation. One of the tasks of the IBS is to constitute an institutional memory for the Barents cooperation and to maintain the web site: www.beac.st. The site contains all information on and contact information to the chairmanships and working groups. The website also has a document database, a media and communication section, information about the Barents Regions and links to related partners and organizations. The IBS has three permanent staff positions and in addition any of the member countries can second staff to the secretariat. Norway recently seconded an Indigenous People’s Adviser to the IBS who has the development of indigenous peoples’ entrepreneurship as a major task.

The national Barents secretariats in Norway and Finland play important roles in both project implementation and policy making.

Economic development

The Working Group on Economic Cooperation (WGEC) promotes cross-border economic cooperation, investments and information. The Barents Business Advisory Group (BBAG) that consists of regional Chambers of Commerce acts as an advisory board to the WGEC. The importance of economic cooperation in the Barents Region was recognised already in the Kirkenes Declaration, 1993.

WGEC arranges Barents Industrial Partnership (BIP) meetings to promote regional cooperation between economic actors and authorities of the Barents region. The latest BIP meeting was held in Archangelsk, November 2008. It had the title “Barents Industrial Partnership in Changing Economic Conditions: Experience and Prospects”.

Barents Forest Sector Task-Force is a subordinate task-force to the WGEC with the aim to promote environmentally and economically sustainable forestry in the region.

Cooperation in the customs sector takes place through the Working Group on Customs Cooperation. The cooperation in this field has resulted in the awareness of the importance of improved customs procedures and the need for review of administrative regulations. One of the most important tasks of the group is the work on preventing and eliminating bottlenecks in the cross-border logistical chains.

The Joint Energy Working Group emphasizes energy efficiency as a means to increase economic performance and reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Other activities include the promotion of bio energy and renewable energy sources – in particular wind power – for which there is a great potential in many parts of the Barents region.

The Barents Region suffers from lack of transport infrastructure in east-west directions making the mobility of people and goods slow and complicated. The Barents Euro-
**Arctic Transport Area (BEATA)** focuses on developing all transport connections in the region. Rail, road, air and sea routes, especially in the east-west direction are emphasized to promote region-wide industrial and economic development. Barents Link, a multimodal transport corridor, is one possible project that needs to be promoted within the forthcoming Northern Dimension Partnership on Transportation and Logistics.

The tourism industry is growing in the Barents Region. The vast wilderness and long coast lines make the region attractive for outdoor activities such as hiking, fishing, hunting, and camping. The conditions for winter sports are excellent. Used wisely, the “Last Wilderness in Europe” is a huge opportunity to both travellers and tourism industry entrepreneurs. The **Joint Working Group on Tourism** was launched in late 2008 to facilitate the development of tourism in the region.

**Environmental protection**

Environmental protection and sustainable management of natural resources are central issues within the Barents cooperation. The environment in the Barents region is vulnerable and considerable challenges exist in all areas: industrial pollution, municipal waste and water issues.

The **Working Group on Environment** (WGE) gives particular attention to cleaner production, the elimination of environmental "hot-spots" in the Russian part of the Barents region, and the conservation of biological diversity and sustainable forest management. A special project preparation fund for environmental "hot-spots" has been created in cooperation with The Nordic Environmental Financing Corporation (NEFCO) and some projects are now being implemented.

Climate change is a major concern for the Barents region and the issue has been on the WGE agenda after the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment report was published by the Arctic Council in 2004. BEAC and the Nordic Council of Ministers have cooperated in the sector of climate change through the project "Impacts of climate change on biodiversity and ecosystem goods and services in the Barents region". The WGE is planning for a continuation and is also planning for a conference “Climate Change and Adaption Measures for the Barents Region”, taking place in early September, 2009.

**Human and social resources**

Long distances, sparsely populated communities, limited rescue personnel and equipment, and restricted means for transport and hospital resources available in case of larger accidents make rescue cooperation important for the security of people living in and travelling to the Barents Region. The **Joint Committee on Rescue Cooperation** was launched to negotiate an agreement increasing the inter-operability of emergency and rescue services functions in the Barents Region to make optimal use of the widely dispersed resources and assistance in the region. The member countries signed the Agreement between the Governments in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region on Cooperation within the field of Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response in December, 2008. The agreement is one of the most important contributions of the Barents Cooperation and it is the second inter-governmental agreement within the framework of the cooperation. (The inter-governmental agreement to start the International Barents Secretariat was the first.) The agreement provides a very solid basis for continued work...
of the Joint Committee on Rescue Cooperation. The Committee also follows the Barents Rescue Exercises.

The BEAC **Working Group on Health and Related Social Issues** focuses on the prevention and combating of communicable diseases, lifestyle-related health and social problems, the development and integration of primary health care and social services. A comprehensive cooperation program on HIV/AIDS has been successfully developed. The Barents cooperation is a vital part of the Northern Dimension Partnership on Public Health and Social Well-being. The HIV/AIDS Program that was originally operational only in the BEAC framework has now been adopted as a part of the Partnership.

The Prime Ministers urged in a declaration 2003 to gain full control of the tuberculosis situation in the region no later than 2013. A report to the working group in late 2008 shows the efforts to combat TBC within the Barents Cooperation shows progress.

The Working Group on Health and Social Issues also recently presented a special program for Children and Youth at Risk.

The **Joint Working Group on Education and Research** focuses on interaction between universities and other higher education institutions in the region. The **Working Group on Youth Policy** plans a ministerial conference in Murmansk in September, 2009. The **Barents Youth Cooperation Office** (BYCO) in Murmansk implements various projects ranging from business planning workshops to music festivals.

The **Working Group on Indigenous Peoples** focuses on cooperation among the Sámi, Nenets and Vepsians. **Barents Indigenous Peoples Office** is located in Lovozero, Murmansk region. A common pilot project with BEAC and NCM is under way in the Murmansk region. The project focuses on traditional reindeer herding, teaching Sámi languages, traditional Sámi crafts and family entrepreneurship training.

The **Joint Working Group on Culture** aims at promoting cultural development, exchanges and networking and building common cultural identity across the Barents region. The programme of Cultural Cooperation 2008-2010 "New Winds in the Barents Region" highlights the cultural diversity and the importance of culture and cultural industry as a unique tool for the development of the region.

**Interaction and cohesion**

The cooperation described above supports the overall aim of developing the Barents region as a socially and economically competitive region in Europe. Increased cohesion, good governance and both environmentally and socially sustainable economic growth are promoted in the sectoral cooperation. In addition, there are many bilateral arrangements in the region.

**Parliamentarian cooperation**

The parliamentarian dimension of the Barents cooperation has developed continuously. At their meetings the parliamentarians discuss pressing issues as well as practical aspects of cooperation for further consideration by national and regional executive bodies.
The first meeting of Barents parliamentarians - the Barents Forum - was held in Kirkenes 1997, and the first conference - in Alta (Norway) 1999. On the agenda were the establishment of lasting ties between parliamentarians in the region, as well as of transport, communications, gender equality and social wellbeing. The next conference was held six years later in June 2005 in Bodo (Norway), then in Rovaniemi in June 2007. The conference in Syktyvkar is the first of its kind to be held in Russia. Parliamentary conferences in the Barents region has become a tradition, and the last conferences have been held on a biannual basis. None the less the Barents (unlike Baltic or Arctic) parliamentarians do not have their permanent body for coordination of their activities. Proposals made to this end have not been able to get enough support.