
Focus on climate change work on regional and local levels

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Analysis of Regional Climate Strategies in the Barents Region.

Reports of the Ministry of the Environment

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The Finnish Ministry of the Environment published a report at the end of the year 2012 on regional climate change strategies in the Barents region. The report addresses a topic that is gaining increasing interest among both academics and policy-makers: the sub-national – and particularly the regional – level in climate adaptation and mitigation work. The report emphasizes the important fact that climate change is not only an environmental issue, but it has also economic and social impacts that deserve attention. Regional climate change strategies are seen, from a top-down perspective, as essential in achieving national and international (e.g. the EU's) goals on climate change issues. On the other hand, in regional climate strategies also issues that are specific for each region can be addressed.

The purpose of the report of the Ministry of the Environment is two-fold: to evaluate the incorporation of Finland's national climate change goals, as set in the National Climate and Energy Strategy (2008), into the regional and local climate strategies in Northern Finland and, particularly, to identify good practices by describing and analyzing the formulation processes of three regional climate strategies in northernmost Finland: Northern Ostrobothnia, Lapland and Kainuu. In addition, climate change work in other parts of the Barents region, Västerbotten in Sweden and Murmansk Oblast in Russia, is briefly discussed for purposes of comparison, as well as three local climate strategies (Oulu sub-region, Rovaniemi and Kajaani) in Northern Finland. The focus of the report is, however, on the Finnish regions and particularly Northern Ostrobothnia. These regions were chosen because of their rather similar natural conditions. Moreover, the formulation of the strategies took place sequentially or simultaneously in 2009–2011, and contacts were made between the strategy projects.

The lessons learned from among the three regional climate strategies formulated recently in Northern Finland are meant to be utilized in climate change strategy work in other parts of the Barents Euro-Arctic Region. As the authors state, the Barents region – unlike other places in the Arctic – has a relatively dense population, and the region's livelihoods are dependent on weather and climatic conditions. Hence adaptation to climate change is urgent in the region. The report was prepared as part of the Finnish presidency of the Working Group on Environment (WGE) of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) in 2012–2013. The Chairmanship Programme¹ suggests, furthermore, both a Barents-level action plan on climate change and cooperation between member regions in formulating regional climate strategies.

The analysis was conducted based on the strategy documents and interviews with 3–5 key persons involved in the strategy formulation processes in each of the three regions in Northern Finland. The focus is on analyzing the planning processes, and aspects such as the participation of various stakeholder groups, project coordination, funding, management and strategy implementation are discussed. At the time the report was published it was, however, too early to evaluate the success of the implementation phase of the regional climate strategies.

The lessons learned are versatile and practical, even if not entirely unfamiliar in existing literature on participatory planning and strategic management. For instance the identified problems and recommendations regarding stakeholders' participation in the strategy formulation comply largely with the existing body of knowledge on participatory planning. On the other hand, some of the findings are particularly worth mentioning. For instance, a communications plan is recommended to ensure innovative and effective communication concerning the preparation of climate strategies and for the dissemination of climate-friendly practices. Examples of potentially useful tools for communicating about the planning processes and climate-friendly everyday-life practices include versatile use of social media and creative campaigns such as the Climate-Friendly Families experiment from Kainuu Region. Moreover, the formulation of local climate strategies should be synchronized with regional ones in order to achieve more with fewer resources. Regarding human resources in climate change strategy work, a

¹ The Chairmanship Programme of Finland 2012–2013 for the Working Group on Environment of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, available at: http://www.barentsinfo.fi/beac/docs/WGE_Finnish_Chairmanship_Action_Program_2012_2013.pdf (accessed June 15, 2013).

combination of an “in-house” project manager and invited consultants is considered the best solution for simultaneously acquiring the best expertise for the planning process and ensuring successful implementation of the climate strategy.

From an academic perspective, the report’s lack of references to scientific literature reduces its value. Some extremely interesting arguments made in the report would benefit from the provision of a specific source. Also the research methods and data supporting the sections on Murmansk Oblast and Västerbotten are not specified beyond a reference to the UNDP report on the impacts of climate change in Murmansk Oblast. More transparency concerning the “insider knowledge” of the authors on some of the planning processes analyzed in the report would have been recommended particularly had the report been called an evaluation in a strict sense. However, the report serves as a step towards more in-depth research and opens new research topics to be addressed. For instance, the factors behind the differences between the strategic solutions in the regions (both with regard to the planning processes and the contents of the strategies) remain partly unexplored. For future work on regional climate change strategies in the Barents region, it should be considered how the lessons that have been learned mainly from Finnish cases can be applied in the planning and political-administrational cultures of the other Barents member countries.

To conclude, the report serves well to open discussion and provides a convincing reference for policy-makers on the importance of climate change work at the sub-national level. The report is also a milestone in the work on regional climate change strategies in the Barents Euro-Arctic Council during Finland’s chairmanship of the WGE. Above all, the recommended practices can further promote and facilitate regional climate strategy work in the Barents region.