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Improving the work of the Arctic Council: challenges and recommendations

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Abstract

The Arctic Contaminants Action Programme (ACAP), originally intended to follow up the work of AMAP (the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme) on identifying the sources of pollution, became an official working group under the Arctic Council in 2006. ACAP has focused on pollution from Russian sources, the main objective being to accelerate the reduction of national emissions of various environmental pollutants and climate forcers. Basically, ACAP initiates projects with a scientific basis in AMAP assessments of the health of the Arctic. The idea behind the creation of ACAP was to channel the work of the Arctic Council in a more practical direction and to improve the use of the knowledge produced by AMAP. ACAP is one of only two Council working groups not to have been specifically evaluated and analysed by external bodies and academics. This article undertakes a critical analysis of ACAP and argues that there are great potentials for improving its work. ACAP has established a forum where it has been possible to facilitate pilot projects aimed at limiting harmful emissions; this work should be strengthened.

Key Words: Arctic Council, ACAP, mandate, coordination, communication

Introduction

All the Arctic states have recognised the Arctic Council (AC, the Council) as the major international forum for dialogue and cooperation on Arctic challenges and opportunities, and as a significant arena for developing knowledge about this changing region (Rottem, 2020). Most of the Council's activity takes place in its working groups (WGs), which produce scientific knowledge and are charged with identifying and analysing Arctic challenges – everything from monitoring mercury levels, to formulating guidelines for Arctic shipping and to undertaking wide-ranging studies of climate change in the Arctic. WGs may submit recommendations on everything from the regulation of environmental pollutants to choices of general policy. These working groups – dubbed ‘the AC locomotive’ (Stokke, 2013) – have also been subjected to a range of studies and evaluations (see Haavisto, 2001; Kankaanpää & Young, 2012; Rottem, Soltvedt & Prip, 2020).

The Arctic Council has six WGs: Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP); Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF); PAME (Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment); Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR); Arctic Contaminants Action Programme (ACAP); and Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG), each with its own history and portfolio. They vary in size, from the three ‘big’ programmes, AMAP, CAFF and PAME, to the three ‘small’ groups, EPPR, ACAP and SDWG. All WGs have representatives from the member-states’ sector administrations, national administrations and the scientific community. Each has a specific operating mandate, a chairmanship (rotating among the member-states), and a Board or Steering Committee supported by a Secretariat. All decisions require consensus, as with the Council's work otherwise. Importantly, the WGs obtain their mandate from the biennial Ministerial Meetings and the Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs), who represent their governments and guide and oversee

the Council's activities (see also Rottem, 2020). There are, however, some basic differences among the AGs as to mandate and structure: AMAP and CAFF are basically monitoring and assessment groups, PAME is more policy-oriented, SDWG is always chaired by the chair-state and focuses mainly on local projects, EPPR is heavily involved in following up on agreements on search-and-rescue and oil-spill preparedness and response, and ACAP focuses on implementation.

All AC working groups have been subject to external evaluations and analyses (e.g Haavisto, 2001; Kankaanpää & Young, 2012). More explicit analyses of each working group are, however, generally hard to find, with some exceptions, for example CAFF (Prip 2016, Barry, Daviðsdóttir, Einarsson, & Young, 2020), SDWG (Soltvedt & Rottem, 2017), AMAP, PAME and CAFF (Rottem et al. 2020), David Stone's book on AMAP is also clearly relevant (Stone, 2015) And even less attention has been devoted to ACAP (and EPPR), and analyses have tended to be superficial. To my knowledge, a separate analysis of ACAP has never been conducted. In 2018 an external evaluation was conducted of the Project Support Instrument (PSI), which funds several ACAP projects. However, this evaluation has not been made public and is therefore not referenced here. Surely that is a gap in the literature on the Arctic Council, the forum recognised as the major arena for Arctic cooperation.

How is the work of ACAP set up? What are the challenges? What is the potential for improvement? Further: Is ACAP's mandate clearly delineated? How well coordinated is its work? Is the work conducted and communicated properly, internally and externally? This article has mainly an empirical ambition: to map the work and shortcomings of ACAP. However, an analysis of organisational challenges for ACAP must be contextualised. Thus, I will also introduce various evaluations and studies of the WGs in general. As the AC literature lacks studies on the individual WGs, this article is meant as an initial step to remedy that. I argue that ACAP is still relevant, despite its shortcomings. An implementation group and arena

for cooperation on practical projects with Russia should be part of the AC structure, but several improvements are also needed. For this analysis I have collected primary data (strategies, assessments, minutes, declarations etc.) from Arctic Council archives, and conducted a survey of previous research contributions and analyses of ACAP, supplemented by a series of interviews with actors with experience in the work of ACAP. All interviews were conducted winter 2019. All interviewees are anonymised; only the dates of the interviews are given.

I begin by introducing some key analyses and debates over the AC structure as such. Although several recommendations on restructuring have been put forward, no comprehensive reorganisation has taken place. In recent years, however, WG group coordination has been strengthened, with several initiatives on procedural reform leading to greater transparency. Changing the overall structure of the AC has proven difficult – indeed, it might not be the way forward. We need a bottom–up perspective to supplement the literature, examining each WG. What are the challenges, and how can their work be improved? Leading to an analysis of ACAP. Thus, a review of ACAP’s history, mandate and position in the Arctic Council structure is in order, as well as a closer look at how ACAP and its expert groups are organised and their project portfolio. This is to give readers less familiar with the Arctic Council an understanding of why and how pan-Arctic cooperation through the Council in general, and ACAP in particular, has evolved and is legitimised.

The final section of this article summarises my findings along three dimensions: mandate, coordination and communication; and discusses measures for strengthening the work of ACAP. Finally, I argue that ACAP remains relevant, despite its shortcomings. An implementation group and arena for cooperation on practical projects with Russia should be part of the AC structure, but several improvements should be made.

Restructuring the Arctic Council?

With the Arctic Council WGs, it is sometimes unclear how their various projects have been evaluated, how well they have been coordinated with the other working groups, and what results they can show. Some scholars hold that these projects have developed almost organically over the years, and that their structure is not optimally efficient (Rottem, 2020). Working group mandates sometimes cover the same ground, and one could also ask whether they correspond to the priorities and needs of the AC.

During the Finnish chairmanship 2000–2002, the Arctic Chair commissioned a consultant study for the SAO meeting in Rovaniemi, 12–13 June 2001, and Pekka Haavisto of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs produced a report on the structure of the AC. After additional consultations, the review report was sent to the 2002 Ministerial Meeting, at Inari, Finland, for finalisation and endorsement. The 2001 report was ambitious, setting short-term and long-term options for the structure of the AC. It was wide in scope and addressed several questions concerning the role of the AC, as well as overlaps, gaps, unnecessary competition, financial problems and cost-efficiency. The 2001 report also examined the idea of reorganising the Council and reducing the number of WGs to two: the monitoring group and the implementation group. In such a structure, an expanded AMAP would act as the overall monitoring and assessment group, while implementation activities would be gathered under PAME. The structure that was actually proposed is, however, more modest. Against a comprehensive restructuring it was argued that one should take full advantage of the work being done today, and in the past. Personnel resources, networks, data collected, and motivation of individuals and member-states should be carefully maintained. The proposed new structure operates with four working groups: Brown, Blue, Green, and Rainbow. The Brown group consists of AMAP and ACAP. The monitoring procedures created by AMAP and the action plan that ACAP has based on monitoring reports will form the basis of action against industrial pollution, in an holistic approach that combines monitoring and implementation. In the Blue group, PAME and

EPPR constitute the oceanic focus, emphasising institutional work on marine pollution. The Green group consists of CAFF as the programme and action group for living resources and biodiversity conservation. Here a combination of the monitoring functions of AMAP and CAFF is also discussed, whereby AMAP would be in charge of biodiversity monitoring as well. And fourth, in the Rainbow group, SDWG would focus on sustainable development issues. Although the Haavisto report and recommendations were endorsed by the AC, not much has happened and no new structure has been adopted. Further, several of my interviewees were sceptical towards merging ACAP and AMAP (see below).

In 2008, the Norwegian chairmanship acted on this debate and published a report on AC challenges and opportunities, which was presented at the SAO meeting in Kautokeino, Norway, 19–20 November 2008. Key points were funding/resources, priorities/focus, WG coordination/communication, and outreach. Funding was described as a major concern with potential implications for project outcomes. Closely connected to funding is the question of prioritisation. One recommendation is to establish long-term goals against which to assess work priorities; another recommendation is to link the work programme of the AC to an assessment of longer-term needs and goals. Central here is the issue of WG coordination and communications. Also highlighted was the value of regular meetings between the SAO chair and WG chairs. However, the report did not recommend restructuring of the WG structure, although the challenges with the working group structure was clearly what the authors had in mind. And again, the report did not lead to comprehensive change of the Council.

At the plenary SAO meeting in Anchorage, Alaska, 21–22 October 2015, a joint memorandum from a multilateral audit of the national authorities of the Arctic states' work with the AC was presented. The audit had been conducted in accordance with a strategic plan signed by the participating Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs). Work on the multilateral audit was led and coordinated by Norway and the Russian Federation. A key finding: the Council faces key

challenges concerning its organisational structure, establishing priorities, funding its work, and ensuring effective implementation of voluntary recommendations adopted by member-states.

However, the multilateral audit also noted that communication among WGs has improved. WG chairs (and secretaries) meet for information sharing, as shown by the September 2015 Tromsø meeting (involving four of the WGs) and the SAO–Chair–WGs meeting in Reykjavik in December 2015. This practice has continued since then. Further, the establishment of the Permanent Secretariat has helped to improve coordination and support to the WGs – especially relevant for ACAP and EPPR, now located in Tromsø. The audit also noted the increasing use of task forces (TFs) to address emerging issues. Establishing TFs may take resources from WG efforts and projects, but they provide helpful complementary expertise within a set timeframe.

Moreover, the 2015 multilateral audit underscored the substantial autonomy of the WGs. The development of the Tracking Tool for Arctic Council Deliverables and Ongoing Work has improved the AC’s ability to inventory and track the status of ongoing projects, but there are no mechanisms for prioritising work across the WGs and TFs. The audit discussed whether high-level national representatives should enhance their coordination of the WGs; it concluded that Council recommendations are broad and general and therefore difficult to implement, as is the tracking of implementation status. Another problem noted was the lack of a coherent feedback mechanism at the national level. But while the 2015 audit addressed various challenges in the work of the Council, it failed to lead to any major AC reform – only incremental changes.

In the prolongation of the audit, the December 2015 Reykjavik meeting of SAOs and WG chairs was held. Matters discussed here included coordination of WG work plans and scheduling, engagement with Permanent Participants (PPs), integration of traditional and local knowledge (TLK), relations between WGs and TFs and with external bodies. The meeting was described as an important venue for discussing future and recurring questions on WG matters. However,

the challenges of the WG structure were discussed only indirectly, and the original AC structure remained intact.

Furthermore, there is a substantial scholarly literature on AC issues. One pertinent contribution is Paula Kankaanpää and Oran Young's survey from 2012, where it was noted that effectiveness of the AC had exceeded the expectations of many. But, the authors continued, it is important to investigate what steps could be taken to secure and improve the effectiveness of the AC in the future. They prepared a questionnaire on the AC's effectiveness designed to elicit the views of persons familiar with the Council and its work. In their conclusion, the Council's good performance in the realm of knowledge generation, issue framing, and agenda setting is stressed. As to adjustments, Kankaanpää and Young distinguish between internal matters and external issues. On internal matters, they focus on the configuration of the WGs and the division of labour between them and the TFs. As to external issues, it is vital, they hold, to engage the interest of regional and local constituencies, along with major non-Arctic states.

'It is time to reclassify and re-categorize the working groups', note Heather A. Conley and Matthew Melino at CSIS in their report with recommendations on AC redesign (Conley & Melino, 2016, p. 7). They conclude that the AC suffers from structural deficiencies. Also others have been critical: the WWF has even proposed that there should be only three Arctic Council WGs. Another type of evaluation, less critical, is presented by Timo Koivurova, Paula Kankaanpää and Adam Stępień (2015), who argue that the Council's structural flexibility can offer lessons that might inform regional governance in other parts of the world. We also find similar more specific analysis of the working groups (Barry et al., 2020). They argue in the case of Arctic Council work on biodiversity (CAFF) that “(..)when clear and detailed plans are in place to guide the work of the Council as for biodiversity then glimpses can be seen of its potential to act as an agent of change” (Ibid).

The effectiveness of the AC has thus received considerable attention at the national, WG, SAO and ministerial levels, as well as in independent research. A quick glance at the minutes of Ministerial Meetings, SAO meetings, and other AC meetings shows that matters like a clearer vision, improved coordination, and increased participation are increasingly debated. A myriad of different diagnoses of the AC, with possible remedies, has emerged. Ways of increasing the effectiveness of the Council are also attracting greater attention. However, it is difficult to find common ground. There is no quick fix, and it will take time to find an optimal institutional structure, if that is possible at all. However, considerable work has been done recently on strengthening coordination and information sharing among the WGs, formally and informally. It is essential to strike a balance between what is politically feasible and what seems rational from the viewpoint of the relevant party – whether a member-state, a representative of a WG or a PP. As every WG and every state is different, the function, role, and focus of the Council's work will always be debated. There is no such thing as 'one' Arctic – and the agenda of every Arctic state will reflect that fact.

This short introduction to debates on the restructuring of the AC indicates that the chances for a total reorganising of the AC are small. A top-down reorganization is unlikely, perhaps not reasonable. We need to take a closer look at the work of each working group. What can and should be done by each of them? ACAP may be especially interesting, as the least-known of the WPs, arguably existing on the periphery of the other five.

[History and mandate of ACAP](#)

The precursor to the Arctic Council, the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS), was formally established in 1991. The Cold War had put a lid on pan-Arctic cooperation, but new opportunities opened in the late 1980s, and both the United States and Russia were positive to establishing new meeting places (English, 2013). In parallel, environmental policy had become an issue of growing importance, as shown by international conventions and other collaborative

arenas that put the environment high on the political agenda (Andresen, Boasson, & Hønneland, 2012). Unsurprisingly, then, it was in this area that opportunities emerged for developing cooperation. Arctic environmental challenges were not solely a national matter: new international arenas for discussion were needed.

In September 1996, the Arctic Council was formally established through the Ottawa Declaration, which begins as follows: ‘The Arctic Council is established as a high level forum to: (a) provide means for promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, with the involvement of the Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues (...)’ (Arctic Council, 1996). With the creation of the Arctic Council, the AEPS was absorbed into this new forum; and indigenous populations, observers, member-states and working groups followed. At the first meetings, procedures and rules were adopted: among other things, it was decided that the chairmanship would rotate biannually among the eight member-states, and that all decisions would be made by consensus. This organisational set-up – eight permanent members, a rotating chairmanship, decisions by consensus, permanent participants, and a wide range of observers – still characterises today’s Arctic Council.

In the first period, from 1996 to ca 2005, most work in the Council focused on pollution in the Arctic. The high levels of pollutants and heavy metals in the North can be extremely harmful to wildlife and humans. Much of this pollution is carried from the south, by sea and air currents, as became evident from efforts at mapping contaminants in the Arctic. In 1998 in its first major report, AMAP mapped pollution in the Arctic (AMAP, 1998). During this early period, AC working groups prepared several reports that provided inputs to international conventions on pollution, including the Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (the Stockholm Convention). The work of AMAP, and of the working group on the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFFs), has focused on monitoring and compiling information on environmental challenges in the Arctic. This work is necessary in order to justify political

action: clear and precise scientific recommendations are often the first step in achieving national and international regulations (Clark, Mitchell, & Cash, 2006).

Since the turn of the millennium, climate change in the Arctic has received increasing attention – as reflected in the most widely cited scientific work conducted under AC auspices, the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA, 2004). The idea of such an assessment was launched in the mid-1990s, with start-up around 2000 (Koivurova & VanderZwaag, 2007). This report showed that the Arctic occupies a special position as regards climate change: among the findings was that temperature rise in the Arctic has been twice as high as the global average, leading to the melting of sea and land ice. It is in the Arctic that the first, and most severe, consequences of climate change will be felt. With shifting ice conditions, erosion and less permafrost, living conditions in the North will change completely.

In this context, the Council has focused both on emissions limits and on adaptation to a changing climate. As to emissions constraints, the challenges concerning short-lived greenhouse gases, such as soot and gases, and methane and ground-ozone, have been prominent. In 2009, a time-limited working group (a task force) was established specifically to examine this issue (Arctic Council, 2009), and this work has remained central. Through ACIA and later work on adaptation and emissions limits, the WGs have provided inputs to international climate negotiations, in particular through the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Thus, in the first ten years of the Council, work on environmental and climate challenges was concretised: and it is in this context that ACAP must be understood. As in the Arctic Council generally, ACAP's work is based on two main pillars: climate and environment. The Arctic Council have a third pillar: sustainable development. But this is not directly relevant when discussing ACAP. It soon became clear that mapping challenges in the field of climate and the environment should be undertaken through specific projects that could be implemented to reduce emissions of substances harmful to the environment and climate (Interview 20.11.2018).

In 1997/1998, AMAP's wide-ranging report on pollution in the Arctic was published within the framework of the AEPS (AMAP, 1998). Already in this work we see the germ of what was to become ACAP. The Alta ministerial meeting in June 1997 produced a joint statement on how to respond to the findings of the AMAP report (Arctic Council, 1997). The Alta ministerial meeting was the last AEPS ministerial. The work of AEPS was incorporated in the Arctic Council. The ambition to take measures to reduce emissions of pollutants was also expressed. In September 1998, the SAOs were commissioned to propose more concrete measures, and the Arctic Council Action Plan to Eliminate Pollution of the Arctic was put forward. The goal was to complement existing mechanisms – including legal agreements and AC structures and mechanisms, such as the Regional Plan of Action for the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment from Land-Based Activities – to enable action under a wide range of pollution-control themes and measures, and to identify collaborative activities necessary for implementation. ACAP, still not an independent working group, was to facilitate strengthening and supporting mechanisms to encourage national measures for reducing the emissions of pollutants. The strategy was designed to cover all the pollution issues dealt with by the Council (Arctic Council, 2000a).

The work on further developing ACAP was led by Norway. Concretisation of strategy and the operational and organisational aspects were discussed at several meetings from autumn 1999 to autumn 2000. It was emphasised that: ‘The success of ACAP will to a large degree hinge on the ability of the individual Council member to identify and propose appropriate actions, and on their commitment to bring the proposals forward (..)’(Arctic Council, 1999). That recognition is important also today. In parallel, at the Barrow AC ministerial meeting in 2000, an ad hoc steering committee was created that would operate for two years under the Norwegian chairmanship (Arctic Council 2000b). During this period, the organisation of the Council as such was also subjected to critical analysis, including the role of ACAP. The evaluation led by

Pekka Haavisto proposed a fairly radical restructuring of the Council structure, with ACAP to be placed directly under AMAP, as a kind of implementing arm – not unlike ACAP's role both then and now, but with a clearer and more formalised link between the two working groups (Haavisto, 2001).

Further, a key recognition during this period was that most of the major environmental challenges lay in Russia. Thus, Norway, with land and sea borders to Russia, also had a self-interest in implementing projects/measures that could put these issues on the agenda and facilitate emissions reductions on the Russian side (Interview 20.11.2018). Much of the motivation behind the Norwegian commitment to ACAP could be ascribed to the challenges in Russia, and ACAP has mainly had projects in Russia.

Despite the Haavisto evaluation's critical approach to the Council structure, ACAP can be said to have started on the path towards becoming an independent working group at a meeting in Oslo in April 2001 (Arctic Council, 2002; Interview 20.11.2018). In this period, ACAP shaped its mandate, with a guiding focus on national pilot projects aimed at reducing environmentally harmful emissions. Other important keywords are linkages to international convention work, pan-Arctic relevance, and transfer value. In 2001 it was decided that several projects were to be implemented on the basis of AMAP's mapping work, like the 'Reduction of Atmospheric Mercury Emissions from Arctic States' (Arctic Council, 2005a) and 'Evaluation of a Few Major Dioxins/Furans Sources (in the Archangel and Murmansk Regions, and in the Republic of Komi)' (Arctic Council, 2005b). It was also discussed how to establish a better funding scheme – for Council projects in general, and for ACAP projects in particular. At the SAO meeting in Inari in October 2002, representatives from the World Bank, the Nordic Environment Finance Corporation (NEFCO) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) were invited to contribute perspectives on future collaboration with the Arctic Council (Arctic Council, 2002). Central here was the recognition that financial institutions tend to focus on

projects, so it was important for the Council to prepare a list of recommended project proposals. Such a list would also have to say something about the host nations' obligations and the benefits of implementing the projects. Although outside financial institutions were to assist with the practical aspects, all projects would remain Arctic Council projects. This was the background to the Project Support Instrument (PSI) which became operational in 2014, with financial support from Russia, which has also been by far the largest financial contributor to this funding mechanism. Space considerations here prevent a fuller account of the PSI, but the time it has taken for the mechanism to become operational says something about the challenges associated with establishing and funding specific ACAP projects (Arctic Council, 2006). The PSI is at the time of this writing still in a pilot phase.

In 2006 ACAP formally became a working group and changed its name from the Arctic Council Action Plan to Eliminate Pollution of the Arctic to the Arctic Contaminants Actions Programme. ACAP would follow the same guidelines as the other working groups, being subject to governance documents such as the Arctic Council Rules of Procedure (Arctic Council, 2015a) and the Arctic Council Observer Manual for Subsidiary Bodies (Arctic Council, 2016). The role of the working groups is summarised in the Working Group Common Operating Guidelines (most recent update 2016). Here are descriptions of the role of the Secretariat and procedures for reporting. However, it is worth noting that four out of the six AC working groups have included more specific descriptions of their roles – the exceptions being the EPPR and ACAP.

Guidelines for initiating and implementing new projects were drawn up. Basically, a member-country will take the initiative for a project (directly or indirectly), which is then discussed in the relevant expert group, for input, before being approved and passed to working group level. After this, project applicants may apply for funding through the PSI.

During the period from the ministerial meeting in 2002 to the ministerial meeting in 2006, ACAP operated on an equal footing with the other AC working groups, without formally being a working group (Interview 20.11.2018). This is evidenced by how ACAP's findings were reported to the AC ministerial meetings in 2004 and 2006 by the Senior Arctic Officials (SAO): special attention was paid to the destruction of PCBs on the Russian side, but also other specific projects were also launched – for example, on brominated flame retardants and mercury. In this context, reference was also made to ACAP's role as a mechanism to support the implementation of international agreements like the Stockholm Convention (Arctic Council 2004, 2006). This aspect was also prominent in the period 2006–2013, but the work on hazardous waste and short-lived climate forcers began to attract growing attention. Moreover, it was around 2010 that most expert groups under ACAP formulated their mandate and Terms of Reference (see below). I have chosen not to distinguish between ToR and mandate. The ToR will usually be more specific on, for example, routines for reporting and organisation, but here too the purpose of the work is often described.

In 2013/2014, the Arctic Council's work was, as noted, subjected to a multilateral audit (Arctic Council, 2015b). Here it was pointed out that the activity and the number of projects in the expert groups varied, partly depending on interest in the work among the different countries. It was also noted that as of September 2013 there was no activity in several expert groups, and that ACAP, with its focus on Russia, existed largely on the periphery of the other working groups. The audit also discussed how ACAP should in the future have projects in all the Arctic states, thereby limiting the number of purely Russian projects. Further, the audit pointed to the low implementation ability and poor goal achievement in ACAP.

Even more critical was the official audit conducted by the Office of the Auditor General of Norway as part of the multilateral audit (Rikssrevisjonen, 2014). It was noted that in recent years (i.e. before 2013) there had been only one specific new project submitted for approval in

ACAP. That project involved work on reducing carbon emissions due to residential combustion of wood, and had been submitted and led by Norway. The project was nevertheless an indication that ACAP could have a more pan-Arctic organisation. Other examples mentioned by the Office of the Auditor General of Norway included the collection of PCBs and pesticides in Russia, which had been partially implemented. As several of my respondents also noted, it had proven difficult to put in place a facility for the destruction of PCBs (Interview 10.12.2018 and 12.01.2019). The USA had offered to contribute technology to set up such a facility, but that stalled, partly because of disagreement as to where it should be located (Interview 10.12.2018 and 12.01.2019).

Furthermore, the Office of the Auditor General of Norway's review drew attention to persistent problem in connection with ACAP: for instance, that in ACAP's reporting to the SAOs and ministers in recent years, no clear recommendations had been made to the member-states, because there were so few active projects. There was only one general recommendation (on waste) that was partly linked to the findings of ACAP investigations. In summary, the audit found that there were few active projects under ACAP between 2006 and 2013, and no project reports with recommendations had been submitted by this WG, in contrast to the other groups.

In the September 2016 strategic plan for ACAP (Arctic Council, 2016) and the most recent work plans for 2017–2021 (Arctic Council 2017, 2019), the broad mandate of ACAP is reaffirmed, and again the importance of pan-Arctic relevance in connection with international convention work and the transfer value of the pilot projects is emphasised. Worth noting here is the greater focus on short-lived climate forcers.

From ACAP's history and mandate it is evident that ACAP has largely followed the same path as the Arctic Council itself, beginning with a clear focus on the environment. Measures against greenhouse gas emissions, the second pillar of ACAP's work, became marked as that topic became increasingly prominent on the Council agenda. This work has been particularly visible

in the Short-Lived Climate Pollutants Expert Group (SLCP EG) (see below), with projects aimed at reducing emissions of short-lived greenhouse gases. Relevant examples are the project on reducing black carbon from residential wood combustion, led by Norway (Arctic Council, 2014), and a US-led project on reducing emissions from buses in Murmansk (US EPA, 2014).

This brief historical presentation shows that ACAP has spent a long time finding its place, and there is much to indicate that it has not yet achieved that goal. There has been a clear focus on Russia from the very start, but in several cases the projects should have been pan-Arctic and at the least have had transfer value across the Arctic states. ACAP has a broad mandate, which requires a streamlined organisation and clear priorities to find a clear direction for its daily work. Moreover, available information on the historical background of ACAP and the work that has been done is often also not transparent. It is difficult to get a good overview of what ACAP has done and is doing – a point to which I return in the concluding section.

Work on mapping the climate and environmental challenges in the Arctic is resource-intensive and requires continuity and painstaking scientific effort. However, the work involved in implementing measures based on the findings of scientific reports may be even more demanding. ACAP projects often include more linkages than for example AMAP projects, such as local authorities and industry. It is one thing to uncover the challenges; doing something about them is another matter. This might have contributed to the special status of ACAP and to its existence on the periphery of other working groups. However, that does not mean that an implementation group is not needed as part of the AC structure.

Organisation and project portfolio

As of today, there are four expert groups within ACAP: on POPs and Mercury, on Hazardous Wastes, the Indigenous Peoples Contaminant Action Program (IPCAP) and on Short-Lived Climate Pollutants (SLCP EG). The four groups have varying levels of activity and are

prioritised differently from country to country, but their main work involves approving and following up several smaller projects. ACAP has had projects in the following specialist areas: pesticides, mercury, PCBs, hazardous waste, dioxins, action programmes against pollution affecting the indigenous peoples of the Arctic, brominated flame retardants, and short-lived climate forcers. Also here ACAP can be seen as an implementer of projects stemming from the scientific work of the Arctic Council – and there is no shortage of relevant topics.

One problem in collecting data about the expert groups is that the ACAP homepage is not updated. No information on specific expert groups has been posted since 2016 (excluding SLCP, last updated in 2017). This does not mean that there has been no activity, but it says something about information on ACAP: it is deficient, fragmented and difficult to access, perhaps even unavailable. It is, however, possible to trace and say something substantial about each of the four expert groups.

POPs & Mercury

The ACAP Expert Group on POPs and Mercury is the result of the merger of the Expert Group on Mercury and the Expert Group on Dioxins and Furans, implemented in September 2015. This expert group is to coordinate and facilitate demonstration projects under AC auspices, to reduce the emissions of POPs and mercury. Further, it is to coordinate (and benefit from the synergy effects) between the projects and communicate the results. This work is close to ACAP's original mandate through the follow-up of situation assessments conducted by AMAP.

The 2012 Terms of Reference (ToR) of the former mercury working group, also applicable to the combined group, describe the overall objective of this expert group : ‘to contribute to a reduction of mercury releases from the Arctic countries, partly by contributing to the development of a common regional framework for an action plan or strategy for the reduction of mercury emissions, and partly by evaluating and selecting one or a few specific point sources

for implementation of release reduction measures' (ACAP 2012). The close linkage to the monitoring work of AMAP and work at the international level, especially in the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), is highlighted. The ToR list various other tasks, such as organising regular meetings, coordination with the Arctic Council and international processes, and information sharing. It is also pointed out that the activities described in the ToR are dependent on funding and are not legally binding.

The work programme of the Expert Group on Dioxins and Furans for 2015–2017 is slightly completer and more precise. There is a more restrictive mandate: 'Develop and implement actions aiming at Reduction/Elimination of Dioxin and Furan Pollution in the Russian Federation with a focus on the Arctic and regions impacting the Arctic' (ACAP, 2015). Work in Russia is prioritised, with a special focus on persistent organic pollutants (POPs). There is also a link to work at the international level, with the stated ambition of supporting Russia's efforts to implement the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants.

In the period 2013–2016 there was considerable activity within the focal area of this expert group (Interview 10.12.2018 and 12.01.2019). However, on the Council websites we find only the minutes from one meeting of the newly established group. Since 2017 there has been less activity, as was also confirmed in interviews (Interview 10.12.2018 and 12.01.2019). Activity in this project group has been somewhat unclear, making it difficult to get a complete overview of completed and ongoing projects. From the reporting to AMAROK system for tracking Arctic Council projects, we can see which projects were implemented and active as of March 2018. According to the latest update, there are four projects under the purview of this expert group. One of these is reported as being on schedule, but with little activity; one has been put on hold; one is delayed and the fourth one has unclear status (Arctic Council, 2019b).

Hazardous Waste

The Expert Group on Hazardous Waste is tasked with developing and facilitating, under the auspices of the Arctic Council, demonstration projects intended to strengthen the handling of hazardous waste and thereby reduce the emission of pollutants (including POPs). Further, the group is to view different projects in context and contribute to synergy effects – and communicate the results. However, also here, website information is incomplete: the only links are to the minutes of three meetings (nos. 20, 22 and 23) (ACAP undated). The choice of what to post appears highly random, so we must ask: has this expert group has succeeded in one of its main tasks – the communication of results from its work?

In April 2015, it was proposed to merge the expert group on PCBs and the expert group on Obsolete Pesticides. The PCB group had not been very active and was without leadership at that time. In September 2015, these two expert groups were further merged with the Integrated Hazardous Waste Management Strategy. In one year, three expert groups had become one single group. No new mandates or ToR were formulated.

The mandate for the work on obsolete pesticides and PCBs was given in the original Arctic Council Action Plan from 2001. The ToR for the Integrated Hazardous Waste Management Strategy of the Russian Federation from 2010 appears to be the last document that explicitly defines the mandate, role and work of the merged group. Here, as the name implies, there is a unilateral focus on challenges on the Russian side (ACAP, 2010). As to the projects reported to AMAROK in 2019, the picture is the same as with the Expert Group on POPs and Mercury: four projects are listed, all of them delayed. Most attention has been paid to the PCB project, which started in 2001 and was aimed at mapping PCBs in Russia – deemed particularly relevant for Russian implementation of the Stockholm Convention. This has stalled due to lack of possibilities for destroying hazardous waste in Russia (Interview 18.01.2019). Summing up: this expert group has had a clear focus on Russia, but implementation has proven challenging.

Indigenous Peoples Contaminant Action Program (IPCAP)

The IPCAP initiative was taken in conjunction with the ministerial meetings in Salekhard in 2006 and Tromsø in 2009. The background was that industrial development in the Arctic had brought threatening waste problems close to members of the indigenous populations. Their traditional lifestyles expose these groups more to environmental toxins: IPCAP focuses on reducing their exposure to these toxins – and representatives of indigenous groups are also to be involved in this work. The ToR for this working group were approved at a WG meeting in Oslo in 2010. As with the other expert groups, there are descriptions of the role and type of activities relevant to this expert group – with one notable difference: this expert group is to have a co-chair from the permanent participants.

This is also reflected in the IPCAP update to the ACAP working group meeting in Alaska in November 2017, where one project particularly highlighted was the Circumpolar Local Environmental Observer Network (CLEO) (ACAP, 2017). At the ministerial meeting in Fairbanks in May 2017, this network was presented as being successful and involving a considerable degree of activity (Arctic Council, 2017).

The most recent update of projects to the Arctic Council notes only two: CLEO, and the Community-Based Black Carbon and Public Health Assessment, both reported as being on schedule. The flow of information from these projects is better than with projects from the expert groups mentioned above; moreover, IPCAP projects have clearer pan-Arctic ambitions, giving ownership to several actors. However, my respondents emphasised the difficulties encountered in implementing projects, especially on the Russian side (Interview 18.01.2019).

Short-Lived Climate Pollutants (SLCP EG)

The overarching mandate of the SLCP EG is to facilitate activities aimed at reducing black carbon emissions that are transported into Arctic areas. This is work that has been high on the

Arctic Council agenda in recent years, through, for example, the 2009 Short-Lived Climate Forcers Task Force (Arctic Council, 2009). Also the September 2010 ToR make explicit reference to this work, as well as to AMAP's activities in the field. The ToR for the SLCP EG were drafted before the expert group was formally approved (ACAP, 2010b). This expert group is led by the USA, with Norway and Russia as co-chairs. The ToR present an overview of how the SLCP EG is intended to work: the expert group should concentrate primarily on black carbon, but activities on other short-lived climate forcers are also foreseen. Despite the initial focus on Russia, the goal is to be relevant to the entire Arctic; also expressed is the need to include local populations and indigenous people in the design of projects. The aim is to identify the best practices, technologies and experiences that can be applied also beyond the individual projects led by the SLCP EG.

Interestingly, this group of experts is a product of ongoing work that received considerable political attention during the period in question. Everything was arranged for this expert group to have the financial and political support needed to succeed. The work on short-lived climate forcers has developed in an ambitious direction, with the framework programme on black carbon and methane and an expert group led by the chair. This work has ranked high on the Arctic Council agenda in recent years. My interview respondents also highlighted the work of the SLCP EG as positive, as a field where the USA, Russia and Norway could find a common platform (Interview 10.12.2018 and 12.01.2019).

That this expert group has shown more activity is also evident in the 2019 report to AMAROK. Seven projects were reported: one completed, four on track and two delayed. Despite pan-Arctic ambitions, most of these projects are rooted in Russia. ACAP as an implementing group has thus shown its relevance – but do these projects have transfer value to other Arctic states?

All these expert groups have taken a long time to find their places. Their number has been reduced to the four that have now been formally established. As regards the level of activity,

there is considerable variation – among the four groups, and within the individual group of experts over time. Some groups have a high level of activity for a while, and then withdraw into ‘hibernation’ for periods, or may be discontinued or merged with other expert groups. The poor continuity in the work has brought difficulties regarding implementation, among other things – to which I return below. All the expert groups would benefit from better communications, especially evident from the ACAP websites that are to present information about the individual expert groups. This is not updated, and the communication of results is inadequate. This shortfall has been partly remedied through the publication of fact sheets, reporting to AMAROK, and reporting to ministerial meetings and SAOs – but the information is difficult to access for outsiders unfamiliar with the workings of the Arctic Council.

ACAP: mandate, coordination and communication

The original mandate of ACAP was to help to support national measures for reducing emissions of pollutants, climate forcers in the Arctic, and share information and best practices on such measures – as confirmed in the 2016 ACAPs Strategy (ACAP, 2016). Has ACAP succeeded in this? What of the potential for further improvement? Here I group three problem areas under three headings – mandate, coordination and communication – and discuss various measures under each heading. The aim is not to provide a recipe for what ACAP should do, but simply to show the challenges. Some measures noted here may be mutually exclusive – for example, bringing ACAP in under AMAP *and* strengthening the Secretariat. I hope such a specification of measures can provide the basis for discussing the paths to be followed in the future.

Mandate

ACAP was originally intended as the extended arm of AMAP. Situation assessments were to lay the foundations for specific action through projects that would reduce emissions to the Arctic environment. The work of AMAP has expanded: ACAP has followed this same trend, as indeed has the entire Arctic Council, which has gone from having 30 projects to over 100 at

the time of writing. This is not necessarily solely because challenges to the Arctic have multiplied: it may well be due in large part to greater political and public awareness of the region. The challenge is that ACAP's original mandate is now faced with a much broader set of issues to be addressed, in turn entailing the risk of insufficient focus.

In its work plans, ACAP must clarify which parts of the portfolio should be prioritised in given periods. Today, its initiatives are spread across many projects, leading to unclarities as to the political priorities. The current work plans for the period 2017–2021 (ACAP, 2017; 2019) highlight the work of the SLCP EG. That may be an expression of a political priority but appears to be more the result of an organic development than a direct strategic choice. What is to have top priority in ongoing work plans should be made more explicit. Perhaps ACAP should focus more on linkages with work on international conventions, such as the Stockholm Convention and the Minamata Convention. Paradoxically, Russia has opposed this, but has also been quite active as regards conventions (Interview 18.01.2019). Linkage between the regional and the multilateral, rooted in the ACAP mandate, has remained pervasive. As the Arctic states differ in their priorities, such linkage work is very demanding, and must be clearly anchored at the SAO level.

As mentioned, the steering documents for the individual expert groups – the ToR and mandate – appear to be uniform and not updated. The work of the Expert Group on Hazardous Waste, for example, has rested on three different documents that appear to be of little use; this can create uncertainty in terms of projects to prioritise and the focus. One measure for dealing with this could be for each expert group to begin work on formulating a clearer mandate for its work. A measure that has been discussed at WG meetings in 2020. Such a process should also make the participants aware of whether the original goal of their expert group has been achieved, and the challenges involved. Each expert group should formulate a new independent mandate. Perhaps all projects should be pan-Arctic. That would spread ownership, making each project

less vulnerable to difficulties in implementation in Russia. Such a measure would break with ACAP practice to date. The challenges have always been greatest on the Russian side, which can explain the focus on pilot projects there. It has also been important for AC member-states (especially Norway and the USA) to have specific projects on the Russian side. Moreover, Russia is the largest contributor of funding allocated to the PSI. Although this article does not investigate why Russia has contributed the most resources, that fact guides which projects are prioritised. The basic idea with ACAP was to implement local projects with transfer value both within the country of project implementation and to other member-states, by demonstrating best practices and technology. Here it should also be discussed whether ACAP has over-focused on specific reduction measures and technology investment, and not on capacity building, exchange of experience and training.

Organisation

By extension, and in the context of discussions of ACAP's mandate, a pertinent question is how this WG should be organised, internally and as part of the Arctic Council structure. ACAP is still in the making. Expert groups have come and gone, there has been considerable variation in activity level, and ensuring continuity seems to be a challenge. ACAP has potentials for improvement in terms of how it is organised, and measures must be implemented to strengthen its effectiveness.

Should this working group be placed under AMAP? After all, AMAP existed before ACAP was formally established, and has a long record of collecting the most professionally accomplished, updated information on environmental and climate conditions in the Arctic. A closer link between these two working groups would bring ACAP more up-to-date as part of an organisation that has largely succeeded in the goals it has set itself. Consideration should be given to whether AMAP should, to a greater extent, make recommendations on which projects/problem areas may be relevant to ACAP. However, there are also indications that such

a proposal may not be a good idea. In recent years, AMAP has invested considerable time and resources in contributing to international processes and negotiations – as with its work aimed at POPs and the Stockholm Convention, and mercury and the Minamata Convention. Such work should not be disrupted. Including a new operational arm in AMAP might result in resources being channelled to meet a challenge that may prove difficult to solve (Interview 22.01.2019). This does not mean that a closer link between AMAP and ACAP should not be discussed, but a possible merger would require careful analysis and a high degree of involvement from relevant actors in AMAP. The connection to international processes must also be made clear. Put simply, ACAP must be *relevant* to AMAP.

Another alternative could be to make ACAP a venue for establishing *task forces*, abandoning the expert group structure of ACAP. In recent years, the Arctic Council has increasingly taken steps to create task forces: time-limited working groups with a specific goal. The three best-known – search and rescue, oil spill and research collaboration – led to binding agreements among the eight Arctic states. One possible measure to increase political awareness and put pressure on the working group could be to use ACAP as an arena for establishing task forces. ACAP could take the leadership in implementing projects or a set of projects with pan-Arctic relevance, with a clear goal and a time-limited work plan from the outset. That would also allow ACAP to take ‘assignments’ from other working groups, as long as such work falls within the original mandate for limiting climate and environmental emissions. I am not arguing that ACAP should be the hub for all task forces, but rather that it should organise itself on the basis of time-limited projects with clearer goals. The implementing function would become sharper, in turn fostering greater visibility and political legitimacy and strengthening the working group. One field that may be relevant here is marine litter, where AMAP could be responsible for monitoring. PAME (Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment) is working on a regional plan of action, and ACAP could create a task force aimed at implementing pilot projects.

A third measure could be to strengthen the ACAP Secretariat. Until 2019, it was also responsible for the Working Group on Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR). As the project portfolios of these two working groups are very different, it was impractical for one and the same secretariat to have responsibility for both. The problems, and their possible consequences, will not be discussed here, only that there were organisational difficulties, also as regards communications. Then, in 2019, the secretariat function between ACAP and EPPR was divided – a step in the right direction.

Communications

ACAP has faced persistent challenges with regard to communicating its work, internally and publicly, in terms of process and results. One explanation may be that ACAP's work has not been prioritised at the national level – or has perhaps not been prioritised sufficiently in the Council itself and among some member-states. Several ACAP projects have stopped, and the original goals have not been achieved. There may be various reasons, but there is no denying that internal conditions in Russia have made project implementation difficult. Highlighting the work of ACAP by implementing measures to improve internal and external communication remains important in making ACAP more relevant.

Under various chairmanships, communication among actors in the environmental management systems of AC member-states has been weak. A first step here would be for each member-state to hold internal meetings ahead of meetings at the working-group level in ACAP, SAO meetings and ministerial meetings. That should help to ensure the quality of the work done in the expert groups. Another recurrent point in my interviews conducted in connection with this study concerned the challenges involved in establishing good contacts on the Russian side and understanding how Russian environmental stewardship is organised (Interview 10.12.2018 and 18.01.2019). Regular meetings between representatives could serve as arenas for exchange of experience, in turn strengthening the administration's understanding of what projects are

feasible. However, such a measure would be resource-intensive, and would require according greater priority to the work of ACAP.

A very specific measure for improving communication would be to create a dedicated website to present the work of the expert groups. A clearer overview of their activities could help to ensure transparency and make ACAP activities more visible. Such a website should also show how and why projects under ACAP auspices are important for companies and local government. That would help to legitimise specific activities, while making information available to actors less acquainted with the workings of the Arctic Council in general, and of ACAP in particular. Such a measure has been discussed at WG meetings and is likely to be implemented in the course of 2020. That it has taken 14 years to come that far as regards establishing such a website says something about the communication challenges that ACAP has faced.

Conclusions

A total restructuring of AC has proven difficult and might not be the right way to go to improve the work of the Council. It is nevertheless important to identify the challenges and propose ways of overcoming them. This debate must involve all relevant stakeholders (PPs, SAOs, and WGs). Such discussion might lead to changes in the structure of the WGs, but it need not. It is clear that earlier restructuring and reorganization proposals were not sufficiently integrated at the SAO, WG, and member-state levels. This may help to explain why these issues have kept resurfacing without resulting in any comprehensive changes. This is not to say these debates have not led to a clearer awareness of the coordination challenges, as we can see by the actions taken to improve collaboration across WGs. Furthermore, most evaluations and academic contributions have analysed the overall structure of the Arctic Council. They have produced recommendations, but really not much has happened. Therefore, I hold that we should have bottom-up perspective, scrutinising each WG. What can be improved? Focusing on ACAP, I

have argued that it is relevant and should remain an AC working group, despite its shortcomings. Surely there is a potential for improvement.

Further, it is important to recognise that the Council is but one element in the governance of the Arctic. States will be the most important stakeholders, and UNCLOS the guiding framework. Thus, even if the Council should be transformed into a treaty-based international body, a more streamlined organisation with clearer goals and mandates, it will continue in its key role to promote knowledge generation and issue recommendations – perhaps constituting a framework for negotiating binding international agreements – on developments in the Arctic, which can be utilized at global, regional, national, and local levels. Also if the Council does not change its character, and achieves a stronger international legal status, its main task will still be participation in relevant political processes at the national and international levels. The overarching question is how best to apply the knowledge already generated within the framework of the Council, so that well-informed knowledge of the Arctic can obtain value in the practical formulation of policy, through implementation and knowledge transfer. And here the work of ACAP could and should be relevant.

Despite the recurrent debates on the challenges and opportunities of the Council's work, there are still shortcomings in the implementation of broader initiatives that treat only the symptoms and not the causes of these challenges. Coordination between the WGs, communication between SAO and WG levels, and involvement of relevant stakeholders appear to have been strengthened – but, in view of ever-wider participation and an expanding portfolio, additional action should be considered. One approach is to analyse each WG in its own right, as has been done here.

What is the purpose of ACAP? At first glance, this question may appear trivial. Its purpose has been defined in work plans, in the ToR and mandate for ACAP and the other AC expert groups. These define the everyday and practical work. Overall, ACAP is to facilitate national pilot

projects to reduce environmentally harmful emissions. This work is to be linked to international convention work and have pan-Arctic relevance and transfer value. However, we need to raise our sights, not just emphasising ACAP's role in AC and how effective its work has been. ACAP is among the few arenas for ensuring continued work on environmental pollutants and climate forcers in the Russian Federation. It is therefore an arena where the other Arctic states can work together with Russia in a geopolitically strained period. Admittedly, that may require a more pragmatic approach. At times, cooperation as such can be more important than its precise content. It may not always be appropriate to impose equally stringent requirements in evaluating individual projects under the auspices of ACAP as in other international cooperation. Sustaining an arena where all Arctic Council member-states can initiate projects and cooperate on environmental challenges is demanding but is also crucially important. Overly critical evaluations of small, individual pilot projects may result in the big picture being forgotten. We must maintain a longer-term perspective on such cooperation.

That being said, an overall review of the challenges and potential for improving ACAP is needed. Here I have discussed various measures along the dimensions of mandate, organisation, and communication. ACAP emerges as a working group with an occasionally unclear mandate, considerable work pressure and lack of prioritisation within its broad portfolio. There are also potentials for improving how its work is communicated, internally and externally. Nor should we forget that ACAP has managed to establish a forum where it has been possible to facilitate pilot projects aimed at limiting harmful emissions. Some of this work has resulted in successful implementation; it has set the agenda, given various actors legitimacy to work on important issues, and established an arena for cooperation with Russia.

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Note: unless otherwise noted, all web sources accessed 28 February 2020

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