



# Advancing Sustainable Urban Development in Remote Regions

## Summary Report



## Background

The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine spurred the understanding of the present time being a time of multiple global crises, with different implications for different places at different times. The same applies to climate change, which remains the biggest global challenge that humanity is facing. But climate change is not equally pressing for everyone. In the Arctic, the far-reaching effects of climate change have been visible for decades and similar to other remote regions, the Arctic regions are experiencing an urbanization trend. While sustainable urban development is considered an important lever to address climate change, most often it is not considered a priority area – neither in the Arctic nor elsewhere. Together with over 40 researchers from different scientific disciplines (amongst others anthropology, ethnography, law, political and social sciences, natural sciences) the hybrid expert workshop served the purpose to discuss how sustainable urban development can be advanced in remote regions, of which the Arctic is just one example.

## Key points from the Discussion

In four sessions, the participants discussed the diverse meanings of sustainable urban development in remote regions of which the Arctic is one example, current challenges at the local levels and how local governance is contributing to the implementation of global goals. Main take-aways from the lively discussions include

1. if cities are framed as agents of change, this has multiple political and socio-economic implications,
2. the relevance and meaning of the concept “sustainable development” differs among stake-, rights- and knowledge holders in decision- and policy-making processes in different regions,
3. local experiences and perspectives on sustainable development are still often not considered across governance-levels,
4. inclusive participation in policy making does not necessarily result in just policy outcomes, i.a. membership in networks and economic inequalities perpetuate unjust policy outcomes,
5. despite all differences, the COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine had severe effects on Arctic research on sustainable development and changed political priorities and agenda setting in the Arctic with climate change and sustainable development policies being less prominent,
6. while often being framed as an “exceptional region”, various factors and development challenges in the Arctic also apply to other remote regions around the world, such as the need to advance the co-creation of knowledges and inclusive governance models, transnational efforts and capacity building in communities, and instead of building new structures from scratch to empower existing where possible.

Please note:

Established in 1964 as the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), on 23 June 2022 the Institute became the **German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)**.

For more information on the new name, please see this [press release](#).

## Summary

In her welcoming remarks, DIE's director **Anna-Katharina Hornidge** stressed the relevance of actors beyond the state level, framing cities as agents of change particularly against the background of the numerous crises humankind is currently confronted with. She also emphasised the G7's focus on infrastructure highlighting the relevance of the urban level and the need to consider questions on democracy as also the development of infrastructure is entangled with societal values. These societal values are also mirrored in the multiple meanings of the concept "sustainable development" that SUDEA co-lead **Dorothea Wehrmann** (DIE) addressed in her welcoming words. While the concept has been criticised for being an empty signifier, as a political concept it has also brought together different interests groups. It stands for the merging of two discourses, one on environmental protection and one on development. In these discourses, remote regions are often not considered even though they are – as regions like the Arctic exemplify – greatly affected by climate change and the global urbanization trend. Preliminary findings from the cities investigated in the European Arctic indicate that also in the context of sustainable urban development the transfer of knowledge from different stakeholders and across the governance levels is very limited and often, particularly local voices often are left unconsidered in policy making.

### **Why do approaches to sustainable urban development differ? (Session 1, Roundtable discussion)**

In this session, invited speakers **Hannu I. Heikkinen** (University of Oulu), **Yanzhu Zhang** (DIE), **Monica Tennberg** (University of Lapland) and **Jacqueline Götze** (DIE) introduced main priorities in urban development processes, these included: (1) gaining comprehensive knowledge about the stakeholders involved in these processes, (2) good coordination of engagement of various stakeholders, particularly in contact with the regulatory sector, (3) developing education for rising social awareness about applicable rules, existing possibilities and expected consequences, (4) reliable negotiations about the access to resources and services between local communities, local authorities and external stakeholders. In the discussion, the speakers highlighted that sustainable urban development is often shaped by (1) social conflicts interrelated with many emotions, (2) national political and economic interests, international influences (including EU regulation in the European context), (3) new economic trends like ongoing green energy transformation, and finally (4) global developments or geopolitical crises. Finally, all speakers expressed their worries about the weak, superficial engagement of local communities in participatory processes due to lack of interest, lack of expertise, distrust, critical approaches presented in mass media, and old-fashioned communication channels. The speakers highlighted the importance of combining local experiences with more universal practices and global aspirations for sustainable development at each governance level.

### **How can sustainable urban development be steered more effectively and in alignment with local and global policies? (Session 2, Panel discussion)**

In this session, **Okka Lou Mathis** (DIE) introduced the model of citizens' councils and their potential to advance sustainability governance. From her experience with Bonn4Future, these bodies promote inclusiveness because the participants are randomly selected, at the same time they are future oriented and encourage slow thinking. However, legal frameworks have

to change for this participatory process to be integrated in decision-making and for now, it is not clear to what degree the policy recommendations from citizens councils like Bonn4Future just shine on paper or have a real impact. By focusing on mining in South Africa and the Philippines, **Alexia Faus-Onbargi** (DIE) addressed the question of whether inequality in policy making process matters for policy incoherence. In the cases investigated, the problem is less a lack of participation but that the people affected by trade-offs resulting from political decisions are not understood. **Dorothee Cambou** (University of Helsinki) emphasised the violation of the rights of Indigenous peoples and land use conflicts in the Arctic resulting from mining and renewable energy projects. Following-up on Alexia's research, Dorothee stressed that economic inequalities translate to political inequality. When referring to recent court decisions that ruled in favour of the right to land of the Sámi people, Dorothee highlighted the need to reform governance systems and to establish processes for reaching consent, to ensure sustainable and just transitions of benefit to all. **Arne Riedel** (Ecologic Institute) underlined the need to consider different phases in participatory processes (in planning and implementation) and highlighted that particularly participation in the implementation is often challenging as it requires continuing commitment and resources. In his talk, he also focused on how cities organise themselves in networks and stated that in the European Arctic, the self-perceptions of cities and their means to participate in networks differ a lot.

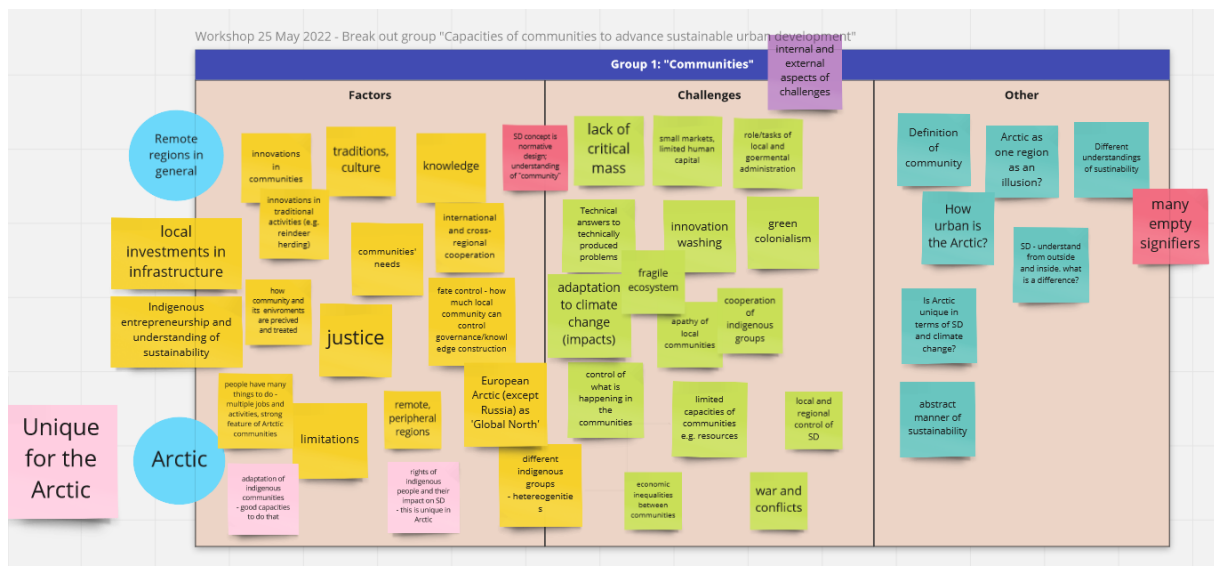
### **The effects of the COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine on Arctic research on sustainable development (Session 3, Project presentations)**

The speakers of this session reflected on the effects of the COVID 19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine on Arctic research on sustainable development. Firstly, it was highlighted that these two are very different critical junctures for Arctic developments and research. However, the consequences of both the pandemic and the war challenge the ideals of objectivity and freedom of science. It was also added that the tradition of the Arctic as a space for cooperation is changing particularly due to the war against Ukraine and that the very much needed long-term perspective for sustainability is also negatively affected. The five invited speakers, **Katarzyna Radzik-Maruszak** (Maria-Curie-Skłodowska-University, UMCS), **Svenja Holste** and **Mikko von Bremen** (both Bielefeld University), **Hannes Hansen-Magnusson** (Cardiff University, JustNorth) and **Monika Szkarlat** (UMCS) shared insights from their current research projects and their various coping strategies. The intensity and impact differed between the projects, with on-site fieldwork being very much hindered on the one hand and new opportunities of virtual fieldwork arising on the other. In pandemic times, the question of how to access first-hand information on cities without being able to visit them is key. Shifting to virtual fieldwork was described as less time consuming and also more convenient for informants than in-person meetings, although this new set-up made reaching out to ordinary citizens and local officials more difficult. The war in Ukraine, on the other side, stopped cooperation at the city level with Russian partners but also between different scientific institutions. Insights from an ongoing study on science diplomacy in war time in the Arctic which is mostly informed by interviews with researchers working for different research institutions engaged in polar scientific networks show that certain research areas are particularly affected by the war, e.g. permafrost research. In general, the current war leads to a loss of trust and in some cases also less data exchange. Strong local effects from the war against Ukraine are also visible in the field of energy transition and its policies because of dependencies on Russian oil and gas. Both critical junctures also led to shifts in political priorities with policies for tackling climate change and advancing sustainable development becoming less prominent on political agendas.

## Preliminary research results and their relevance for the Arctic and beyond (Session 4, Breakout groups)

In this session, the participants joined two breakout groups to discuss research on “Capacities of communities to advance sustainable urban development” (Group 1, chaired by SUDEA co-lead Michał Łuszczuk, UMCS) and “Governing sustainable urban development” (Group 2, chaired by SUDEA co-lead Dorothea Wehrmann, DIE).

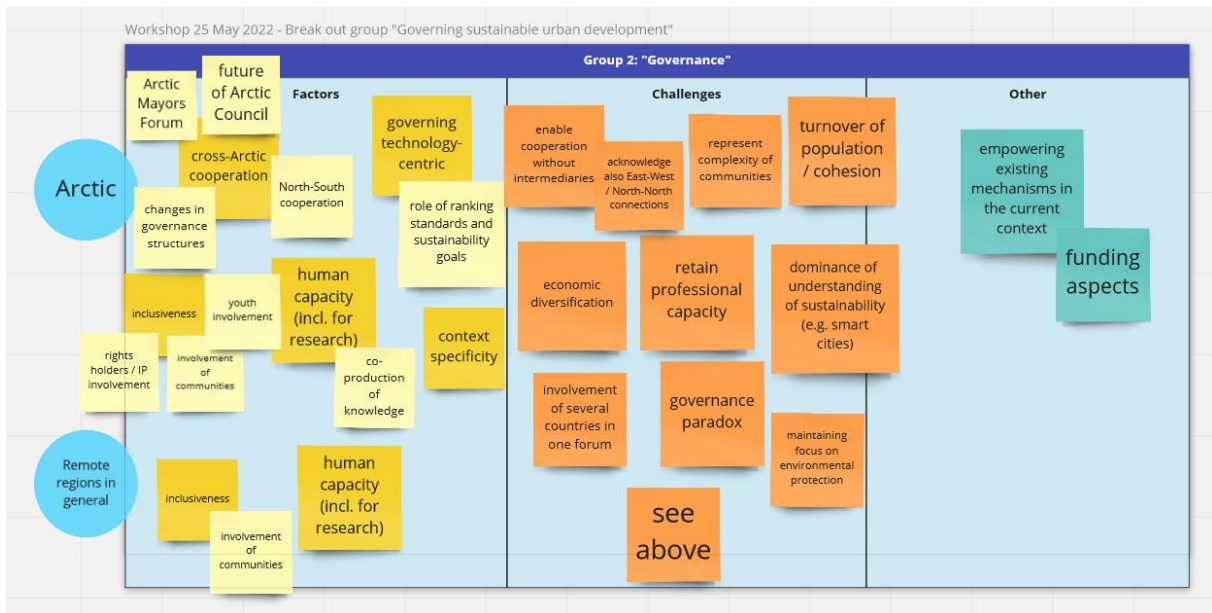
In Group 1, the invited speakers, **Adam Stępień** (University of Lapland) and **Peter Schweitzer** (Austrian Polar Research Institute) reflected critically on the concept of sustainable urban development and its relevance for communities. It was discussed whether the concept is too normative by forcing a concept on a social reality as very often different realities are not reflected in sustainable urban development processes. At that point, the difference between exogenous and endogenous factors for communities’ development was highlighted. The group further identified that remoteness acts not only as a natural limitation in the Arctic, e.g. in the area of capacity building, but that many factors and challenges are applicable beyond the region and relevant for other remote regions as well. To avoid building new structures when empowering communities, existing structures should be featured which ensure a greater involvement of different groups and enable co-producing of knowledge.



Aspects addressed by Group 1 and summarized on Miro.

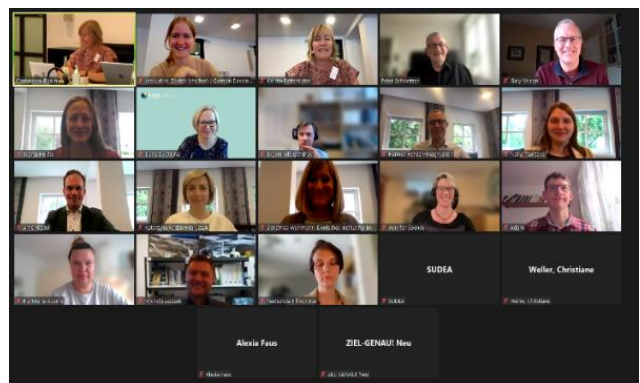
In Group 2, **Gary Wilson** (University of Northern British Columbia), **Jennifer Spence** (Kennedy School, Belfer Center Arctic Initiative), and **Elena Dybtsyna** and **Evgenii Aleksandrov** (both Nord University) focused on governance dynamics and their relevance for sustainable urban development in the Arctic. In the discussion, it was stressed that despite the pandemic and the war in Ukraine many institutions exist that continue cooperation and that there is a lot of effort to co-produce knowledge in the Arctic. However, often cooperation patterns follow the direction from the South to the North (Southern institutions facilitating North-South cooperation) instead of East–West and do not bring political authority to the region. When considering the local level, the group agreed that it is important to consider the diversity of Arctic communities. With many of them experiencing demographic changes and difficulties to attract professionals, it is important to invest in capacity building of Arctic communities and to diversify their economies, which are often dependent. Education and capacity building is also needed to challenge global perspectives that are dominating local perspectives. This can also be detected in rankings of sustainable urban development for the Arctic, which, as the

concept of smart cities illustrates, often emphasise technological aspects but are not based on local perspectives. In addition to more inclusive governance models, it was suggested to involve citizens and to rethink the role of rankings, which currently matter a lot for acquiring funding.



Aspects addressed by Group 2 and summarized on Miro.

**Thanks again to all speakers and participants for the valuable contributions and discussions!**



**Roundtable (Session 1): Why do approaches to sustainable urban development differ?**

<p><b>Hannu I. Heikkinen</b> Professor of Cultural Anthropology University of Oulu</p>	<p><b>Yanzhu Zhang</b> Senior Programm Manager and visiting researcher Ministry of Ecology &amp; Environment (China) and DIE</p>	<p><b>Monica Tennberg</b> Research Professor University of Lapland</p>	<p><b>Jacqueline Götzte</b> Researcher and PhD Candidate DIE and University of Bonn</p>
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➤ What are main priorities in urban development processes?  
➤ Why are the priorities different or similar in the different cases?

For more information on the SUDEA project,  
please consult the [project website](#), [flyer](#), [video](#)  
and feel most invited to reach out to the SUDEA-project leads

[Michał Łuszczuk](#) (Maria-Curie-Skłodowska-University) and [Dorothea Wehrmann](#)  
(IDOS, former DIE).