Youth Networking, Education and Communications Channels Across the Circumpolar Region

A preliminary exploration

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Introduction

The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) has developed a range of projects to help build the capacity of young Northerners to become leaders in their communities. Our principal effort has been the Circumpolar Young Leaders Program—an initiative for young Northerners that combines training in Arctic issues, communications and leadership with peer networking and work experience at international organizations involved with circumpolar affairs. With the support of the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, we have enriched this program with distance education (providing the initial training modules in partnership with the University of the Arctic) and with opportunities for face-to-face meetings among the participants during their internships. In addition, we have been asked to host and manage OOKPIK (http://www.ookpik.org)—a Web site for young Northerners in support of the Future of Children and Youth initiative of the Arctic Council. With funding from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, we have developed the site to share the vision and pride of Northern youth, to provide a platform for sharing their creative work and their opinions, and to provide information resources they may find useful.

In spite of these efforts, however, we are uncertain whether and how extensively we are making a difference with Northern youth. We need to understand better how young Northerners learn, seek information, communicate with each other and engage on issues that affect their lives. But as best we can tell, this information has not been systematically collected and analyzed across the circumpolar region. Studies such as the Arctic Human Development Report tend not to separate out a youth demographic that would help us to plan our own capacity building programs more effectively.

In consultation with the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, we decided to use some residual funds to explore youth networking and communications. Further discussions with the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Environment led to our inclusion of education and training channels in our research. A graduate assistant from the faculty was assigned to undertake complementary research on education and training across the North. With funding from Canada Corps, we engaged a young intern to assist with several youth engagement research projects, including this one. The Aboriginal and Circumpolar Affairs unit of the Department of Foreign Affairs provided additional funding. This was used for database programming to create several directories on OOKPIK to manage the information collected, and for research stipends to interns in our Circumpolar Young Leaders Program to assist with the research. The University of the Arctic added another young research assistant to the project to assist with the scan of media channels.

Objective

This brief study is an exploration of youth networks across the Arctic, together with the communications channels they use and their access to formal and informal education channels. This information will help us to develop a better understanding of how to reach and engage youth across the region.

Approach

The project proceeded as follows:

- inception meeting with the University of Manitoba Faculty of Environment and the development of three tasks:
    - investigation into media channels across the North;
    - investigation into education and training programs available to youth across the North; and
    - interviews with young leaders in Northern organizations and communities to learn about their networking and communications activities;

- development of the interview protocol and methodology: a "snowball" approach was to be deployed, in which each young person contacted would suggest additional persons to be interviewed;

- beta test with a representative of the Arctic Youth Network;

- Web and literature scans;

- analysis, including an examination of barriers in engaging and communicating with Northern youth, and new opportunities for outreach and engagement; and

- preliminary findings discussed with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and the Aboriginal and Circumpolar Affairs unit of the Department of Foreign Affairs.

The project was coordinated by IISD's project assistant who also conducted many of the interviews herself, and who prepared the first analysis of the findings. The study was also informed by IISD's participation in the Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO) Aboriginal Dialogue on two-way communications with Canadian aboriginal communities (May 29–30, 2006).

Challenges Encountered and Their Impact on the Findings

1. The scope of investigation was quite broad, and we found in the end that the interview protocol was too complex, covering too many issues. As four interns in total were conducting interviews, we found significant variations in the amount of data collected.

2. Using young professionals to interview other young professionals helped to elicit good input from the informants. However, more training or discussion about survey processes, including how to make the initial contact to get the interview, should have been provided to the interviewers. This impacted on the number of interviews actually secured.

3. More significant was the difficulty in reaching young informants, getting phone calls and e-mail requests returned. Even when names were supplied by the first contacts in the process, we found we simply couldn't get to the next level of connections. This also impacted on the number of interviews secured. As noted by the project coordinator, "Gaining access into the various organizations for interviewees was mediocre. Many were willing to participate once it was explained to them our purpose for the survey. But many did not follow through. Getting the support from youth coordinators [at established organizations] was good in that the youth … would be more likely to respond and schedule an interview. Also, the interview was positive for most of them as this allowed them to assess their organizations, or their own goals, challenges and education."

4. There were language limitations. We were fortunate to have one intern able to conduct research and interviews in Russian with his contacts. Other interns based in Europe were also able to get some assistance from their local hosts to help with researching information sources in those countries. Nevertheless, we believe that there is significant room to expand our investigations into non-English sources.

5. Finally, we encountered a particular challenge with the term "young leader." Informants were uncomfortable with our use of this term, observing either that young people don't see themselves as leaders (making it problematic for them to suggest other young "leaders" we should interview) or that they saw all young Northerners as "leaders." Preferences were expressed to focus on youth who were "actively involved" in their communities or with their peers, considering all youth to be "on the same page and level with all other youth." Upon closer investigation, it would appear that "leadership" was often considered in a political or bureaucratic context (elected representatives, heads of organizations and so forth) and therefore informants found it difficult to connect our interest in youth networks and communications with the concepts of leadership.

Principal Outputs

We set up a database on OOKPIK to enter directory information gathered by the researchers. Researchers added their information directly into the system as they worked. OOKPIK now holds the following directories, three of which [youth networks and programs, education and training and Arctic media] did not exist elsewhere on the Internet at the time of publishing, to the best of our knowledge. The directory of research organizations complements similar lists that exist on other Web sites.

a) Directories

- Arctic youth networks and programs; Arctic research institutions, compiled by Dolma Dongtotsang, Linda Davis and Heather Creech.

- Education and training opportunities for Northern youth, compiled by Megan McKenna with contributions from Rhonda Pankratz

- Media channels serving the region (Newspapers, magazines, radio and television)

The bulk of the work for the Media List Project was carried out by Jennifer Mayville and Robin Urquhart, both interns at the University of the Arctic (UArctic) International Secretariat. They were able to use extant media information from UArctic's own database as a starting point. These researchers also utilized the UArctic network for media contacts across the circumpolar North.

A representative of the University of the Arctic noted the following about this last directory: "youth, through this media contact list, will have the ability to learn about and get in contact with various media outlets across the circumpolar North. There is no doubt that this list will be constantly evolving. The list will need to be updated as contact information changes and as new vehicles emerge. It is a good project for interns as it familiarizes them with media channels in the North and allows them to practise research skills as well as make important contacts. UArctic would suggest that the IISD make this an ongoing project with future interns that can be enlarged and refined over the coming years. It is an important resource for anyone interested in the North."

b) Interviews

Nineteen interviews were conducted with young Northerners currently active in Northern youth networks or working with Northern youth.

- o 1 from Iceland
- o 1 from Greenland
- o 1 from Sweden
- o 4 from Russia [3 from Arkangelsk region and 1 now working in Alaska]
- o 2 from the Yukon
- o 5 from Nunavut
- o 3 from the Northwest Territories
- o 1 from Labrador
- o 1 person from the South working on Northern youth programming

Observations

The following observations must take into consideration the very limited interview sample. Nevertheless, the research provides some initial signals worth further investigation to better understand youth networks, education, and communications channels and tools.

1. Communications channels

Informants all noted a mix of communications channels that they themselves used to communicate with Northern youth, or to stay in touch themselves with Northern issues. In-person interaction was considered to be more important than any other mechanism: sitting

and talking with youth to listen to their concerns; attending public meetings to hear from others; and informally talking with local political and community leaders, among other ways. Informants often mentioned how important it was to them personally to attend other forums outside of their community—conferences, political gatherings and so forth. Those working with Northern organizations noted the need for regular face-to-face meetings—as often as every other month—to keep the channels of communications open and to keep participants informed and engaged. Phone and fax were often preferred to e-mail as more efficient means to stay in touch, although more expensive. But even with phone and fax, establishing a more personal, direct relationship first was considered essential.

Use of local newspapers, local television and local radio followed in importance. In particular, one informant noted the non-confrontational culture of Inuit peoples, and the importance of radio call-in shows that allowed many individuals to speak more publicly about their concerns.

Subsequent Internet research also located a number of Northern Canadian "communications societies" that provide radio and television programming that could also be tapped into:

- Inuvialuit Communications Society
- James Bay Cree Communications Society
- Native Communications Society of the Western Northwest Territories
- Northern Native Broadcasting, Terrace
- Northern Native Broadcasting, Yukon
- OKalaKatiget Society
- Societé de communication Atikamekw-Montagnaise
- Taqramiut Nipingat Incorporated

Visible, tangible communications products that directly targeted youth—flyers, posters and brochures, for example—were also considered important, especially when combined with promotions and activities through school systems and teachers.

Informants themselves used a mix of mainstream and electronic media to stay informed and connected with their family, friends and personal interests (local and national newspapers, TV, a wide range of Web sites, e-mails and instant messaging, and blogs). Several who were not living in their home community at the time of the interviews mentioned that they regularly visited the Web site for the community to follow local events.

a) On mainstream media channels

As reported by the UArctic researchers: There are currently 180 media vehicles compiled from across the circumpolar North in the directory on OOKPIK. "The work represents a comprehensive, but not exhaustive, list of regional newspapers, magazines, national broadcasters, news providers, and radio and television stations. Canada and the United States are very complete including information, where applicable, on the target audience. It was more difficult to obtain information on outlets in Iceland, Denmark, Greenland,

Norway, Sweden and Finland. Their Web sites for the most part lacked an English component thereby reducing data access.

However, it was discovered that **most of the mainstream media are targeted to the age bracket of 18 to 54** [emphasis added]**.** The demographics include youth, but are not youth-specific as they also cater to older audiences. Based on the investigations to date, there are no mainstream media vehicles targeting a Northern youth demographic." [1]

The interviews reinforced this finding—no informant was able to identify a specific magazine or other vehicle that specifically targeted Northern youth. Informants themselves often wrote articles for their more local press, or gave interviews for radio.

Certainly the lack of particular media vehicles that target youth make it more challenging to reach out to Northern youth. What is clear is the concentrated and persistent effort necessary to use the available local channels that reach youth in the context of their community.

b) On electronic media channels

Despite the fact that the Internet is available in the North, broadband access has only become available in a few remote communities just within the past year (2005). In the remote communities, Internet access in general tends not to be available at home at all (although many households have satellite TV). Several informants noted that youth need to go to community centres or schools to have access at a shared Internet facility. This raises a number of questions about fair and equitable access to the Internet—are young men more likely to use the facility than young women; are some individuals using the facility more often, excluding others from access?

Also, the lack of home access to the Internet has implications for distance education as well as networking more broadly with youth across the North. Both assume ready access at the convenience of the user, to download assignments, to research on the Internet, to exchange e-mails and to chat—but without home access, this may be much more difficult to do.

However, it is interesting to note the importance of local community Web sites to the Northern Diaspora. While young people within the community may not have ready access to look out to the world via the Web, young people away from the community use the Web to look homeward.

2. Education and training channels

The researchers identified close to 90 opportunities for young people, including college and training institutes, scholarships, student exchanges, apprenticeships and other experiential learning (work internships). These ranged from programs open to all circumpolar residents,

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[1] Correspondence with Outi Snellman and Robin Urquhart, 2006.

as well as programs open to Northerners from individual countries, including Canada, the United States, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Finland, Sweden and Russia.

Among the informants themselves, many had completed or were continuing their post-secondary education in Southern universities; several had also attended community colleges in the North or special programs like the Nunavut Sivuniksvat program in Ottawa that combines teachings on Inuit culture and history with public management training. They noted the need to grow and learn in their professions in order to work with other youth in their communities. In addition to formal education, they learned through workshops, took courses through distance education or had practical experience through internships and student exchange programs.

The majority of informants observed across the North a strong traditional orientation to more experiential learning—learning by doing—under the guidance of parents and elders. Across the Canadian North, youth learn through seasonal hunting events and through daily interactions with their families, elders and mentors in their communities. In Iceland, it was noted that young people usually leave school to work with their parents rather than pursue additional formal education. In Canada and Iceland we noted the importance of apprenticeship programs for trades. Only the Russian informants noted that "everyone goes to school, including evening schools." But the other European informants from Iceland, Greenland and Sweden, where higher education opportunities are free, observed that such opportunities are not taken advantage of by young Northerners.

Group activities like sports and cultural events were considered to be very important channels for informal learning. Attending workshops, community events, and sitting on boards and committees with the older generations were also mentioned as significant learning experiences.

Several barriers to the effectiveness of formal education processes were mentioned by informants.

- In Canada, it would appear that Northern culture and history are still limited or absent from the high school curriculum. Informants noted that the content is based either on the Alberta or Quebec curriculum—and so youth learn about Quebec history and affairs, about Southern Canada's geography and so forth, but not about their own environment and culture. While individual modules with Northern content might be taught, it is not pervasive through the curriculum. As one informant noted, "youth can't identify with the content."

- School schedules did not accommodate the seasonal traditional learning events through hunting or camping trips.

- Teachers often come from the South, fresh from college, with very limited cultural awareness of Northern communities.

- Science teaching at the high school level did not provide a sufficient basis for further studies in science, environment and health.

During the NWMO Aboriginal Dialogue, participants noted that schools in their communities evolved independently of other local community structures. This suggests that an understanding of curriculum and pedagogical goals and methods are not necessarily shared or supported.

The lack of family support structures for formal education was frequently mentioned in the interviews. Families were unable to help with homework (language or literacy barriers); or families had a negative outlook on formal education derived from their own experience; or students had to leave their communities to attend high school, removing them from their traditional guidance and supportive environment.

According to the informants, very few young people are aware of the University of the Arctic. We learned that opportunities for training and education tend to be circulated by word of mouth, so one might assume that the more Northerners who learn about, and access, the university, the more who will eventually begin to seek it out. But it is also important to learn who the "connectors"[2] might be within and across communities, who are well positioned to spread information about new opportunities.

The colleges that offer more training in basic trades and skills continue to have an important niche. Government training courses are available, but not offered regularly (and therefore, one assumes, more difficult to find out about by word of mouth). Finally, in Canada it was noted that most Northern communities have a community learning centre that offers a range of formal (high school diploma equivalency exam preparation) and informal learning opportunities.

Upon completion of the interviews, our project coordinator observed from our limited survey sample that: "with adequate support from parents, extended family, mentors and elders in their communities, youth tend to complete their high school. With additional and continued encouragement and support, many go on to professions and post secondary education. Mentors also play a huge role in influencing young people to pursue professional fields and guide them while working. This support is also provided from the workshops, conferences and youth activities set up by the community, youth organizations or other NGOs. It seems that the young people derive their resilience from these supporters and supportive activities."

3. Youth engagement and networking

The researchers updated the OOKPIK directories for Arctic organizations and networks. What was particularly interesting was the wide range of youth "gathering points" mentioned by the informants during the interview process. These can be grouped as follows:

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[2] Gladwell, Malcolm, *The Tipping Point: How little things can make a big difference.* New York. Little, Brown and Company, 2002.

- local youth clubs (mostly formed by schools within the communities);
- local, regional and national indigenous groups that have created positions for youth representatives (e.g., youth representatives to the National Women Aboriginal Council; youth coordinator for Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami);
- youth councils and alliances (e.g., Saami Youth; NWT Youth Council; Inuit Circumpolar Youth Council; National Inuit Youth Council; Arctic Indigenous Youth Alliance);
- regional agencies and NGOs with youth programs (e.g., Northern Forum's Youth Ecoforum; Youth Health Forum);
- student associations at colleges and universities (e.g., the Arctic Students Association; KEKIP – the Greenland Students Association in Copenhagen);
- networks of Northern youth (e.g., Arctic Youth Network; Alaska Youth for Environmental Action)
- networks of youth (both Northern and Southern) interested in Northern issues (ArcticNet; IPY Youth Steering Committee); and
- Southern-based networks that have added Northern programming to their work.

We do find it interesting that no research institutions working on Arctic issues (e.g., EcoAccord in Russia; Stefannson Institute in Iceland; CICERO in Norway) were mentioned as having programs that targeted young Northerners. These institutes tended not to be on the "radar screen" of the interview group at all. Whether they do in fact have programs involving or targeting young Northerners remains to be investigated.

We also observed a few signals with the European informants (excluding the Russians) that it was important to connect youth from their Northern regions with European youth networks, issues and concerns rather than (or in addition to), circumpolar institutions and structures. This has implications for promoting circumpolar interests among youth in competition with a possible trend to look southward to the rest of Europe.

In spite of this wide range of networks, councils and programs, informants all observed the significant challenge of engaging Northern youth—getting them more involved in youth programs, networks and actions. Informants believed that most Northern youth are not very active on issues affecting their communities, whether social, environmental or political. Interestingly, their own engagement often took place because another organization within the community or region championed them in some way—inviting them to a meeting, passing their name on to another organization, and so forth. The "self selection" process—proactively seeking out opportunities to become involved—was also evident, but supported by the process of being encouraged by others.

Russian, Greenlandic and Canadian informants all believed that "networking" was key to communicating with and engaging young Northerners. But they were less clear on how "networking" actually is fostered and sustained. Apart from the traditional challenges of remoteness and isolation and the variety of languages, several challenges to connecting youth across the region were noted:

- The need for personal contact in advance of interacting by e-mail was considered essential. However, the need for consistent, regular, planned communication by e-mail, phone and fax was critical to sustain relationships over time.

- Informants involved in planning youth programs noted that "participants tend not to stay in touch with each other" and that it was "hard to keep track of all council members and to know exactly what they are doing." This suggests a tendency towards a hub and spokes model for networking, with only one or two individuals at the core responsible for reaching out to many individuals. This has implications for the sustainability of networks and youth programs, once the "hub" changes or moves on to something else. Building the social networks across the region that involve many more "connectors" or "nodes" is a significant challenge.

- Informants also made comments such as "knowledge is being sent only to a specific group of people," or the "database [of contacts] was not maintained," or that an informant was "a little bit out of the loop." This suggests a lack of experience with the nuts and bolts of managing networks.

- Financial challenges were obvious: the lack of payment for services rendered by youth work teams, even when agreed to by contract, was noted in particular by one of the Russian informants. Other informants observed the lack of sponsorships for youth activities combined with the high costs of regional travel for face–to-face interaction, the desirability of attending other fora, the costs of running projects, etc.

- The lack of information relevant for youth was also identified. The Swedish informant noted that "a lot of Swedish youth are interested in the modern issues, but the structures are not always in place to be able to access youth information."

In other research on youth engagement, we have observed a possible correlation between the success and endurance of youth initiatives and their connection to/location within established institutions that can provide stability, continuity, guidance and mentorship. One of our associates notes that "we struggled to get good focus from young people who were in youth-led agencies … [in part] because they may have needed more policy mentoring."[3] But concerns were also raised about how youth-led agencies and networks tend to focus extensively on process, sometimes at the expense of actions, outputs and results. Independent youth-led initiatives also often lacked the institutional structures to manage funding, human resource management, reporting and accountability. These may be contributing factors to some instability of youth networks, or to higher transactional costs and longer struggles with achieving their very laudable and insightful goals.

Two additional observations from the NWMO Aboriginal dialogue may also have some relevance for this exploration of Northern youth networking. First, we would suggest that an emphasis on a particular age demographic may be too short-sighted; that, in fact, initiatives designed to engage youth may need to be oriented towards building and sustaining much longer-term relationships that don't end when the youth move through somewhat arbitrary

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[3] Correspondence with Terri Willard, 2006.

age indicators. Some consideration should perhaps be given to building the personal connections and following them through in a life-long process of mutual learning and capacity development. The emphasis should perhaps be as much on building and sustaining leaders as on a particular demographic.

Second, with the emergence of the Internet and the virtual, borderless communities that it supports, youth now have many different communities to belong to. As one participant in the dialogue observed, "youth are walking in two different worlds." One is anchored locally, with family and community traditions; the other is more global, connected to peers and issues without borders.

Five Issues for Further Investigation

1. We have determined that the basic data gathering is far from complete, and that a longer exercise is required to identify all the media outlets serving Northern communities, all the educational opportunities, and all of the relevant and active youth initiatives and networks across the circumpolar region, not to mention putting in place appropriate mechanisms to share the maintenance of these directories. Ideally, along the lines of the proposition from UArctic to share responsibility for maintaining the media directory, we should consider setting up a small consortium of Arctic institutions to share ownership and maintenance of the resources that we have begun to identify. Longer term, we would like to move to a wiki model, where young people themselves contribute to maintaining the resources as a benefit to all. How to establish and foster an initial consortium and a broader community to maintain these youth resources on OOKPIK should be explored.

2. Concepts of "leadership" among Northern youth need further investigation and understanding. IISD has used this terminology extensively in its work with the Future of Children and Youth initiative of the Arctic Council. But this may in fact be somewhat of a barrier to engaging the very group with which we are seeking to build leadership skills. We think there may be a need to discuss what "leadership" means to young people, both in face-to-face meetings and in online discussions. Do we need to find and use other concepts that more adequately reflect the role of young people within their communities, and the processes to champion them to assume responsibilities and tackle the challenges that face the region?

3. How can the current barriers to formal education processes be overcome, and how can informal learning practices be used effectively to engage youth and help build their skills?

4. Motivations, incentives, recognition and rewards: If there is in fact a significant challenge across the circumpolar region on engaging youth, how do we address this? Informants in this study were motivated by opportunities for them to listen to debate, to discuss issues and to secure scholarships for further education. But the triggers that led them to seek opportunity in the first place are not well understood.

5. How can existing or fledgling networks and initiatives of young people across the region be strengthened? IISD has suggested in its research on network management[4] that networks need to be managed—that they are not entirely self-organizing and self-sustaining, but that they need to be structured, driven by purpose and time bound. We have insufficient information on circumpolar youth networks to assess where the specific challenges are, and how to build capacity to act collaboratively. But we see this as critical to the future of regional cooperation.

Conclusion

While this study in the end did not take us as far as we initially hoped it would, we have a much better understanding of several pivotal issues and challenges that can now be framed for investigation in a more comprehensive project.

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[4] Creech, Heather and Willard, Terri: *Strategic Intentions: Managing knowledge networks for sustainable development.* Winnipeg. IISD, 2001.