



THE BARENTS WORKING GROUPS ANNUAL REPORT

Name of the Working Group: Barents Euro Arctic Working Group on Economic Cooperation

The current Chair and the Chairmanship period: Norway is chairing the group from October 2019 until October 2021.

1. Priorities of the Chairmanship

The Norwegian Chairmanship started the period with plans to host physical meetings in Tromsø and Kirkenes, in connection with other Barents-related events in 2020. Due to the pandemic, these plans have been replaced with limited digital interaction. We have managed to keep the constructive Barents dialogue going within our group. It is challenging to find a mutual economic sector which all four countries can find relevant. Therefore, the Norwegian Chairmanship has decided to focus on youth entrepreneurship and to highlight the opportunities for entrepreneurs and innovative spirits in the Barents region. Our priorities are to meet and remain active in information-sharing throughout the Chairmanship period.

2. Meetings (meetings held, main topics and outcomes of the meetings)

The Working Group on Economic Cooperation decided to hold one large-scale digital meeting in 2020. The meeting took place on June 10th, with approximately 15 participants. The participants were both from the national and regional levels. This is a significantly higher number compared to what we could have expected at a physical gathering. The first part of the meeting was conducted with external participants and included presentations on cross-border economic opportunities from Innovation Norway. In addition, the Arctic Investment Platform and the Norwegian Barents Secretariat gave presentations. In the second part of the meeting, more internal consultations took place. The status for Covid-19 in the respective countries was also an important topic of the meeting. In our opinion, it is important that the Working Groups at national as well as regional level keep close contact about respective activities in order to make synergies and avoid duplication of effort. The group has had some communication via e-mail in 2020. In addition, we decided not to plan for any physical events considering the travel situation. The group agreed that it was a useful meeting and that catching up was important.

Otherwise, members of the BEAC WGEC have participated at events and meeting organized by the Barents Euro Arctic Council, where Norway is currently the chair. We also appreciate the close dialogue with the CSO-members and other working groups.

3. Other activities (projects, events, programmes etc.)

In November, Norwegian Minister of Trade and Industry, Ms. Iselin Nybø, gave a welcome speech to the digital "Green Arctic Innovation Challenge (ICE)" in Kirkenes (hosted by the Barents Secretariat). The Minister's speech highlighted the importance of international cooperation in order to develop innovative sustainable solutions – and that we all need more innovators, investors and start-ups. The speech also emphasized the importance of the green shift even in challenging times like this year.

The BEAC WGEC is currently in the process of gathering interest for a report on the entrepreneurship ecosystems in the Barents region. We have received good input on the proposal from the members of the Working Group, as well as regional stakeholders such as the Barents Secretariat, Consulate Generals etc. However, we need to do more research to determine what scope the report should have, and the added value it can give. There are many reports and initiatives in the Barents region, and we do not want to just replicate other initiatives.

4. Results of the year (decisions, new initiatives, improvements)

In 2020, the Barents Forest Sector has also changed its status to a Working Group. Previously it was a sub-group of the Working Group on Economic Cooperation but has in most aspects functioned as an independent Working Group. The BEAC WGEC considers this a positive development as it shows potential for closer dialogue within a certain sector. We wish the new WG the best of luck in the future.

5. Youth involvement (how has the working group included young people or worked with youth issues during the year)

The Minister's welcome remarks at the "Green Arctic Innovation Challenge (ICE)" was targeting young and ambitious entrepreneurs.

6. Evaluation of the work (What went well, what needs improvement)

The digital meeting in June went very smoothly, and we appreciate the constructive dialogue and very helpful assistance from the International Barents Secretariat.

In terms of challenges, we still consider it challenging to have a regular dialogue and contact within the group outside of the meetings. The portfolios within each member state are broad and varied, so it can be challenging to find a common ground. However, we try our best to find interesting topics for the meetings.

7. Other