



Communication and Cooperation in the BEAC Working Groups

Report of the BEAC Communication
Development Project

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Abbreviations

BBAG – Barents Business Advisory Group

BEAC – Barents Euro-Arctic Council

BEATA – Barents Euro-Arctic Transport Area

BFSN – Barents Forestry Sector Network

BRC – Barents Regional Council

CSO – Committee of Senior Officials

ENI – European Neighbourhood Instruments

IBS – International Barents Secretariat

JCRC – Joint Committee on Rescue Cooperation

JWGC – Joint Working Group on Culture

JWGER – Joint Working Group on Education and Research

JWGHS – Joint Working Group on Health and related Social Issues

JWGT – Joint Working Group on Tourism

JWGY – Joint Working Group on Youth

RC – Regional Committee

RWGIEC – Regional Working Group on Investment and Economic Cooperation

RWGTL – Regional Working Group on Transport and Logistics

WG – Working group (general)

WGE – Working Group on Environment

WGIP – Working Group of Indigenous Peoples

Introduction

In 2015, the International Barents Secretariat (IBS) conducted an evaluation survey among the working groups (from now on referred to as WGs) under the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC, also referred to as the Barents Cooperation) with the aim to get a better understanding of how the WG members experience their participation in the Barents Cooperation. The result, based on the responses from 70 WG members (a response rate of 42 percent), shows that the majority of the respondents are pleased with how the WGs function, but challenges in their work were nonetheless identified by a significant minority of the WG members. The primary challenge, according to the survey, is insufficient access to resources. In addition, communication, recruitment and low participation rates were reported as problematic issues. Many respondents also asked for increased cooperation with other WGs and external actors.

Based on the feedback from the WGs, the BEAC Communication Development Project (referred to as the Communication Project) was initiated by the IBS, with the aim to improve communication, participation and cooperation in and among the WGs and thus indirectly strengthen the entire Barents Cooperation. The project has been implemented by the IBS in cooperation with Northern Arctic Federal University (NArFU), Syktyvkar State University (SyktSU), Arctic Centre and Kainuu Regional Council, and was supported by the Norwegian Barents Secretariat.

The project consists of three key parts; one evaluation study of the WGs, the establishment of a project information platform and the development of a regional communication strategy. First, the interview-based evaluation study with the WGs was conducted by the IBS, with support from NArFU and SyktSU, in order to further identify the underlying causes and potential solutions to the challenges that were reported in the above mentioned survey. The result of the study is presented in this report and should be taken into consideration in the development of the Barents Cooperation. Secondly, a project information platform has been developed for the BEAC website, where updates about ongoing WG projects will be published in order to facilitate the dissemination of information about the WG activities. This prevents overlaps, at the same time as it facilitates the identification of potential cooperation partners within the organisation. The information platform has been developed by the Arctic Centre and will be maintained by the IBS. The third part of the project concerns the development of a communication strategy for the regional actors in the Barents Cooperation. The work with the strategy was initiated by Kainuu Regional Council and has been drafted in dialogue with the involved stakeholders before being adopted during the Barents Regional Council (BRC) meeting in Kajaani in May 2016.

This report presents the result of three parts of the Communication Project, with focus on the evaluation study of the WGs. The first chapter presents the methodology of the study, followed by a second chapter, which introduces the organisation of WGs and thereafter the result of the interviews with the WGs is presented. The latter is concluded by a section with more general trends that were identified among the majority of the WGs and recommendations for reforms and initiatives that could strengthen the role of the WGs in the Barents Cooperation. Finally, the development of the communication strategy and the information platform is described in the last two sections.

Evaluation Study of the BEAC Working Groups

Methodology

Thematisation

The goals of the Communication Project are central to the development of the methodology used in the evaluation study. This section therefore elaborates on the specific goals of the evaluation study and also defines the key concepts that are relevant for the study.

The overarching goal of the project has been to improve and enhance communication, cooperation and participation in the WGs of the Barents Cooperation. With regard to this goal, the evaluation study has sought to assess the above mentioned areas and how they could be improved among the WGs. The evaluation aspired to explain the underlying causes of the challenges experienced in the above mentioned areas and to identify potential solutions for how participation, communication and cooperation could be strengthened. The need for redefining and reformulating the current mandates of the WGs has also been considered during the discussions with the WGs. By considering the feedback from the WGs in the future meetings of the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) and the Regional Committee (RC), this also gives the WGs an opportunity to influence the onwards development of the Barents Cooperation.

In order to lay ground for this study, it is necessary to define the key concepts of the study more closely as well as to understand how they are interconnected. When it comes to communication, the WGs communicate with various actors both internally (i.e. among the WG members of the same group) and externally (i.e. with other WGs or organs in the Barents Cooperation, with the domestic organisations or with other external organisations with which the WGs cooperate). The preceding survey conducted by the IBS did not distinguish between internal and external communication and it is therefore important to identify in what fora the expressed communication challenges are taking place.

The concept of communication also entails a variety of understandings. Since the majority of the WG work occurs at a distance, the effectiveness and functionality of virtual communication should be considered in the assessment of the communication. Another issue that is important to discuss is how the usage of a non-native language and the transgression of different business, academic and communication cultures influence the communication. The WGs are also characterised by a frequent turn-over and its impact on the quality and frequency of communication and the continuity of the work should be considered.

Participation, which entails not only the physical presence at meetings, but also the active participation in distance communication, is closely interlinked with the quality of communication in the WGs. To uncover the underlying causes of challenges in participation, it is necessary to identify the possible barriers for participating in the meetings and the continuous work (e.g. costs, motivation, influence, outcome, information, previous contact etc.).

Similarly, cooperation, meaning the ability to maintain a constructive and productive multilateral work across the borders in the Barents region, is heavily dependent on both communication and participation in the WGs. Cooperation is a very broad concept and is relevant on many levels in the context of the WGs. For the purpose of this study, the evaluation will primarily consider cooperation in terms of the ability to develop and implement projects, activities and events within the WG as well as in collaboration with other

WGs or external actors and it will also assess the relationship between the WG and the IBS in terms of provision of information and updates.

Study design

In order to assess the above discussed issues, information has been collected through interviews and discussions with the WGs. The interviews are primarily group interviews and discussions during the WG meetings. In addition, individual interviews have been held in cases where physical meetings with the whole group were not possible or when additional information was needed.

The above mentioned survey served as an explorative pre-study of the WGs and has provided valuable pointers to the most challenging areas for the WGs. With this background knowledge, the interviews have allowed for developing a more detailed understanding of the reported challenges and to identify and describe the underlying processes from which the difficulties originate. The main research question for this study is *why* the challenges occur, but it is nonetheless important to understand *how* the WGs currently function, in order to also identify possible solutions. While the interview topics are derived from the survey result, the four key topics (communication, cooperation, participation and mandates) have served primarily as guidelines and the WGs have been given the opportunity to elaborate on other topics that they consider relevant to the group.

The group interviews took place during the WG meetings where the IBS participated during the project period. Attending the meetings, not only saves time, but it also allowed for discussing challenges and potential solutions in a group where all interests can be heard, and thus it has been possible to identify solutions for which there is strong consensus and hence more realistic to implement. However, there are also downsides to this arrangement. The group-setting could cause bias, both in terms of unwillingness to express criticism in front of colleagues and some persons might be more willing to participate in group discussions than other, resulting in a skewed representation of the WG. While this tendency has been observed in a few WGs, the majority of the group interviews have resulted in active and inclusive discussions, so the influence of this bias is estimated to have an insignificant impact on the final result.

The result of the study is presented in this report both as the WG-specific finding, with one section on the feedback from each WG, and with general trends and tendencies that are identified among a majority of WGs.

Background

The Barents Cooperation, incorporating the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) on interstate level, the Barents Regional Council (BRC) on interregional level and 14 thematic WGs and their subgroups, was established through the Kirkenes Declaration in 1993, marking the starting point of the formal regional cooperation between the four Barents states; Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Since the institutionalisation of the Barents Cooperation, the organisation has been a force for maintaining good relations between the Barents states and enhancing cooperation across the borders in the region.

The WGs play a central role in the Barents Cooperation, not only through their continuous work on cross-border projects, but also as platforms that allow for maintaining a transnational dialogue and exchange of knowledge within their respective thematic fields. The 14 WGs work on both national and regional level and cover a broad spectrum of policy areas, including transport, environment, health, education, economy, tourism, youth issues and indigenous people. The WGs are made up of experts from the national or regional administrations and meet approximately two times per year. That being said, the level of activity varies considerably among the WGs and, in a few previous cases of inactivity, certain WGs have been given inoperative status.

The work done by the WGs often lays the ground for expanded cooperation and international agreements in the Barents region. Examples of the importance of the WGs include the development of the Joint Barents Transport Plan (2013, 2015), the work on environmental Hot Spots, the implementation of the Barents Action Plan on Climate Change, and the organisation of joint rescue exercises in the Barents region.

Feedback from the Working Groups

Barents Business Advisory Group

The Barents Business Advisory Group (BBAG) was established in 2002, but in the past few years there has been little activity in the group. An informant from the BBAG suggests that the recent inactivity of the group can be explained by the abundance of, often overlapping, transnational organisations and cooperation networks in the Barents region as well as problems with participation within the group itself.

In addition to the BBAG, there are many other regional business forums where the Barents member states and regions participate, and often the different fora overlap both in membership and agendas. At the same time, the members have limited time and resources to participate in all the fora, leading to a competition for members among the different transregional organisations. It is suggested that the multitude of regional cooperation regimes is too complex and that there are too many organisations operating with similar mandates. The BBAG informant further claims that the group has seen a decline in activity as new regional business fora have emerged, notably with the establishment of the Arctic Business Cooperation in 2008. In addition, it is suggested that the composition of the BBAG membership does not reflect the business relations in the region. Many important business partners, such as Iceland and Canada, are not included in the WG, as opposed to other regional organisations that have a wider membership. As it is today, it appears that the BBAG members engage in regional cooperation through other business fora than the BBAG.

Another point that is brought forward concerns problems with participation and membership. As noted above, some of the criticism suggests that the group's membership not fully reflects the regional trade relations, but also the criteria for membership is claimed to be unclear. The systems for chambers of commerce differ among the member states, where Finland, Russia and Sweden have similar systems, while Norway operates with a different organisational structure. According to the BBAG, these organisational differences complicate the group's membership and it is unclear who qualifies as member of the group. Moreover, there has been no formalised procedure for the rotation of the chairmanship and the current chair has been on the post since the BBAG was established in 2002, since no one has been willing to take over the position.

The level of participation also varies, both within the group and in the regional business cooperation in general. When the BBAG first was formed in 2002, the group held up to three meetings per year and it published several reports. However, in recent years the group has become inactive, something which, in addition to competition from alternative business fora, is explained by the fading motivation of the chair. While the activity has been low in the BBAG in recent years, business cooperation is reported to function well between Russia, Norway and Finland through other business fora, while Swedish representatives are said to rarely attend any regional business meetings. One respondent notes that the Swedish participation is especially low when meetings are held in Russia, but also see a similar trend among Russian representatives, who are less likely to participate when meetings are hosted outside of Russia. It is suggested that the low participation rates among Russians is explained by the weak ruble and the need for visa to attend meetings abroad.

Finally, lack of information about the Barents Cooperation is reported as a problem in the BBAG. The group testifies that there is very low awareness of the purpose and the organisational structure of the

Barents Cooperation and there is demand for closer integration within the organisation. One of the members recalls to have been invited to the ministerial meeting in Oulu in 2015 and prior to that, the last occasion of contact with the organisation was the Barents Industrial Partnership in 2013. With exception for these events, the contact with the other BEAC actors has been very limited and sporadic. The group also asks for more regular communication and feedback from the CSO and RC.

To conclude, the BBAG welcomes a discussion on the future of the WG, with reference to its current inactivity and the overlaps with other business fora in the region. Alternatively, the group might benefit from closer cooperation with other related WGs in the Barents Cooperation, such as the WGEC and the RWGIEC. More generally, it is recommended to simplify the network of transregional business fora in the Arctic, since the different organisations often have similar agendas and memberships.

Barents Forestry Sector Network

The Barents Forestry Sector Network (BFSN) is a subgroup to the WGEC and replaced the former Barents Forestry Sector Task Force. According to the BFSN members, the participation in the group is high among all the involved parties, which is partly explained by the relatively small workload of the group and the low frequency of the meeting, meaning, it does not demand too much of an effort to participate. The group is described as well-institutionalised and as having good communication between its members. Today, it functions as a platform for information exchange on policy and other current developments in the forestry sector of the member states, a function that it successfully fulfils according to the group members. As a subgroup of the WGEC, representatives from the BFSN also attend the WGEC meeting and thus provide a continuous point of contact between the two groups.

The key challenges in the BFSN appear to be related to the potential transformation of the group from a platform for information exchange to an action-oriented and implementing body. “We should have something more than talking. We need a project”, says one of the respondents. Previously the group has engaged sporadically in projects, such as the organisation of the Barents Forestry Sector Forum in Joensuu last year and some cooperation with the WGE. The discussions concerning the possibility of running more common projects through this forum have been going on for years, but so far with little constructive outcome. At the same time, the same countries and institutions have successful, and mainly bilateral, projects operating through other international fora. One of the members suggests that the BFSN is useful as a meeting point where ideas can be discussed, but that the projects are easier to implement through other cooperation schemes.

The lack of financial mechanisms within the Barents Cooperation is mentioned as one of the reasons for the absence of projects within the BFSN. Despite the fact that the group synchronised its chairmanship rotation with the BEAC chairmanship, hoping to improve the access to funding, the members report that there is still little or no funding available from the ministries. The national BEAC chairmanships sometimes have funds for the group, but these are too ad hoc and sporadic to maintain long-term projects, according to the respondents. Applying for EU funds, on the other hand, is a too complicated process for the group to engage in. According to group’s members, similar resource problems undermined the implementation of projects also during its time as a task force.

Some members also identify conflicting interests as a source of stagnation in the project development process. The development of a common action plan for the group was initiated during the previous

chairmanship, however the group was unable to come to a consensus on the priorities to be included in the document. Firstly, the current policies vary among the involved countries, with Sweden, Finland and Norway having a somewhat similar policy framework while Russia differs from the other member states. Some respondents suggest that many of the discussed projects focus primarily on Russia, where the most significant development potential is found, and they question the interest for the other member states to invest in projects focusing solely on the Russian forestry sector. The second aspect concerns the practicalities of developing a common agenda. According to one member, a list of common priorities had been compiled and agreed upon in the BFSN meeting, but the consensus was later broken as the Russian members were replaced by new representatives. Norway also reports that the hand-over of the proposed action plan from the Russian chairmanship was problematic, with the submission being postponed and the document finally obtained was not the same as agreed upon.

In comparison, the bilateral cooperation between the Barents countries appear to be more successful, and, as mentioned, some project ideas that have been discussed in the BFSN have later been implemented as bilateral projects. One of the members notes that the political interest is significantly higher for the bilateral cooperation and that representatives from a higher political level are more likely to participate in bilateral cooperation fora than in the multilateral BFSN.

With these longstanding challenges in mind, several of the participants express low ambitions and hope for the BFSN meetings. From the Norwegian side, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is very keen to maintain the cooperation, while the Ministry of Agriculture and Food sees little interest in the group, primarily due to the lack of outcome but also since there are many other fora for discussing similar issues. Despite the expressed lack of interest and the lack of outcome, previous discussions of disbanding the group have not been fruitful. The reason for this is primarily political according to the members. No chairmanship wants to make the decision to end the cooperation. This is also proposed as an explanation to why the group was transformed from a Task Force into a network, rather than being fully disbanded, despite the minimal outcome.

In addition to these concerns with the group's mission and existence, there is also expressed a need to get a better overview of the work that is already done within this field in other organisations, in order to avoid overlaps. Many of the representatives underline that there are several fora working within similar scopes and that there is no need to duplicate the work that has already been done by others. It is also mentioned that the BFSN could improve the dissemination of information about their work. "I am not sure if the outside world knows enough about what [we] are doing in this group", says one member.

Joint Committee on Rescue Cooperation

The Joint Committee on Rescue Cooperation (JCRC) coordinates the joint work on rescue exercises among the BEAC member states, where one of the key events is the triennial Barents Rescue Exercise. The cross-border cooperation was initiated in 2001 with the first regional rescue exercise and was institutionalised in 2008 when the inter-governmental agreement (from now on referred to as the agreement) that states the mandate of the JCRC was signed by the four countries. The JCRC is different from the WGs of the Barents Cooperation in that its purpose and scope is regulated by the agreement and hence the committee receives its mandate from the respective governments and not from the CSO or the RC.

The JCRC reports that the cooperation is overall well-functioning and the clear mandate and obligations established in the agreement are mentioned as a key reason for the successful collaboration. According to the members of the group there is widespread interest in the cooperation and the participation is generally high. “I think this is because of the inter-governmental agreement [on which the cooperation] is founded. It specifies very clearly what we are expected to do, and we follow it”, says one of the JCRC members. “There have been occasional meetings where one of the countries did not participate, but all the member states are almost always represented.”

The communication within the group also runs smoothly according to its members. According to the agreement, the JCRC should meet at least once per year, but generally the group meets twice annually. “We have known each other for years and we can call one another easily. If we send emails, we reply rapidly”, testifies one of the committee members and announces that the group has also started using videoconferencing. There is also a continuous preparation process before the meetings, for which the members of the internal working group are responsible. The JCRC has developed the Barents Joint Manual, an attachment to the agreement, which includes contact details for the involved personnel in the four member states, and is used to facilitate the interstate communication. In addition to the meetings and the Barents Rescue Exercise, the JCRC also performs tests of the interagency communication several times a year. According to the Swedish delegation, these types of exercises and tests are often funded by the so called 2:4 funds for civil contingency projects, which facilitate the participation in the cooperation.

While the communication within the committee and between the involved national agencies runs smoothly, the group has no permanent platform for sharing documents and information. Rather, each chairmanship is responsible for creating an information exchange point to be used for the planning process of the upcoming tests and joint exercises. “When Sweden is planning, we use a Swedish sharing point and when Finland is planning they have a Finnish sharing point. We should have a common one”, suggests one of the committee members and this proposal is supported by all four member states. “We have just finished the Barents Rescue work in Finland. They have a nice platform that people know [...] and now we have to reinvent it [...], to get everybody familiar with that and begin from scratch with something that is unknown”, says another participant, suggesting that the lack of a permanent platform takes unnecessary time from the key tasks of the committees. One suggestion is that the group could use the document database on the BEAC website to share documents. This database is currently only for public documents, but the possibility of creating closed access accounts for working groups will be investigated. The use of a permanent platform would also provide the committee with a historic record from previous exercises and allow for better continuity in the work. “This is our problem, we don’t have the lessons learnt [from previous exercises]”, says one of the informants, referring to the absence of a historic data record.

A permanent information platform could also be used as a means to enhance the cooperation with other actors within the Barents Cooperation. The committee has no regular contact with other actors in the Barents Cooperation and has not previously participated in joint events with other groups. “The regional representatives cooperate with the Regional Council and provide some information [from the council], but I don’t think we have direct contact with any other actors”, says one of the participants. The strict regulations of the JCRC agreement, which stipulates precisely how the group should work, is suggested to be one of the reasons for the limited contact with other BEAC actors. Others underline that the committee does not overlap the agendas of the other actors in the Barents Cooperation, and hence there are few synergies to be found. However, climate change is brought forward as a topic where cooperation with other WGs could be of interest.

The development of one permanent platform for information sharing would also facilitate the dissemination of information among the actors in the Barents Cooperation. The information platform used during the Finnish chairmanship is brought forward as an example, where gives multiple WGs access the platform and the documents can be made available either only for specific WGs or for all, allowing for sharing information also between WGs.

Today, information about the JCRC can be found on the BEAC website, which is managed by the IBS. In addition, the respective national agencies are responsible for informing about the committee’s work through their own information channels. “The committee has no common website that we are updating”, says one of the representatives. This is however not perceived as problematic by the group. “It is perhaps because we see this work as part of the ordinary work, and not as something separate. And we perhaps do not wish to make it something separate either”, notes one of the respondents.

The lack of opportunities to meet with other actors in the Barents Cooperation is also mentioned as one of the causes for the absence of cooperation with other WGs. “It is quite hard to start communicating with a person that you have never met before, it is much easier if you have had some personal contact. So maybe if these working groups have some common meetings it would be much easier to communicate [between the working groups]. [...] Maybe it should be some big event with many of the working groups, where they could meet in person and share opinions and then the communication might improve”, suggests one of the committee members. Similarly, the committee has no direct contact with the CSO and the RC and has not previously been asked to report to either of the committees. “I guess we have not been invited to do so”, says one of the interviewees, while underlining that the committee reports to the four governments in accordance with the agreement.

There are also uncertainties about the secretarial services that the IBS can provide to the JCRC. “We know very little about what the [International] Barents Secretariat can assist with”, says one of the participants. “In the Council of Baltic Sea States and the Arctic Council, the secretariats provide quite a lot of assistance, so it would be good to know what you can offer.” This suggests that although the IBS participates regularly in the JCRC meetings, the information about its services could improve. Members of the committee also noted that the IBS used to provide support for applications for external funding, a service which is no longer available. “If, at some point, we would need to apply for EU funds, this would be useful to have”, says one of the interviewees.

Joint Working Group on Culture

According to the members of the Joint Working Group on Culture (JWGC), the group is a very active and the participation rates are high. Rather than pinpointing problematic areas, the discussion with the group primarily concerns possible improvements to how the group currently function.

The group notes that the dialogue and communication within the WG could be strengthened. Firstly, there is a need to improve the maintenance of contact information for the WG members. It is currently difficult to know whether the available contact details are correctly updated and the communication of contact details for newly recruited WG members does not always run smoothly. More generally, the internal communication between the JWGC meetings is largely a one way communication, where the chairman plays a central role. “We always invite more active participation from our members, so that even if you don’t have much to [...] comment, you can always reply ‘thank you, this was nice to receive and we agree with most of the material’ or ‘we will come back later’”, says one of the JWGC members.

The group also welcomes extended communication with other WG within the Barents Cooperation. “It is very important [...] to get more [integration] between the group”, maintains several members. The JWGC has previously discussed the possibility of having a closer dialogue with the JWGT through common back-to-back meetings and the WGIP is also proposed as a potential cooperation partner. “I feel that the WGIP is something we don’t know anything about, yet they are working with the exact same issues as we are”, says one of the informants.

In 2014, the JWGC participated in a joint meeting with representatives from the Northern Dimension Partnership on Culture and the Council of Baltic Sea States’ Group for Culture. The event is mentioned as a very positive experience and allowed for exchange of information, not only between actors within the Barents Cooperation, but also with other organisations in the Barents region, and the JWGC suggest that this should be “a model for how things could be organised in the future”. At the same time, the WG members note that the IBS needs to play a bigger role in the organisation of WG meetings if similar large-scale events are to be repeated.

In addition to back-to-back meetings, the WG asks for a common digital platform, where information can be shared both within the JWGC and with other WGs. The group also underlines the importance of spreading information about the Barents Cooperation to external actors. “There is a lot of good work going on in the Barents Cooperation [but it is] known only to the representatives who are working in those working groups”, notes one of the respondents. The development of an intranet for the Barents Cooperation could also enhance the communication within and among the WGs by providing a forum “where you can throw out issues for discussion [...] that never come up in the meetings and that are more spontaneous”, as one of the JWGC members puts it. At the same time, it is noted that use of social media for internal communication, e.g. a Facebook group, is unlikely to gain support from the ministries, suggesting that an internal restricted communication platform would be preferable.

The regional councils can also help improving the communication between the WGs by ensuring regional representation in all the WG and by organising the region’s WG members locally. Kainuu Regional Council is highlighted as a positive example where the region, since its BRC chairmanship, is represented in all the WGs and the Kainuu Regional Council organises regular internal meetings for the region’s working

group members, allowing them to keep updated on what goes on in the Barents Cooperation and the other WGs.

Finally, the group asks for a more centralised direction of the WGs. Firstly, more clearly directed mandates for the WGs could enhance the cohesion between actors in the Barents Cooperation. “We are a very self-directed group and the other [working] groups [are] too, I think”, says one respondent. It is suggested that the overarching Barents Programme should be more clearly reflected in the WG mandates, which is something the JWGC has attempted to achieve during their own revision process of the mandate. “We took the Barents Programme into account and from that we wrote our strategy, which then gave content to the [group’s] mandate”, describes one of the members. In addition to clearer connection between the mandates and the overarching Barents Programme, the group asks for more secretarial assistance from the IBS, in order to improve the coordination between the JWGC and the rest of the Barents Cooperation. “Since we have no permanent secretary [...] and there are new people coming every second year [...] it would be of great help to have a more active International Barents Secretariat.”

Joint Working Group on Education and Research

The Joint Working Group on Education and Research (JWGER) is a network of universities in the Barents region and, unlike the other WGs, its members are not representatives from the state or regional administrations. The WG is currently made up of members from 13 institutions for higher education in Norway, Finland and Russia.

The communication in the JWGER generally functions well, but it largely depends on an active chair to initiate and maintain the discourse within the group. The contact between meetings is mostly a one-way communication with the chair proposing dates and agenda items for the upcoming meetings and with relatively little feedback from the other WG members. One group representative suggests that the absence of an active dialogue could partly be explained by a lack of commitment or insufficient experience of the practicalities of transnational cooperation.

It is also noted that forums outside of the Barents Cooperation serve as important arenas for meeting and discussing topics related to the WG. “Since many of the members [...] come from international offices of the Barents universities, we have many other opportunities to meet and talk either during conferences or at University of the Arctic meetings”, says one of the JWGER members, who sees this as a clear advantage. The opportunity to meet in person, rather than to use solely digital means of communication, is also promoted as a key factor for achieving better communication within the group. This also echoes a wider critique of the absence of a common forum for the actors within the Barents Cooperation. “In-person meetings for BEAC working group leaders have not become a tradition within the Barents Cooperation”, notes one of the JWGER members, while recalling that the last Norwegian BEAC chairmanship made a positive exception to this norm by inviting all WG chairs to participate in the CSO meetings during their chairmanship. “This was a great opportunity for the working group leaders to communicate [and] many good projects have been initiated during such kind of meetings.” While the group has already successfully implemented joint projects with other WGs, it acknowledges that the development of a joint forum for all the WGs could improve the possibility to collaborate with other groups.

There are no obvious challenges concerning the cooperation within the group and the JWGER is pleased with its current mandate. The member institutions, and notably in Russia, show a big interest in the WG,

however it is noted that the level of commitment often depend on the interest of individual representatives rather than their home organisations, which could make the network vulnerable to changes of membership. Moreover, the scope of collaboration is largely limited to practical issues of academic exchanges rather than policy. “[The JWGER] deals with internationalisation practises, such as international student enrolment and academic mobility issues [and] sometimes with applications for funding. But they are not ready to deal with issues of policy”, says one of the JWGER members.

Widening the membership is reported as one of the key improvements that could be done in the JWGER. Firstly, there is a demand for a close cooperation with the national and regional ministries of education. By giving the ministries of education an active membership in the WG, this could strengthen the ability to develop joint policy initiatives. Secondly, the current membership of the JWGER is dominated by Norwegian and Russian institutions and, as a result, the cooperation is largely bilateral. Swedish institutions, who are currently not represented in JWGER, are therefore encouraged to join the network and the group also welcomes a stronger engagement from Finnish universities. The key obstacles to improving the participation in the WG is funding and the voluntary nature of the organisation. “Funding seems to be the main obstacles, both for coordination and administration of the working group activities and for travelling”, claims one respondent.

Joint Working Group on Health and related Social Issues

The members of the Joint Working Group on Health and related Social Issues (JWGHS) reports that the group functions very well in many aspects. The participation is high and, as is pointed out by the members of the group, three regional ministers were attending the meeting at the occasion of the interview, which underlines the priority given to the group. The WG members are also pleased with the current mandate of the group.

The JWGHS runs three major transregional programmes that function as subgroups: the Barents Tuberculosis Programme, the Programme on Children and Youth at Risk in the Barents Region (CYAR) and the Barents Programme on HIV/AIDS. These are not only long-term programmes with benefits for the public health in the region, but also have a positive effect on the consolidation of the WG. “I think it brings the group together with a purpose”, says one of the WG members. The long-term perspective of the programmes also gives continuity to the WG. “The three subgroups [...] have a more permanent function because they have coordinators that stay for several years. The chairmanship changes but the coordinators of the groups remain”, says one of the interviewees.

Nonetheless, the JWGHS welcomes a discussion on how to improve communication and highlights interagency communication as one of the weaknesses in the group. Several of the members testify that there is a lack of knowledge about the current projects and work on health and social issues. Information is not sufficiently shared between the countries in the Barents Cooperation, which risks resulting in overlapping projects or loss of cooperation opportunities. “For example in Finland, we [the JWGHS] talked to my delegation and nobody knew [about] the project that we were referring to. So we actually don’t even know ourselves”, says one of the JWGHS members. One of the Russian participants has similar experiences, stating that “my Finnish colleagues informed us that they have the same type of project or programme, but I didn’t have any knowledge of that”.

That is not to say that attempts to disseminate information are not made. One participant reports that the awareness about the CYAR programme among the WG's regional representatives remain low, despite continuous attempts to inform about the project. "Our partners in the region were on several occasions encouraged to contact their regional representatives [...] in the joint working group in order to inform them on the CYAR programme [...]. And so far, I am sorry to say, this request has not reached through, because not many regional representatives in the joint working group are aware of this CYAR programme", says the informant. The latter example also suggests that there are not only limits to the information shared across borders but also within the WG itself.

Some of the difficulties with sharing information about the work in the region might be related to the lack of permanent secretarial resources within the group, which is also reported as one of the group's challenges. "The advantage of having this rotating [...] secretarial function is that we have a great commitment. But the drawback is that we have to restart the process each time", says one of the representatives and several members agree. There are also some uncertainties about the use of the secretarial services provided by the IBS. "The website of the secretariat is a bit of a challenge. Where should presentations be sent? Where should we sent the minutes?" asks one of the participants, suggesting that there might be need to provide better information about the secretarial services of the IBS. "We also have the aspect of what should be the official documents on this open website and what should be kept for a more limited audience", notes one informant, referring to the BEAC document database, which, with few exceptions, only allows the WGs to share public documents. It is also reported that the BEAC website is not always up-to-date, which further complicates the ability to access and share information about the group's work. "Maybe the information that I provided on the members of the joint working group [...], that I found on the website [...], is not correct. So I assume that the regional partners didn't actually find the right person to talk to. There is a disconnection there", says one of the participants with reference to the information on the BEAC website.

It is mentioned that Finland has developed a programme for improving the sharing of information and it has been suggested that the experience of using this system should be shared within the Barents region in order to enhance the exchange of information within the Barents Cooperation. At the time of the interview, this has yet to be implemented. It is also proposed that a system for sharing information about ongoing projects should be implemented. "We all have information departments and we have systems to handle information. [...] We have to make a system to exchange information as a continuous activity", says one of the participants, suggesting that a reference group could be established for the purpose of developing a system of information exchange.

Another factor that has facilitated the cooperation with the BEAC chairmanship has been when the JWGHS chairmanship has followed the BEAC chairmanship. "Last time Norway had the chairmanship of this group we also by chance had the chairmanship of BEAC. That of course made it very easy for us to collaborate with the BEAC chairmanship", notes one of the participants. However, the group members agree that no change of the current rotation order of JWGHS chairmanship is needed. Firstly, the group has traditionally had one country and one Russian region in the joint chairmanship and this would be difficult to bring in line with the BEAC chairmanship. Secondly, as is claimed by one of the interviewees, "[the member's] commitment to the issues is more important than the chairmanship". Other participants point out that it is positive for the group's chairmanship to work together with another country.

The group decides to continue the discussion on how communication can be facilitated by asking its members to provide proposals for improvements for the next working group meeting. “We are delighted that this is taking place, but I also think that the CSO members have a strong responsibility to take care of the result and identify further measures for how to continue with this”, says one of the group participants.

Joint Working Group on Tourism

The Joint Working Group on Tourism (JWGT) is an internally well-functioning group, but it nonetheless faces multiple challenges as it seeks to fulfil its purpose.

Firstly, the JWGT members report about formerly low interest in the tourism industry among policy-makers. It is only in recent years that the sector has been brought onto the political agenda and there is currently a growing interest for tourism in Finland, Sweden and Norway, while it remains a low priority for Russian policy-makers. In addition, Sweden has until now, with its upcoming BEAC chairmanship, shown very little interest in the Barents region in general. “It is the first time that we have a much bigger interest in the Barents region and the Arctic”, says one of the JWGT members.

It is suggested that the tendency not to give priority to tourism issues on the political agenda, partly explains the low participation from national level in the WG. Although the other member states have previously been more active, it is currently only Finland that has a national representative that actively participates in the group. Sweden has a nominated representative, but who rarely attends the meetings. “We had [a meeting] in Stockholm, 100 meters from the ministry, and [the Swedish national representative] couldn’t make it”, recalls one of the JWGT members. From the Norwegian side, no one knows who the national representative is. “I have spent so much time on finding this person”, says one of the respondents, who argues for that the national ministry should take a bigger responsibility in the WG. “The national level should actually be the ones who put forward proposals of what should be done [in the working group] and the regional level should be implementing it. But I have never heard anything from someone at the national level.”

In addition to low national participation, Russia has had few active participants in the group also on regional level. One proposed explanation is that tourism still remains a low priority policy area in Russia, as opposed to the growing interest in the other Barents countries. The lack of attention given to tourism therefore undermines the ability to obtain funding for participation in the WG and its activities. It is also claimed that there is need for better coordination and communication between the Russian tourism agencies on national, regional and federal level. One proposed solution to facilitate the Russian participation and to ensure the continuity of the work is to arrange for alternative means of participation through videoconference on occasions when face-to-face meetings are not possible.

The limited engagement from a higher political level is closely linked to the broader sense of disconnectedness of the WG. While members of the group has met and reported to the CSO on multiple occasions, they ask for more feedback on their work and a clearer link to whom they are responsible over for. “I feel like the group is hanging there, but there is no one to catch what we are doing. [...] Who is actually taking notice of the work that we are doing?” asks one of the respondents.

While the vertical relations are rather weak, the group has had active contact with many of the other WGs in the Barents Cooperation and the JWGT members welcome further development of joint projects. “It is

in the nature of tourism, it infiltrates into all kind of different ministries”, says one of the members. Previously, the groups has undertaken projects together with the JWGER, it has participated on WGE events and last year a representative from the JWGC attended the JWGT meeting in Oslo with the hope to find synergies between the groups. According to the JWGT members, the contact between WGs is not very well-organised and would benefit greatly from better knowledge about the structure of the Barents Cooperation, as well as clear information about whom to contact. The group also suggests that all the WGs should agree upon one common goal to include in their respective mandates, in order to incentivise and hopefully intensify the cross-sectoral cooperation in the Barents Cooperation.

In addition to the sporadic cooperation with other WGs, the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs invites all the Finnish WG representatives to common meetings several times per year, which gives the representatives an opportunity to develop contacts with other WGs and to get updated on the ongoing work. Similarly, Kainuu Regional Council has, since their BRC chairmanship, arranged regular meetings on a regional level, where all the BEAC representatives from the region meet and report on current issues in the BEAC bodies and WGs.

Within the JWGT, the communication is reported to function well and the members underline the importance of face-to-face meetings for the development of project ideas, strengthening contacts and furthering the WG’s mission. The group has a clear and well-defined mandate and action plan, which was developed during the Swedish chairmanship. However, the limited financial resources undermine the ability to implement the set agenda. “It is a really good action plan. It is really to the point when it comes to what the challenges and obstacles are and the things that we want to do something with. [...] So where do you get the money to do something with the challenges that we see?” asks one of the participants. While the group recognises that there are external funding for these types of projects, they underline that the application process for those funds is very complicated and time-consuming and hence not compatible with the amount of time that is currently available to set aside for the Barents Cooperation. At the same time, they maintain that even a small budget would significantly strengthen the WG and enable it to achieve some of its goals. “100 000 euro per year would not be bad. It would give power to the group too and the interest would become much bigger,” estimates one member.

Joint Working Group on Youth

The Joint Working Group on Youth (JWGY) was created from the merge of the Working Group on Youth Policy and the Regional Group on Youth Issues. The JWGY is also closely connected to the Barents Youth Cooperation Office (BYCO), which was established in Murmansk in 2002, and the Barents Regional Youth Council (BRYC). Both BYCO and BRYC are members of the WG and play an important role in developing and implementing the youth programme of the JWGY.

While the JWGY has been very active when it comes to implementing youth projects in the Barents region, it is currently facing severe challenges that undermine both its youth programme and the viability of the WG as such.

It appears to be a lack of commitment to the youth issues with which the groups is concerned, both among its members and within the administrations of the involved regions and states. Firstly, there is a problem of financing the implementation of the JWGY youth programme through the BYCO and BRYC. In the

previous funding agreement, each member states was committed to support BYCO with 10000 euro annually and, similarly, each region provided 10000 euro for the BRYC. However, Russia has not paid their contribution to BYCO during the past four years and, since the previous contract ended in 2015, no contract currently exists for the financing of BYCO. Similarly, BRYC is struggling to get finance from the Barents regions. "It has only been a couple of regions who have paid. [...] The Norwegian regions, the Swedish and maybe one Finnish, but the Russian regions are not contributing and most of the Finnish regions are not contributing either", says one of the BRYC members. "[If] individual regions cannot pay, it does not affect the cooperation, but if more than 50 percent of the [members] are not paying, then it all collapses and that is what is happening now."

While the underlying causes for the problem to provide funds for BYCO and BRYC are not clear, some suggest that, in addition to the general economic recession in Russia, it reflects a lack of interest in the youth cooperation as well as internal conflicts of interest within the JWGY. One JWGY member mentions the rejected proposal of moving BYCO to Arkhangelsk as one source of conflict. "They wanted to move BYCO to Arkhangelsk. [...] Since the working group rejected the suggestion [...] I think Arkhangelsk has not been very happy with working group's work. [...] So I don't think Arkhangelsk will make the most cooperative and active chair." It is also suggested that the inability to show a concrete impact of the funds invested into youth cooperation might undermine the willingness to provide funds for the youth programme. "It is hard to get concrete results from youth cooperation. [...] It is more about capacity-building and encouraging youth", says one of the respondents.

The level of commitment among Sweden, Norway and Finland also differs. "The Norwegian government has, at least earlier, shown significantly bigger interest in the youth cooperation than the Swedish government", says one of the JWGY members. "The Swedish foreign ministry underlines the importance of maintaining all the working groups [...], however the Swedish government has not been interested in increasing the funds for BYCO for many years, despite the fact that the other member states are willing to do so. [...] I think it is embarrassing that we have kept the funding of 10000 euro for the last fifteen years [and] that it has not been raised to 15000 or 20000 as suggested by the other [member] states."

Since BRYC and BYCO functions as the implementing organs of the JWGY, the absence of funding clearly undermines their ability to implement the youth programme, which is one of the key elements of the JWGY. "We do as many projects as we get funds for, and we would like to do even more", says one of the BRYC members. "They are all with external funding [...] and a lot of our time goes to applying for these external funds." Not only does the lack of funding complicate the development and implementation of youth projects, but it has also taken the discussion on youth issues off the agenda in the JWGY meetings. "Much of what could have been discussed in this group has been replaced by discussions on [financial] practicalities", says one member and there appears to be a consensus among the respondents that as long as the financial mechanisms are not agreed upon, very little attention will be given to the real youth work in the region, with which the regional representatives are concerned. The lack of focus on implementation further undermines the willingness to fund the BRYC and BYCO. "It seems like the question of financing has become the important one and that the work itself became not so important. [...] And why would you pay if you don't see what it is for?" notes one of the respondents.

In addition to disagreement on the financial mechanism, the absence of a clearly defined leadership is another challenge in the JWGY. Since Russia took over the national chairmanship for the group in 2015, there has been very little activity in the group. "Russia didn't show any plan of action for its chairmanship

and they didn't schedule any meetings or nominate a chair", says one of the JWGY members and this view is reflected also by others in the WG.

It is proposed that an effort to reinstitute the regional chairmanship of the working group could provide better continuity and avoid situations with inactivity in the group. "I miss the co-chair function. [...] If there had been a regional chairman in place, this could have kept the work going", suggests one of the JWGY members, referring to the joint structure of the WG. There has at times been a regional co-chair in the JWGY, but at the time of writing there is no regional chairmanship and the national chair has not been announced by Russia. There are also no clear guidelines for how the rotation of a region chairmanship should be organised. While such guidelines would facilitate the maintenance of a co-chairmanship, it is also noted that standardised rotation guidelines for all of the Barents Cooperation might not be possible to implement. For example, it would not be possible to synchronise the group's regional chairmanship with that of the BRC, since not all regions are currently represented in the WG.

Others suggest that the joint structure is not suitable for the JWGY and that the group would benefit from going back to the previously separate regional and national groups. "Before it became a joint working group [...] the working group on regional level was discussing the real youth project plans during their meetings. [...] Now they are only listening to all these ministerial problems and the regional problems are not taken into consideration and they are not [prioritised]", says one of the respondents. Others agree, but also underline the value of cooperation between the regional and national level. "If we really were discussing topics that are youth-related and not funding-related, then it would of course be good if we were together."

Apart from the issues related to the current JWGY leadership and the financial situation of BYCO and BRYC, the respondents are positive to how the WG and its implementing bodies operate. The communication is reported to work well within the group and the practice of including all its members as a copy to the email allows for keeping everyone updated on the current discussions within the group. The communication between the JWGY and BYCO and BRYC also functions well according to the members, and BRYC and BYCO are participating actively in the JWGY meetings and work together on the development of the Youth Programme.

While the cooperation within the JWGY and its implementing bodies has functioned well in general, the respondents report that they welcome more contact with other actors in the Barents Cooperation. With exception for a close collaboration with the WGIP on several projects, the JWGY has had limited contact with other actors in the Barents Cooperation. "We know the people in the Barents Regional Council [...] and we take part in the Barents Euro-Arctic Council meetings from time to time. But we don't know that much about the working groups", says one of the representatives. A closer contact with the CSO representatives is also asked for.

The participation in the JWGY meetings is overall good and the majority of the WG members attend the meetings regularly. However, Russia has not had a national representative in the JWGY for a long time, according to the WG members. Instead, one of the Russian regional representatives has been given the task to represent both the regional and the national level. This is seen as problematic by several of the JWGY members, both since it does not provide the continuity, in terms of a permanent contact person and a consistent policy direction, that is needed to forward the cooperation. "Every time it was a new person and it makes it hard to maintain the contact", says one of the respondents, who notes that the changes of representatives also result in an inconsistent policy direction from Russia. Moreover, the

regional representative often lacks the mandate to make decisions on behalf of the national level. “If there are additional questions [...] then the person who has been given the task to represent Russia at this specific meeting is not able to give any answers”, says another JWGY member.

The WG mandate has been discussed regularly and was last updated during the Finnish chairmanship in 2015. While there is a continuous review process of the mandate, some of the JWGY members suggest that the current activities of the WG do not reflect the group’s mandate. “It is hard to tell [if the current mandate is suitable] because we haven’t been working with the issues that we should work on in the working group”, says one of the JWGY members, referring to the focus on finding a financial solution to BYCO and BRYC. The centrality of BYCO and BRYC for implementing the mandate is also mentioned. “The activities we want to implement largely rely on [BYCO]”, says one of the respondents. “If the [BYCO] office is shut down [...] then the [implementation of the mandate] will be very tricky. [...] If it is decided that BYCO will be shut down, then we need to find out what this working group should do instead, and that discussion has not been had yet.”

Regional Working Group on Investment and Economic Cooperation

The Regional Working Group on Investment and Economic Cooperation (RWGIEC) was established in 2006, and has, after a few years of inactivity, recently initiated an attempt to reactivate the group.

Weak interest and participation appears to be the key challenges to the group. The current Norwegian chairmanship organised a meeting in Rovaniemi in 2014, where only the chairman and the head of the IBS participated. It was also proposed to convene a meeting during the Murmansk International Business Week in 2015, but the initiative received no response from the group members. An attempt was made by the IBS to ensure that the contact details to the WG members were up-to-date and in April 2016 the group convened for a meeting where participants from all four Barents countries were present. While the participating regions expressed an interest and commitment to reviving the cooperation in the group, it should be noted that only one region from each country was represented at the meeting. At the time of writing, five of the Barents regions have no membership in the group and Komi has not confirmed who their representative in the RWGIEC will be. This suggests that there is potential for improving the participation and widen the membership of the group.

The RWGIEC members also report to need a clearer mandate. “The challenges that we have had may have to do with this sort of loose agreements and attachments. [...] For an efficient working group, it would of course be better to have much more regulated, financed and clear mandates”, says one of the group members. It is suggested that the weak mandate is related to the missing link with the RC and the IBS and that there is need for clearer instructions of that the groups should be doing. “If nobody in the [Barents Cooperation] cared about what is coming out of this working group we could just take it and sell it to someone else. [...] If nobody is listening on a higher level [...] there is a weak link [...] and if we do not have an impact on anyone, I would say that there is a missing link”, claims one of the interviewees, referring to the absence of input from the RC and the IBS on what the purpose and tasks of the group should be.

In addition to strengthening the link to the RC, the group also welcomes closer cooperation with other WGs. “The group will definitely be open to discussions with other groups”, says one of the respondents, but underlines that the IBS must play a central role for the coordination of intergroup cooperation. “It is difficult for us to see these things and to know what is going on in the other [groups]. I think it would be

an overwhelming task to oversee all these things from our position because we are fully employed in other jobs, so we would need help.” It is suggested that the IBS could facilitate the cooperation between the WGs by proposing suitable collaboration partners to invite to the WG meetings. The RWGIEC is also positive to organising back-to-back meetings with relevant groups in order to enhance the dialogue with other groups. However, the group experience disconnectedness from the wider organisation and welcomes further inclusion of the WGs in the activities of the Barents Cooperation. “So far, I have not received even one invitation to anything at all”, notes one of the participants, who has been a member of the group for several years.

There is also need for secretarial services to provide support for the organisation of meetings as well as applications for project funds. During the chairmanship of Norrbotten, the regional council in Norrbotten provided secretarial support for the group and a joint project of identifying existing barriers to movement across the borders in the Barents region was implemented. The chairmanship of Troms will now look into the possibility of establishing a similar service. The JWGIEC also proposes that the regional councils could provide funds for future projects in the WG. Without any sources of funding there are few opportunities for the group to implement common projects, they conclude.

Regional Working Group on Transport and Logistics

From the discussions with the Regional Working Group on Transport and Logistics (RWGTL), three key challenges can be identified: the partially weak communication and participation in the group, its ad hoc nature and informal structures, and the lack of a precisely defined role in the wider cooperation framework.

While the RWGTL organises regular meetings and report no problems with the recruitment of new members and updating the contact details, it nonetheless experience that the communication is rather sporadic and that not all regions are as well-represented in the group. The “Swedish and some Norwegian” regions are the most active participants in the WG, according to one of its members. Russian participation, on the other hand, could be strengthened in the group. “At almost every meeting there is missing somebody, mostly from Russia”, says one of the WG members. “This [Tromsø, 2016] is the first time that no one from Russia comes to participate [in the meeting] [and] they don’t give any feedback or any comments to [...] emails”.

One of the possible reasons for low participation rates is the lack of finance, which is indirectly linked to the absence of a common project at the moment. “If we don’t have any project money, we don’t have any finance, so our organisations have to pay. Maybe this has been a problem on the Russian side”, suggests one of the members. More than easing the budget, running a project also provides a strong incentive for maintaining communication and organising regular meetings. “We have to have something, some common aim or some project [...], so that everybody can be more active and participate”, states one of the members. “When we had the Barents Freeway Project, we were very available and active and discussed [...] very actively. We were preparing projects, exchanging ideas and we had more meetings too. [...] It is difficult to communicate between the meetings if we don’t have any projects”. To develop a new common project is therefore high on the agenda and ideas were discussed during the meeting in Tromsø in March 2016. With reference to the above mentioned benefits, a new project could be an important contribution to maintaining the vitality of the group.

Another proposed explanation to the limited participation, notably from Russia, refers to the cultural and administrative differences in region. Several of the WG members speculate that a centralisation trend in Russian, combined with an administrative culture that does not encourage regional engagement in international relations, could help explain the challenges of maintaining a stable Russian participation in the WG. “[The Russian] cultural and administrative culture and background is totally different from ours”, says one of the RWGTL members, who has the feeling that the Russian regions are not encouraged by the authorities to act independently in relation to their neighbouring regions.

The language barrier is also discussed as a possible explanation for instances of inactivity, but although it is agreed that it has some impact, this is not suggested to be the key reason for the problem. “Sometimes [...] our secretary [...] sent Russian emails and then he gets some answers. But in English it is very difficult”, says one of the participants. Another participant claims that while communicating in Russian would improve the contact, it is not the solution to the problem. “It would make it easier if we sent emails in Russian and gave them the possibility to answer in Russian. But I would expect that one of [...] five would answer.”

Yet, despite these regional differences in the level of participation, it should be noted that even the less active regions do participate in the cooperation to some extent. “When we make proposals of [...] projects that are interesting to the regions, they will answer after a certain time and negotiations. [...] But it is always hard footwork to get them in the boat”, says one of the members.

One proposal that is brought forward during the meeting is to provide training, notably for the Russian partners, which would provide the participants with better understanding for how the cooperation functions. Already today, tacit knowledge is transferred through the transborder projects in the cooperation and ENI, together with other financial institutes, provide training courses in how to participate in transborder cooperation. Through the projects, the participants gain knowledge about key transport issues and how these issues are dealt with in an international perspective as well as a general understanding of the international cooperation programmes and how the EU works. “They gain a lot of new knowledge and after that they can be more active in this kind of cooperation”, says one of the RWGTL members.

In addition to the potential for improving the internal communication in the group, the members of the RWGTL also ask for better cooperation with other WGs and external actors. The RWGTL has enjoyed close cooperation with BEATA since the Norwegian chairmanship in 2012 and has participated in several joint projects with BEATA, such as the Joint Barents Transport Plan and the Barents Freeway Project. The two groups have also organised joint meetings on several occasions. However, the RWGTL members express some concern about the shortage of updates from the newly established Russian BEATA chairmanship. “It is very difficult because the chairmanship is in Russia and I don’t know anything about the BEATA working group after that”, says one of the RWGTL members when asked if the group still cooperates with BEATA. This claim is confirmed by one of the representatives from BEATA who says that “the Russians did not present [...] any programme for their chairmanship” at the time of the interview.

Apart from BEATA, the RWGTL has no continuous contact with other WGs in the Barents Cooperation. “The communication is quite random”, says one RWGTL representative. “Maybe it could be good [...], at least to know what they are doing”, says one informant. The already heavy work load of civil servants is mentioned as one of the challenges to developing closer cooperation and communication with other WGs.

Other RWGTL members underline that the WG should not limit their cooperation to that with BEATA. “We have other actors besides BEATA. [...] We have the Arctic Council, we have the NDPTL, we have the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions and the Baltic Sea Commission. There are transport working groups there too”, says one of the members, claiming that the RWGTL should focus more towards the external borders of the region, rather than limiting itself to act within its geographical borders. “The [RWGTL] is working in some sort of vacuum, it is just inside. But it is very important that we act upon what is happening at the borders”, says one of them. These comments suggest that there is demand for better communication and coordination, not only within the Barents Cooperation, but also with other transnational organisations that have overlapping interests in the region. One proposal raised at the meeting is that the WG should organise a seminar in Brussels about the transport issues in the Barents region.

The demand for better coordination between the Barents Cooperation and other cooperation regimes in the region also reflects a need for contextualisation of the RWGTL. As one of the group members puts it: “The big question is actually, what is the demand for the RWGTL in the region?” The informant says that he is unaware of any clear directive of the RWGTL’s role in the Barents Cooperation and asks for a clarification of the objective of the group.

This question is also connected to the need for updating the mandate of the WG. The RWGTL mandate has so far not been reviewed since the group was established under its previous name, Regional Working Group on Communication, in 2010. “Our mandate is still for the Working Group on Communication”, says one member. Others claim that the group needs “some kind of specific aim” and “a clear mandate”.

The calls for a clearer mandate appear to be just one of the symptoms of the general absence of formal organisational structures in the WG. The group has no formal procedure for the rotation of the chairmanship and the current chair has been chairing the group since its very foundation in 2010. “Sometimes I have asked my friends if they would like to change the chair”, he says. This is also acknowledged by the other WG members. “I think [he] has been a chairman even though he was not supported to. He has taken responsibility on top of everything else that he does. The key is that we are doing this on top of all the other things that we have to do.”

There are also no clear division of responsibility within the WG, something that further complicates the communication in the group and undermines the willingness to take new initiatives. No one is formally responsible for reporting back to the IBS about the RWGTL’s work and the reports to the RC occur on a somewhat ad hoc basis. The WG has been represented at meetings of both the BRC and the RC, but mainly because members of the WG simultaneously held positions in the RC, which made it easy to participate. When asked if they still attend these meetings regularly, one informant responds that that is no longer the case, explaining it as a result of there now being “other representatives [in the BRC and RC]”.

Working Group on Environment

The Working Group on Environment (WGE) is one of the most active WGs in the Barents Cooperation and encompasses four subgroups on water issues, hot spots exclusion, nature protection, cleaner production and environmentally sound consumption.

According to members of the WGE group, the internal communication functions well and there an internal initiative has already been made to improve the communication within the group, resulting in a communication strategy that adopted in 2013. During the process, a communication workshop was held in Rovaniemi where communication issues were discussed. However, it is suggested that the strategy needs to be followed up to be effective. “Many ideas were brought forward,” says one of the WGE members, “but you also have to review it, because now [the process] has ended”.

While the internal communication runs smoothly, the WGE has limited communication with other BEAC actors, both WGs and the CSO and the RC. “We don’t communicate” says one of the group members when asked about their interaction with other WGs. One explanation for the irregular communication with other groups appear to be the lack of joint projects and the group explains that they were communicating regularly with the JWGER when they ran a project together a few years ago. “The cooperation was good, but, as far as I know, it was the only example of cooperation and communication [with other groups]”, says one of WGE members. The subgroups also mention their position as a subgroup to the WGE as a barrier to communication with other WGs. “As a regional group, you had the possibility to communicate with other regional groups”, says one of the members of the Subgroup on Water Issues. “Now we are a subgroup under the WGE and then it is not so natural for us to communicate with other groups.” Members of the WGE group welcome a better dialogue with other WGs and several proposals are put forward for how the external communication could be improved. One idea is to create a common web platform for the WGs and to use a shared meeting and event calendar to get a better understanding of what the other WGs are doing. It is also suggested that the annual reports of the WGs should be more readily available.

The group also expresses a demand for better communication and feedback from the regional administrations as well as the RC. “It is very important with the linkage between [the working group] and the regional council and the regional committee”, says one of the WGE members who says that the WGE has been invited to report to the RC, but that feedback and direction for the group is lacking. “Could they use us for anything? Could we support them in any way? Do they need our experience in their work? [...] We can tell [them] what we are doing, but can [they] use us for anything?” The absence of feedback from the RC is not a new tendency but something that has also been a concern also for earlier chairmanships according to the WGE members. The group also welcomes more engagement from the regional administrations in the Barents regions. It is suggested that the regions should have a person who is responsible for following the Barents Cooperation and provide a connection to the regional administration. “Somebody [who is] responsible [...] so that we know that somebody in every county notices that we had a meeting, that we published a report, that we did something or *didn’t* do something. I think that would be a good thing”, says one of the WGE members.

The development and implementation of new projects in the WGE generally works well according to the members. “I think we have no problems with cooperation on projects”, says the chairman of one of the subgroups. However, one informant notes a lack of dialogue and coordination on projects: “During the Russian chairmanship there was no discussion about the projects, they were simply presented by Russia. They did their thing and we did our.” Financing is mentioned as the key challenge for implementing

projects, but also the access to funds has improved over the years. “Earlier it was a problem to get funding for multilateral projects, because each country wanted to say ‘that’s my project’ and ‘I was the one paid for this’ [...] so it was difficult to have three countries involved”, says one of the representatives who notices that the access to funds from the EU has facilitated the implementation of projects. “After we got the new [EU] funding instruments it has been much easier.”

When it comes to dissemination of information about the WGE projects, websites have been developed for many of the projects and some of them have also been featured in the Barents Saga newsletter, but not all of the project websites are linked to the BEAC website. The WG members are however positive to using the BEAC website for providing a better overview and further disseminating information about the projects.

While information about the ongoing WGE projects is available, the group reports a need for better information and knowledge about the Barents Cooperation more generally. “What regional council are we talking about?” asks one of the new group members during the discussions, which illustrates the limited understanding of the organisational structure of the Barents Cooperation. Several of the members also testify about a lack of insight into the Barents Cooperation among the regional media. “It is needed to travel around the Barents [region] and give a lecture about what the Barents Cooperation is”, says one of WGE representatives.

One of the key challenges for the WGE group appears to be participation. “How can we improve the Russian participation in this group? [...] That has been discussed for many, many years”, says one of the members of the Subgroup on Water Issues. The Norwegian chairmanship has proposed to organise a meeting in Russia, but this does not necessarily increase the Russian participation according to one of the group members. “If we have the meeting [...] in Arkhangelsk, then the people from Arkhangelsk will attend [...] but maybe not [members] from Murmansk and Karelia.”

Several factors are proposed as explanations for the low participation. One is the limited human resources. “They are so busy so they cannot give priority to this”, says one WGE member. The lack of finance is another explanation and the weak ruble, as well as restrictions on international business trips, have made the situation more difficult for Russian participants. “What used to cost 10 rubles is now 20. This is one of the major reasons. [...] I know people who wanted to come to this meeting, but they couldn’t make it because the cost of the hotel is not affordable”, says one of the Russian representatives. But others claim that the weak currency is a recent trend, and hence it fails to explain the long-term tendencies of low participation, which they suggest is more likely a result of structural changes and differences between the political and administrative systems of the member states. For one, the Russian policy concerning the coverage of expenses during international business trips has been revised. “In the 1990s it was possible for the inviting side to cover the expenses. [...] [Now] civil servants are not allowed to go abroad and have the expenses covered by the foreign side”, says one of the representatives. It is also suggested that a general centralisation trend in Russia has undermined the regional participation in the Barents Cooperation. “In the 1990s, the regions were free to engage in cooperation and projects. [Then] there was a period of reforms [...] in the beginning of the 2000s [and] this was the beginning of vertical power. [...] They might want [cooperation] but they are held tight”, says one informant. While these challenges remain, both the visa process and travelling in the region is reported by the WGE as areas that have been improved and that facilitate the participation in the cooperation.

Working Group of Indigenous Peoples

The Working Group of Indigenous Peoples (WGIP) differs from the other WGs in that its representatives also participate in all the other WGs. In addition, the WGIP has a permanent secretariat and it also receives funding to cover the participation costs of the meetings, which, according to the group results in a high level of participation. “In that regard the WGIP is rather privileged [...] because with our current financial situation we are able to take part in the other working groups”, says one of the members. The WGs of the Barents Cooperation provide an arena on which the WGIP, through their wide representation, can bring issues concerning indigenous people onto the transregional agenda. “The first task is fulfilled, [the WGIP] bring the indigenous voice to the other working groups”, says one of the respondents. The groups also agrees that the WGIP mandate is clear when it comes to the issues on its agenda, which has support in the group’s action plan and different congress resolutions. However, the WG notes that the means by which the goals are to be achieved could be more clearly specified in the mandate, such as how to organise reporting and sharing of information within the group.

While the indigenous peoples have a voice in the BEAC WGs, the impact on the output of those WGs is less visible and several of the WGIP members question their real influence in the other WGs. “I am very worried about whether the indigenous issues are really taken into account in the other working groups”, says one of the WGIP members. Others highlight that there is still a lack of coordination between the WGIP policies and the output of the other WGs. “How can our action plan be coordinated with the other [working groups’] action plans?” asks one of the participants. “The WGIP cannot be alone responsible for implementing all the indigenous peoples projects and improve the living conditions of the indigenous peoples in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region. [...] The action plan and the proposed measures and the prioritised areas of the WGIP [are] supposed to be a guiding tool for the regions and other partners in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region.”

The lack of human resources is brought forward as one of the key barriers that prevent WGIP from optimising their contribution and influence in the other WGs. “Since we are already a minority and we are not too many people, it can be a challenge to find representatives who have the time and the right competences to be appointed”, notes one of the respondents. “The participation in the working groups demands that you prepare for the meetings, you have to keep updated on the relevant issues and maybe also take part in other meetings. So it is time-consuming.” In addition there are very few candidates who have experience of working with interstate relations. “I can count on one hand, [the number of] persons [in the Swedish Sami Parliament] who have some sort of experience of working in the international field”, says one of the respondents, who also notes that knowledge and experience often comes and goes with individuals rather than being institutionalised within the organisation. “Since we are politically elected, these people tend to disappear after a while. And perhaps they have not had the opportunity to instruct and share knowledge with their successor.” Language also provides an additional barrier, especially to the Russian representatives. “I was a delegate at a meeting, and everything was quite clear during the meeting, but afterwards I received material in English and that was a problem for me. It was an obstacle for proceeding with my work”, recalls one of the Russian WGIP members. To deal with this issue, English language courses have been arranged for indigenous youth in the region to help facilitate their representation on an international level.

Over the years, the WGIP has initiated projects, such as the Indigee project, and it also identifies suitable projects and project partners within the larger network of Nenets, Veps and Sami communities. However,

there is potential for improving the development of joint projects with other WGs and the incorporation of indigenous perspectives to already existing projects. “I don’t think we are very well-updated on what projects that the other working groups have at all times”, says one of the interviewees, reflecting the challenge of identifying synergies with other WGs and areas where joint projects could be developed.

This highlights the lack of shared information among the different WGs and within the Barents Cooperation, but it also reflects communication challenges within the WGIP. “Our main challenge is that the information from the other working groups does not come back to this working group”, says one WGIP member, who notes that a discussion on how communication can be improved is already on the WG’s agenda. Ideally the WGIP representatives in the other WGs should attend the WGIP meetings and report back about the activities in their respective groups. “That is how it has been, from time to time. But we do have challenges with this”, says one representative. “We need to establish a mechanism for reporting back to the [WGIP] secretariat [...] and then also how to share information within the formal framework of the Barents Cooperation.” It is suggested that the internal communication and dissemination of information could be improved by sharing written reports and to organise more frequent meetings between the secretariat and the WGIP members represented in other WGs.

Discussion: Trends among the BEAC working groups

This evaluation study has shown that the WGs in the Barents Cooperation are overall positive to participating in the regional cooperation, however a number of common challenges have also been identified. The end of this chapter concludes the study by summarising the general trends and tendencies among the WGs and, finally, outlining a number of recommendations, based on observations and suggestions from the WG, that could facilitate the work of the WGs and strengthen the regional cooperation more generally.

Firstly, the result from the WG interviews indicates that the majority of the WGs (with exception for a handful of groups) function well internally. Most WGs organise regular meetings and between the meetings, information is exchanged and contact is maintained by means of digital communication (primarily email, but some groups also use videoconference). The key problems related to the internal process of the WGs are cases of inactivity and limited communication.

There are multiple causes for inactivity in the WGs and it is also possible to identify two different types of inactivity. Partial inactivity, meaning that one or several member states or regions are inactive in the group, is the most widespread. The general tendency is that Russian participants are more often reported to be inactive in the WGs, but also Sweden has been said to have shown limited interest in cooperation in the Barents region. The causes for partial inactivity vary. Language and limited financial resources have been mentioned as key barriers, particularly for Russian participants. Also organisational and political culture is claimed to be a factor that limits the engagement of the Russian regions. Inactivity among the other member states and regions is primarily explained as lack of interest in the WG or in the cooperation more generally. There are also cases where the entire WG is inactive and this type of inactivity is explained primarily by an unclear organisational structures and weak leadership. Unclear structures and the absence of formalised processes is suggested to cause inactivity in the WGs. Several groups have no rotation of the chairmanship, which, in some cases, results in a fading engagement over time for the sitting chair. At the same time, the chair plays a key role for the maintenance of communication, the organisation of meetings and proposals for the agenda. Similarly, many groups ask for a clearer mandate from the CSO and the RC, and this has also been mentioned as a cause for inactivity in the WGs. There is also a positive correlation between the implementation of projects and the general level of activity in the WGs. The most active groups are also those that most frequently develop common projects, and even groups that rarely implements projects maintain those were the periods when they were the most active. The lack of projects was often related to insufficient resources, both time to engage in the project and funds for implementing it.

While communication within the WG generally functions well, it is reported that the maintenance of contact details and the exchange of information about new WG members is sometimes an obstacle to the internal communication. The recruitment of new members to the WG can take a long time and often contact information to the new members is not submitted to the IBS resulting in outdated email-lists, which obstructs the communication within the groups. The internal communication is also in several cases largely unidirectional, where the chair solely develops and proposes the agenda.

The key challenges identified by the WGs primarily relate to their relations with the other BEAC actors, or rather the lack of such relations. Most of the WGs appear to operate in a vacuum with very little or no contact and knowledge about other actors in the Barents Cooperation. The majority of WG are very positive to closer cooperation with other group, however (with a few exceptions) this is not common practice in the Barents Cooperation. The absence of intergroup cooperation is explained by a lack of information about other WGs, making it difficult to identify synergies between the groups. There are also few opportunities to meet other WGs and many groups ask for a common forum, both for sharing material digitally and for meeting face-to-face. In Finland, attempts have been made to strengthen the connections between the WGs by regularly organising common meetings for all the WG representatives (both nationally by the Foreign Ministry and regionally by Kainuu Regional Council) which allows the members to keep updated on what goes on in the other groups.

Moreover, there is a wide demand for clearer directives from the RC and the CSO on the WG mandates and how their individual initiatives are related to the overarching strategy for the Barents Cooperation. The contact between the RC, the CSO and the WGs is currently largely unidirectional, where the WGs are invited to report to the RC and the CSO and many WG experience a sense of disconnectedness from the wider organisation. The reporting appears to be rather irregular and many WGs would like to have more feedback on their work from the RC and the CSO. With the exception for reporting, WGs are generally not participating in BRC/RC and BEAC/CSO event, although many express that they would like to be invited to these meetings. Many WG members have little insight into the structure of the Barents Cooperation and the functions of its various actors, which can be assumed to be a result of their limited integration in the organisation.

The feedback also suggests that more secretarial support is needed for the WGs. As of today, the WGs (with the exception for WGE and WGIP) have no permanent secretariats and the secretarial duties are performed by the chair of the group, who often has few or no resources set aside for this purpose. The lack of secretarial resources results in slow reporting to the IBS and also explains the limited access on information about the WGs' activities. Some groups also report that they know very little about what services the IBS can provide and note that the IBS needs to play a bigger role for coordinating the work if the cooperation between the WGs is to be expanded.

Recommendations

Based on the findings discussed above, in combination with suggestions from the WGs on what changes they wish to see in the Barents Cooperation, the following proposals are expected to improve the effectiveness of the regional cooperation, if implemented:

Establish a BEAC intranet

As previously noted by the IBS, and now also confirmed through the interviews with the WGs, the majority of BEAC WGs do not exchange information about their activities and projects with other actors within the Barents Cooperation, and while there is an interest for cooperation with other groups, the lack of knowledge about the BEAC WGs is reported to be one of the key barriers to such a development. Several WGs propose that a common digital platform should be developed. The platform should function as an intranet for the Barents Cooperation where its members can share information, either within their specific groups or between different groups or actors in the organisation. Moreover, the platform could provide a forum for open discussions, both within and between the groups. By having a permanent intranet, instead of the chairmanships setting up their own systems for sharing data, both time and resources will be saved and it would also provide better continuity to the organisation.

Encourage back-to-back meetings

In order to strengthen the cooperation between WGs it has also been identified that it is important to meet representatives from the different groups and several of the WGs mention that physical meetings are needed to establish contacts with other groups. Back-to-back meetings should therefore be encouraged and the possibility of organising a common event for all the WGs has also been discussed. Several WGs also welcome closer integration with the RC and the CSO and asks for the WGs to receive invitations also to other BEAC events and meetings.

The Finnish initiatives, where the WG members have been gathered for regular meeting, both on national level and within the regional administration, have received positive feedback and the WG members who have participated in such meetings express a greater sense of connectedness with the other parts of the BEAC organisation. This practice should therefore be encouraged also in the other member states and regions in order to enhance the connectedness within the organisation and to facilitate the communication between the different groups.

Provide more secretarial support

While the WGs are positive to operating within the BEAC system, many ask for more support from the IBS as well as for more information about the support that can be provided. It is also noted that the IBS needs to play a central role in the coordination of cooperation between the WGs if greater interconnectedness within the organisation is to be achieved. The IBS, with its holistic perspective of the organisation, should help the WGs identify suitable cooperation partners, and support is also needed for organising back-to-back meetings, which tend to be larger and more complex than the normal WG meetings. This is something that today's unfunded WG secretariats do not have the resources to do.

Establish a BEAC financial mechanism

According to an earlier survey conducted by the IBS, the lack of resources is a key obstacle to the WGs in the Barents Cooperation, with 77 percent of the survey respondent claiming that the WG does not have sufficient resources and funds. This claim is also supported in the interview findings, with many of the WGs mentioning limited resources as a cause for low participation and difficulties of developing and implementing projects within the groups. During the Finnish BEAC chairmanship, a report was published, which concluded that there are multiple funding opportunities for projects in the Barents region and that no internal financial mechanism is needed. The WGs also acknowledge that funds for cross-border cooperation in the Barents region exists, however, they underline that these funds are often not obtainable due to complicated application processes and lack of human- and financial resources to apply for funds. This study therefore suggests that the establishment of a BEAC financial mechanism would have a positive impact on the activity in the WGs. Even a small basic budget for all the WGs would improve their ability to participate in the cooperation and to apply for external grants for implementing projects in the region.

Clearer guidelines

Several WGs ask for clearer guidelines from the RC and CSO that stipulate the purpose and the mandate of the WGs, in addition to a direct connection to the overarching strategy for the Barents Cooperation. With this in mind, a close dialogue between the RC, the CSO and the WGs is welcomed, and especially in the continuous revision of the WG mandates. Some WGs use the BEAC strategy as a source for their own WG strategy and mandate and hence gives the group a stronger connection to the wider organisational goals. This is a practice that could be implemented also among other WGs. One of the WGs also proposed that the groups should have one shared goal in their respective mandates, which would allow for identifying synergies and encourage intergroup cooperation. This idea should be considered and further discussed among the RC, the CSO and the WGs.

Some WGs also express a need for clearer organisational structures within the group, specifying how the group should function. This work has been initiated through the Regional Communication Strategy that was adopted in May 2016, which provides guidelines on matters related to communication in the Barents Cooperation. The IBS also proposes that a standardised format for the WG mandates should be adopted, with a number of permanent content items that should be included in all mandates. This would allow for specifying for example the process of chairmanship rotation, to ensure that the chairmanship rotates in all WGs.

Communication Strategy for Barents Regional Cooperation

The Communication Strategy for Barents Regional Cooperation (from now on referred to as the Communication Strategy), which was developed as part of the Communication Project, was initiated by the Kainuu Regional Council who took over the regional chairmanship of the Barents Cooperation from Arkhangelsk in October 2015. Despite long experience of regional cross-border cooperation, the regional administration identified a need for better information on how to operate within the Barents Cooperation. Changes of personnel had affected the transfer of knowledge and Barents know-how within the organisation and the planning process of the BRC chairmanship had to start from scratch. It was therefore decided to develop a formal communication strategy for the regional cooperation.

Going through the available material on the IBS website, it became clear that a lot of information was indeed available, but not always in a form that was easy to digest. At the same time, certain practical details were not documented at all. As a consequence, it was not easy to get an overview of how the Barents Cooperation functions, what role the different parties have and how they cooperate in practice. The Communication Strategy would therefore seek to create a holistic understanding of how the cooperation and the communication functions in practice.

The Communication Strategy was drafted by Kainuu Regional Council, in cooperation with the IBS, based on the experienced needs of the regional chairmanship. The document was presented to the Regional Committee, who was invited to submit comments to the strategy and to discuss the content before it was accepted. Following the 6-month drafting process, the Communication Strategy was adopted by the Barents Regional Council in Kajaani on May 31st 2016.

The document starts by introducing the contact details (including videoconference) of the parties involved in the regional cooperation, followed by instructions on how the contact information should be maintained and updated. While contact information is published on the IBS website, the process of acquiring information about changed to the contact details has been problematic, resulting in outdated information. Moreover, the strategy outlines general guidelines for the organisation of face-to-face and video meetings, mandates and reporting procedures of working groups, followed by a section on information exchange and social media.

For the Communication Strategy to serve its purpose, it is essential to continue the discussions on communication. The accepted document should be distributed, discussed and updated on a regular basis as a natural part of the Barents Cooperation. The ultimate responsibility to continue this process lies on the regional chairmanship and the IBS, but the importance of a wider engagement in this process cannot be stressed enough.

This work will now continue by producing a practical introduction guide for members of the Barents regional cooperation and a BRC Chair Region Handbook, which will be developed in cooperation between the IBS and the regional chairmanship.

Project Information Platform

The third part of the communication project is the development of a digital platform where information about the ongoing projects and activities in the WGs can be published. An improvement in the information exchange between the WGs would allow for identifying synergies and potential areas of cooperation between the groups, at the same times as it prevents overlaps within the organisation.

Previously, the IBS website has provided more general information about all the WGs on the groups' individual pages where information about projects has also sometimes been available. However, in the majority of cases, there has been a lack of information about projects and ongoing activities and hence, this information is often only known by the involved parties or available on the national or regional WG members' websites. By creating a common newsfeed for all WG projects it will be easier to follow the development of all WGs in the Barents Cooperation.

The information platform was developed by the Arctic Centre, in cooperation with the IBS, who will be responsible for the continuous maintenance of the platform. In connection to the platform, the Arctic Centre developed an online form where the WGs can easily submit information about their current activities and projects. The information submitted through the form is sent directly to the IBS and can then be used to provide content for updates about the WG projects on the BEAC website.

Both the information platform and the online form have been operational since February 2016, however the service has not been as actively used as hoped for. Information about the platform has been distributed to the WGs, but, at the time of writing, only two WGs have used the service to report about projects. At the same time, many of the WGs ask for a common forum for sharing information within the Barents Cooperation. It is therefore recommended to further inform and encourage the WGs to use this service, with the expectation that stronger awareness of the service will increase the usage.

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