

Survey:

BEAC Working Groups

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Abstract

This report outlines the findings of an evaluative survey which has been conducted among the BEAC working groups (WGs). Seeking to shed light on how the WG members experience their participation in the WGs and to identify potential areas for improvement in order to facilitate the work of the WGs, this survey has provided the WG members with an opportunity to reflect upon and give feedback about the functionality of the WGs.

The findings show that while the majority give a positive account on their work in the WGs, there are areas with potential for improvement and development. The major challenges reported in the quantitative questions relate to the access of funding and the recruitment of new members. The qualitative responses also identify the need to improve communication, increase participation rates, facilitate cooperation among the WGs and redefine some of the WG mandates.

Introduction

The Barents cooperation has 14 Working Groups (WGs) and nine sub-groups (throughout the report they will both be referred to as “working groups” or WGs) who perform continuous transnational work on thematic issues in the Barents region. The WGs have representatives from the BEAC member states (Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia) on both regional and national level and cover a large variety of common interest areas, such as environment, culture, transport, economic cooperation, education, indigenous peoples and youth.

The WGs have a key role as expert groups in the Barents cooperation and they offer a platform for transnational communication and collaboration among the national experts of the member states and regions on thematic issues. 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 have been 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. The functionality of the WGs is therefore central to the performance of the Barents cooperation altogether.

Considering the significant political and environmental dynamics in the Barents region today, it is important that the Barents cooperation maintains an institutional flexibility to accommodate the ongoing changes. Recognising the importance of the ability to adapt to upcoming organisational needs, this survey is a part of the continuing work to evaluate the potential for improvements to the organisation.

The purpose of this survey has been to evaluate the performance of the WGs and notably how the WG members experience their involvement in the WGs. The result gives an insight into the challenges and opportunities as they are perceived by the members of the WGs and provides an important basis for considering potential reforms and initiatives to improve the effectiveness of the WGs. The feedback obtained in this survey will strengthen the ability to respond to the current organisational needs.

This report presents the survey and its outcome in four parts. The first section gives a detailed description of the methodology used to conduct the survey. It also assesses the response rate and accounts for potential limitations of the result. The subsequent section accounts for the result of the study, starting with an analysis of the quantitative responses followed by a summary of the qualitative responses. In the third section, the findings are discussed in relation to their implication for the Barents cooperation and key areas with development potential are identified. The final section concludes the study and provides recommendations for further actions to address the current challenges.

Methodology

This survey has been conducted among the members of the WGs included in the Barents cooperation during a period of six weeks. The link to the survey, which has been based on an online survey form (Google Form) that was accessible at all times during the set period, together with information about how to complete the form, was sent by email to the WG members.

The survey population amounts to 206 WG members and is based on the contact details available on the International Barents Secretariat (IBS) website. Of the 206 WG members on the email list, 39 email addresses were outdated or not functioning and, hence, did not receive the survey. A total of 70 WG members responded to the survey, giving a response rate of 42 percent. Responses were obtained from all WGs, however some WGs are overrepresented among the respondents as can be seen from Table 1 below. Some WGs are more numerous, such as the WGE, which has many subgroups, which explains their overrepresentation in the survey. The activity level in the WGs also varies and while most WGs meet at least one to two times per year, one respondent reports that the WG has not had a meeting since 2011. Considering the varying levels of involvement among the WGs, it can also be assumed that active WG members are more likely to have responded to the survey and thus the level of performance reported in the survey is probably an optimistic account of the reality.

Working Group:	Number of responses:
Barents Forest Sector Network	4
Barents HIV/AIDS Programme	1
BBAG	1
BEATA	3
BRYC	1
CYAR	1
JCRC	6
JWGC	8
JWGE	1
JWGT	3
JWGY	4
JWGER	2
JWGHS	7
RWGE	3
RWGIEC	3
RWGTL	3
WGE	16
WGEC	2
WGIP	1
TOTAL:	70

Table 1: Distribution of survey responses among the working groups.

The survey form is made up of nine quantitative and two qualitative questions and the opportunity was also given to provide other comments (see Appendix 1). The response rate, calculated as a share of the 70 responses, is close to 100 percent for all quantitative questions but lower for the qualitative questions (see Table 2).

The first question, addressing the frequency of participation in meetings, has a multiple choice format where the respondent can choose from four frequency rates. The second question asks about the respondents' perception of how well the WG functions and here the respondents are asked to indicate their experience of how the WG functions on a four-graded scale ranging from "very badly" to "very well". With exception for these first two questions, the quantitative questions are statements to which the respondent is invited to agree or disagree with on a numbered scale of four response options, ranging from "totally agree" to "totally disagree". A neutral or "I don't know" response alternative has been left out as it is assumed that the WG members have some basic knowledge about the WG to which they belong and as the main purpose of the survey is to gain an understanding of their *individual* experience of the work with the WGs.

The two qualitative questions were based on an open-ended format where the respondent can formulate their own answer rather than choosing between pre-selected alternatives. This allows for obtaining a wider range of responses and prevents simplification as the categorisation of responses only occur at the later stage of analysis. At the same time, the open-ended questions complicate the comparison of data as the answers may refer to the same thing in many different ways. Moreover, it leaves much of the responsibility for interpreting the data to the researcher, which might result in bias or misunderstanding. While these problems are relevant in the context of the study, the short and concise answers have facilitated the categorisation, but the same features also mean that there is need for further investigation in order to understand the contexts and underlying factors.

In the analysis of the responses to the qualitative questions, focus has been put on identifying common and reoccurring themes in the answers. These have been summarised and presented in table 3 and 4. Many of the respondents referred to multiple, and often interrelated, challenges and opportunities, e.g. limited participation resulting from a lack of resources, in which case the response from one individual has been counted in both categories for "lack of resources" and "limited participation". The total number of times the issues have been reported may therefore be higher than the total number of respondents.

Quantitative questions	Response rate (%)
How often do you participate in meetings with your working group?	100
How do you think your working group is functioning?	100
I am motivated to participate and contribute to the working group.	100
My other commitments limit my capacity to contribute to the working group.	98.6
The communication between the members of the working group is functioning well.	100
The leadership of the working group functions well.	97.1
The working group has sufficient resources and funds.	100
The working group has a clearly defined role in the Barents cooperation.	98.6
The appointment of new members to the working group runs smoothly.	100
Qualitative questions	Response rate (%)
What are the main problems faced by your working group?	77.1
What can be done to improve the performance of your working group?	62.9
Other comments.	24.3

Table 2: Response rate (%) per question.

Result

Quantitative questions

The first question, “how often do you participate in meetings with your working group?” (Figure 1), shows that the majority of the respondents, 58.6 percent, participate in WG meetings one to two times per year. 31.4 percent of the respondents participate in meetings more than twice a year and 10 percent of the respondents participate less often than every year. None of the respondents reply that they never participate in WG meetings.

The second question (Figure 2) asks how the participant thinks the WG is functioning. The respondents can indicate their response on a four-graded scale which ranges from “very badly” (1) to “very well” (4). The majority of the respondents report that the WGs function well, with 35.7 percent of the respondents indicated its functionality as 4, and 47.1 percent indicating it as 3 on the scale. 11.4 percent of the respondents indicate it as 2 and 5.7 percent indicate it as 1.

The third question (Figure 3) is a statement with which the respondents are asked to agree or disagree on a scale ranging from “totally disagree” (1) to “totally agree” (4). The statement is: “I am motivated to participate and contribute to the working group”. 64.3 percent indicate their answer as 4 and 28.6 percent as 3 on the scale. 5.7 percent indicate their response as 2 and 1.4 percent as 1.

In response to the fourth statement (Figure 4), “my other commitments limit my capacity to contribute to the working group”, 20.3 percent of the respondents indicate their answer as 4, 43.5 percent indicate their answer as 3, 27.5 percent indicate their response as 2 and 8.7 percent as 1.

Responding to the fifth statement (Figure 5), “the communication between the members of the working group is functioning well”, 37.1 percent of the respondents indicate their agreement as 4 on the scale, 38.6 percent rate it as 3, 18.6 percent as 2 and the remaining 5.7 percent as 1.

The following statement (Figure 6) assesses the leadership of the working group. 48.5 percent of the respondents totally agrees with the statement that “the leadership of the working group functions well” and indicate their answer as 4. 38.2 percent of the respondents indicate their answer as 3, followed by 11.8 percent marking it as 2 and the last 1.5 percent as 1.

Considering the seventh statement (Figure 7), “the working group has sufficient resources and funds”, 2.9 percent of the respondents indicate their response as 4 and in total agreement with the statement. Subsequently, 20.0 percent indicate their answer as 3, 45.7 percent as 2 and 31.4 percent as 1.

The eight statement (Figure 8) considers the role and mandate of the working group. 44.9 percent of the respondents indicate a total agreement with the statement that “the working group has a clearly defined role in the Barents cooperation”. 33.3 percent of the respondents mark their answers as 3, followed by 17.4 percent answering 2 and the final 4.3 percent respond 1.

The final quantitative question (Figure 9) assesses the statement, “the appointment of new members to the working group runs smoothly”. Here 32.9 percent of the respondents indicate their answer as 4, 34.3 percent of the respondents mark it as 3, 30.0 percent answer 2 and 2.9 percent respond 1.

Qualitative questions

The first qualitative question asks, “what are the problems faced by your working group?” and the most frequently reported problems (Table 3) are related to the lack of resources, limited participation and the lack of commitment among the WG members. The lack of resources predominantly refers to funding for implementing projects and for attending WG meetings, but some respondents also mention limited organisational resources as a problem. Several respondents refer to limited funding as an important factor for explaining the, in some cases, low participation in WG meetings. The concerns with participation rates are mainly related to limited participation by Russian WG members and the respondents welcome more Russian participants. The lack of commitment to the WGs and the Barents cooperation in general is also reported as a wide-spread problem and respondents note a shortcoming of commitment both among Russian, Swedish and Finnish regional actors.

Other challenges mentioned are problems with unclear and increasingly irrelevant mandates. Some respondents question the utility of their WG while others suggest that it would be beneficial to merge with another WG. Some respondents also testify about difficulties to implement and follow up on projects and activities initiated by the WGs. It is suggested that this problem relates to a lack of resources, lack of cooperation and in some cases political conflicts between the involved actors.

Multiple respondents also mention a lack of continuity, lack of cooperation and problematic communication. Problems related to limited continuity in the WGs are explained as a result of the rotation of members and in some cases as a consequence of the WG chairmanship terms not corresponding to BEAC chairmanship term. Several respondents call for more cooperation among the WGs in order to facilitate the implementation of larger projects, but also because they already have some overlapping activities. The causes for challenges in communication are not specified by the respondents.

Reported problems	Number of times reported
Lack of resources	26
Limited participation	16
Lack of commitment	11
Unclear mandate	8
Difficulty to implement and follow up on projects	6
Lack continuity	5
Political conflict	5
Lack cooperation with other WGs	5
Problems with communication	4
Lack administrative support	3
Lack leadership	2
Transport to and from meetings	2
Problematic decision-making	1
Visa issues	1

Table 3: Problems reported and the number of individual respondents who have reported it.

The second question (Table 4) asked “what can be done to improve the performance of your working group?” Among the responses, the call for additional resources is widely pronounced. This refers mainly to funding for projects and the operation of the WGs, but also to human- and organisational resources. More extensive cooperation is another suggestion which gains broad support. The respondents ask for more cooperation both among the different WGs and with the BRC and BEAC as well as external organisations operating in the Barents region. Respondents call for collaboration on project implementation in areas that are of interest to many WGs. There is also demand for more information about other WGs’ work and activities in order to determine the potential for the development of joint projects. Another reoccurring theme is the demand for more administrative support. The respondents mainly refer to better communication and assistance from the IBS, but some also ask for more resources in order to improve the administration within the WG.

Other proposals of actions that could improve the performance of the WGs include provision of more feedback about the WG activities and how the WGs could best benefit the Barents cooperation. Also new projects, access to training and information, a better recruitment process and enhanced participation are suggestions of improvements that would benefit the WGs according to the respondents.

Suggested actions for improved performance	Number of times reported
Additional resources	19
More cooperation	10
More administrative support	9
Clarification of mandate and purpose	6
More feedback	5
Initiate new projects	2
Training/improved access to information	2
Improved recruitment process	2
Expand participation	2
Reform the chairmanship term	1
Facilitate visa applications	1
Solve political conflict	1
Recognition of indigenous rights	1

Table 4: Suggested actions that would improve the performance of the WGs.

The last section of the survey was left for other comments and hence the variety of issues raised. Several respondents underlined the importance of the Barents cooperation and shared their views on its potential for further development. Others noted challenges faced in the Barents cooperation, such as the need for earmarked EU funds to the Barents region and that the administration of the Barents cooperation is too big. Some also indicated the need for organisational reform in the Barents cooperation in order to meet today’s needs. Two comments concerned the format of the survey where one noted that the survey form did not distinguish between WGs and sub-groups and the other underlined that asking about the ‘problems’ of the WGs risk resulting in a problem-focused bias.

Discussion

By investigating the WG members' opinions and experiences of participating in the WGs, this survey provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by the WGs and gives suggestions for how the performance of the WGs could be facilitated and improved. By assessing the motivation and the willingness to work within the WG framework as well as the functionality of this platform, the survey can also be used as a source of legitimacy for the organisational structure.

The results show that the vast majority (92.9 %) of the respondents are motivated to participate in and contribute to the WGs and the majority of the respondents participate regularly in WG meetings. (However, these participation rates are most likely an optimistic representation of the totality of the WG members, based on the assumption that the inactive WG members are less likely to have responded to the survey.) This support for the WGs and the Barents cooperation is also found among the responses in the space left for other comments, where many underlined the importance of cooperation in the Barents region. At the same time, there is a resounding call for increased participation and the varying participation rates are also illustrated in the distribution of responses to this survey (Table 1), where some WGs are clearly overrepresented.

A somewhat smaller majority (82.8 %) indicates that the WGs function well. At the same time, a significant share (17.2%) report that the WGs function badly and considering that the least active WG members have probably not participated in the survey, this result suggests that there is potential for improvement among several of the WGs.

The two major challenges, according to the quantitative survey questions, are access to resources and the recruitment of new members to the WGs. The vast majority of the respondents (77.1%) indicate that there is not sufficient access to resources for the WGs and this is also reported as the main problem in the qualitative responses. It should also be noted that many respondents link the absence of financial resources with other challenges, such as the ability to attend meetings or to implement projects.

This challenge is previously known and an in-depth investigation of the current financial mechanisms was undertaken during the Finnish BEAC chairmanship. The final report¹, which was published earlier this year, outlines the available funds and establishes that there is no need for the development of a common financial mechanism in the Barents cooperation today. Considering the novelty of the report, it is not expected to have had effect on the WGs yet, which explains the resounding call for more resources. It is also unknown to what extent the new report will improve the access to funding for the WGs and it is therefore advisable to revisit and evaluate this question once more in the coming years.

Concerning the recruitment process, the majority of the respondents agree that the recruitment of new members functions well, but the minority who suggests the opposite represent 32.9 percent of the respondents, which must be considered a rather significant proportion. In the qualitative section, the comments related to recruitment mostly refer to low participation rates, call for better communication and welcome improvements to the recruitment processes. Based on this survey, it is not possible to

¹Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland (2015). *Financing of Barents Cooperation*. [online] Available at: http://live.grano.fi/ejulkaisu/Ulkoministerio/UM_Barents_ejulkaisu/index.html [Accessed 13/11/15]

draw any conclusions on what the specific challenges in recruitment are and it would therefore be useful to investigate this issue further.

Communication is one of the other factors assessed and the majority of the respondents say that the communication functions well, but there is still a significant minority (24.3%) who indicate the opposite. The need for better communication gains support in the qualitative responses, where several respondents report low participation rates and problems with communication. Several factors related to communication are mentioned among the suggestions of reforms that could lead to improved performance of the WG, such as more cooperation, more administrative support (including better communication with the IBS) and more feedback. None of the respondents name specific causes for the communication problems and this is therefore an issue that would benefit from further investigation in order for it to be properly addressed.

When it comes to leadership in the WGs, the large majority (87%) of the respondents agree that it functions well. In certain cases, where the working group has been without chair for longer periods, this has been reported as a major concern. However, this is more likely to be a question of problematic recruitment, as was discussed earlier, rather than problems with leadership itself. Some respondents have also asked for the chairmanship of the WGs to rotate on the same basis as the BEAC chairmanship. Apart from this, problems with leadership are not widely expressed.

An issue that has gained more attention is the mandate of the WGs. According to the survey, 21.1 percent of the respondents report that the role of the WG is not sufficiently defined and this is an issue which is repeatedly mentioned also in the qualitative questions. Several respondents mention unclear WG mandates as a problem and some also welcome a redefinition of the current mandate or alternatively that the group merges with other WGs. The result suggests that it would be useful to evaluate the current mandates of the WGs and consider whether or not it is necessary to redefine some of them.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, this study gives valuable insights into the experience of WG members and provides a foundation upon which further studies and evaluations can be built. The result shows that the majority of the WG members have a positive experience working with the WGs and are pleased with the way they function today. However, the study also indicates that that significant minorities within the WGs experience challenges in their work with the WGs and there are also many suggestions for how the performance of the WGs could be facilitated. Key areas for improvement include the access to resources, the recruitment process of new WG members, communication and participation, cooperation among the WGs and redefining the mandates of the WGs. On the whole, the study indicates that there is a development potential among the WGs and addressing these issues would strengthen the WGs and the Barents cooperation in the long run.

Based on this conclusion, it is recommended to evaluate the above noted challenges and opportunities in further detail in order to establish how to best address these in the coming years. It has been established that there is no need for reassessing the funding opportunities today, as a similar investigation was recently presented in a report by the Finnish BEAC chairmanship. It is still too early to determine what impact the report will have on the WGs' ability to access funding and it is therefore recommended to evaluate the impact of the report in the years to come.

For the remaining challenges and opportunities, the prospects for improvements should be discussed in more detail with the WGs as well as the causes for problems need to be further investigated. This could be done through an in-depth study, conducted in dialogue with the concerned WGs. In order to address issues related to communication and lack of cooperation, a platform for disseminating information about the WGs' work and activities would be useful. This type of platform could most naturally be initiated and maintained by the IBS as part of the coordination and administration of the Barents cooperation.

Although this survey provides no in-depth knowledge about the WGs, the findings provide a valuable status update from the WGs and should be taken into account in future reforms and decisions in the Barents cooperation.

Appendix 1: Survey form

11/6/2015

Survey: BEAC Working Groups

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The International Barents Secretariat is mapping the performance and the potential for improvement in the facilitation of the BEAC working groups. We would appreciate if you could fill in the following form to give us a better idea of the current situation and how we can work to improve the working groups.

By participating in the survey you have the chance to win a ticket to the Kirkenes Conference in February 2016, one of the year's biggest events which coincides with the Barents Spektakel Festival. Please include your name and email address if you wish to participate in the lottery.

Thanks!

1. Name of working group:

.....

2. Your name:

Fill in this information to participate in the lottery.

.....

3. Your email:

Fill in this information to participate in the lottery.

.....

4. How often do you participate in meetings with your working group?

Please choose your answer from the alternatives below.
Mark only one oval.

- ☐ More than 2 times per year.
- ☐ 1-2 times per year.
- ☐ Less often than every year.
- ☐ Never

5. How do you think your working group is functioning?

Please mark your answer on the scale below.
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Very badly	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very well

6. I am motivated to participate and contribute to the working group.

Please mark your answer on the scale below.
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Totally disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Totally agree

7. My other commitments limit my capacity to contribute to the working group.

Please mark your answer on the scale below.
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Totally disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Totally agree

8. The communication between the members of the working group is functioning well.

Please mark your answer on the scale below.
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Totally disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Totally agree

9. The leadership of the working group functions well.

Please mark your answer on the scale below.
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Totally disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Totally agree

10. The working group has sufficient resources and funds.

Please mark your answer on the scale below.
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Totally disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Totally agree

11. The working group has a clearly defined role in the Barents cooperation.

Please mark your answer on the scale below.
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Totally disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Totally agree

12. The appointment of new members to the working group runs smoothly.

Please mark your answer on the scale below.
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Totally disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Totally agree

13. What are the main problems faced by your working group?

14. What can be done to improve the performance of your working group?

15. Other comments

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Appendix 2: Charts

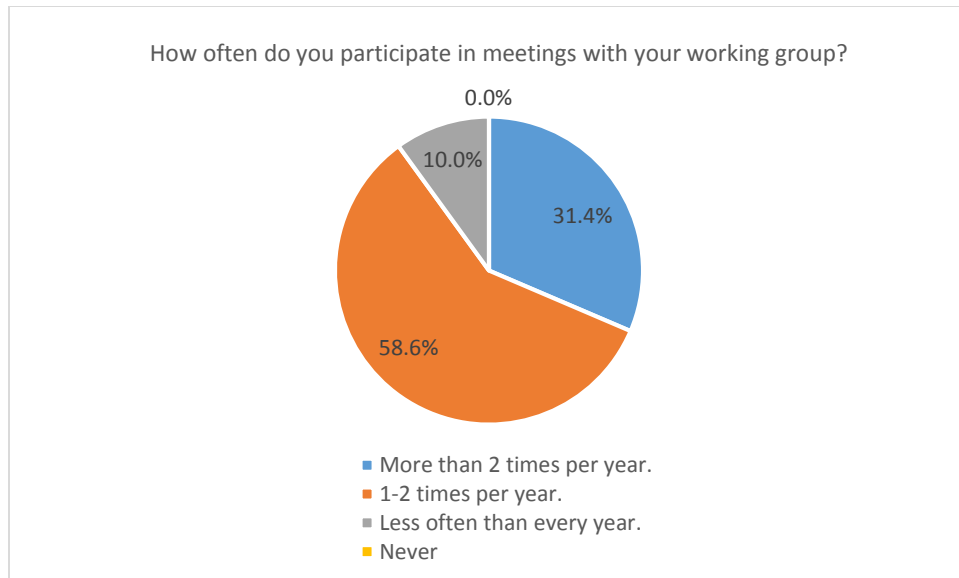


Figure 1

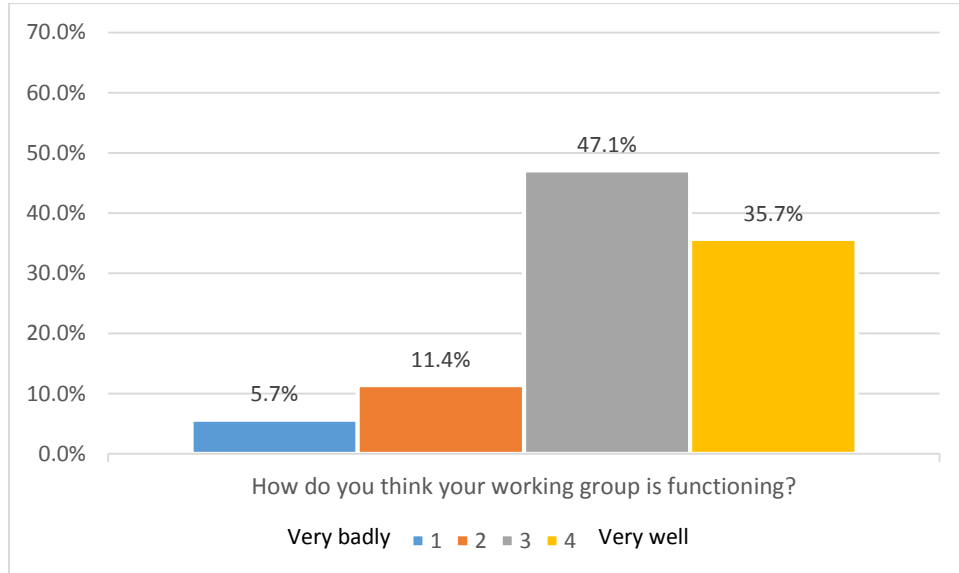


Figure 2

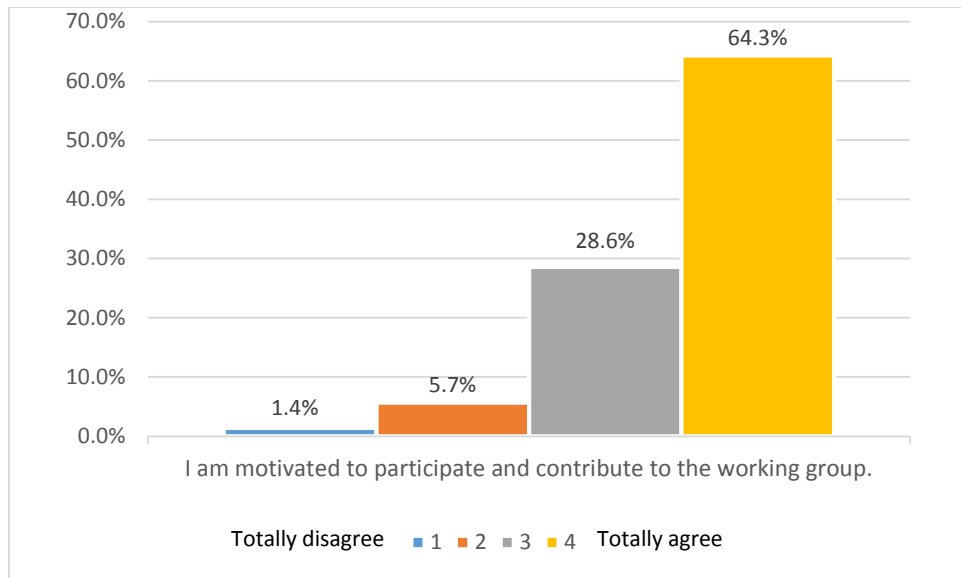


Figure 3

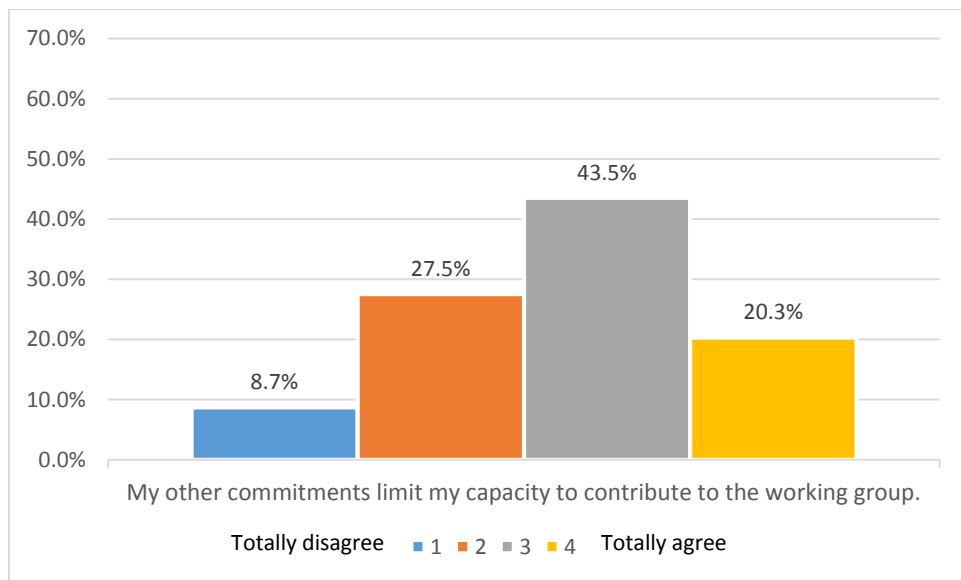


Figure 4

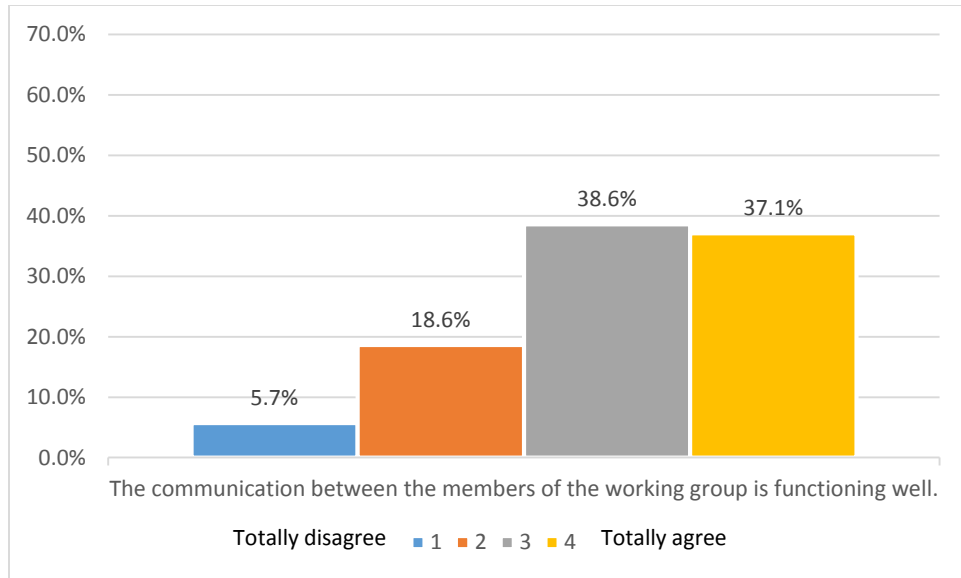


Figure 5

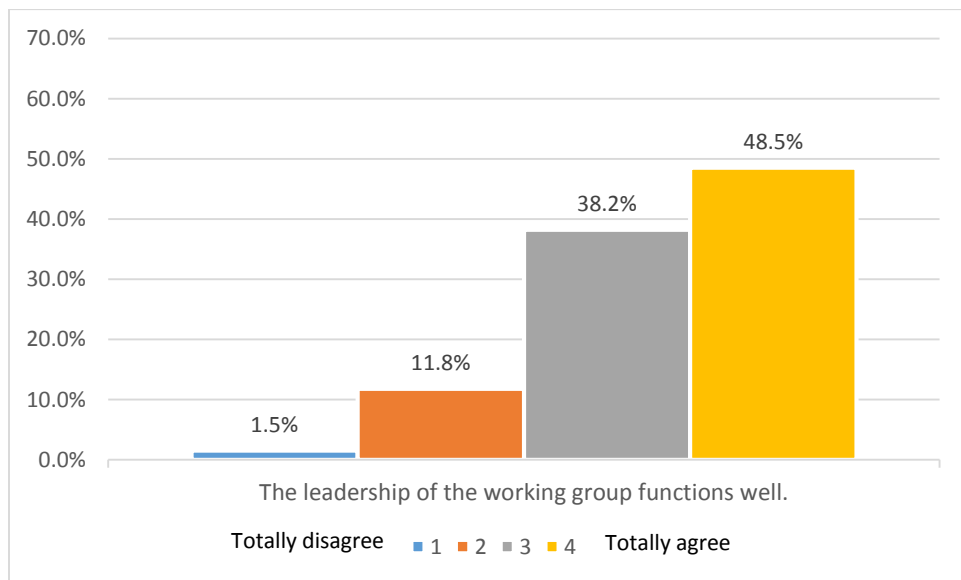


Figure 6

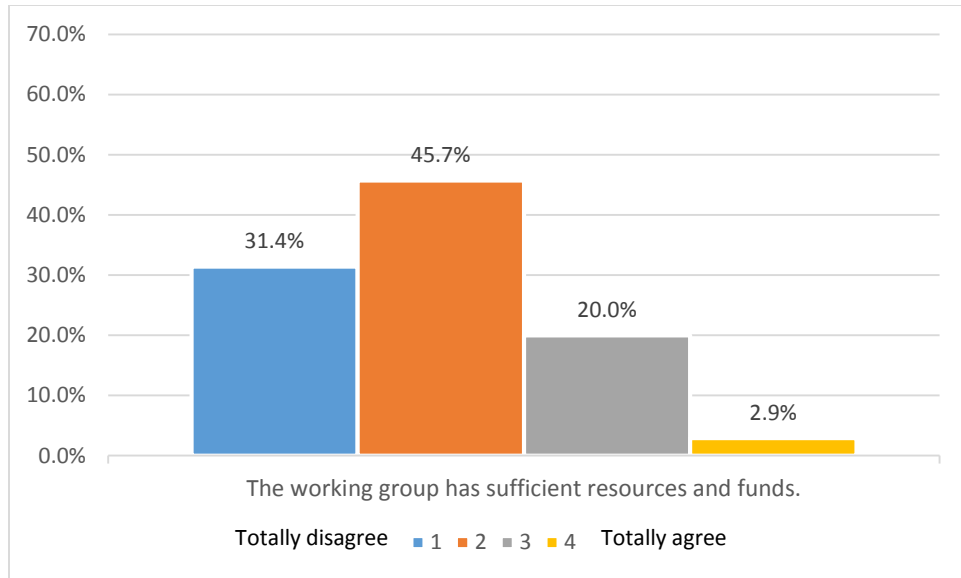


Figure 7

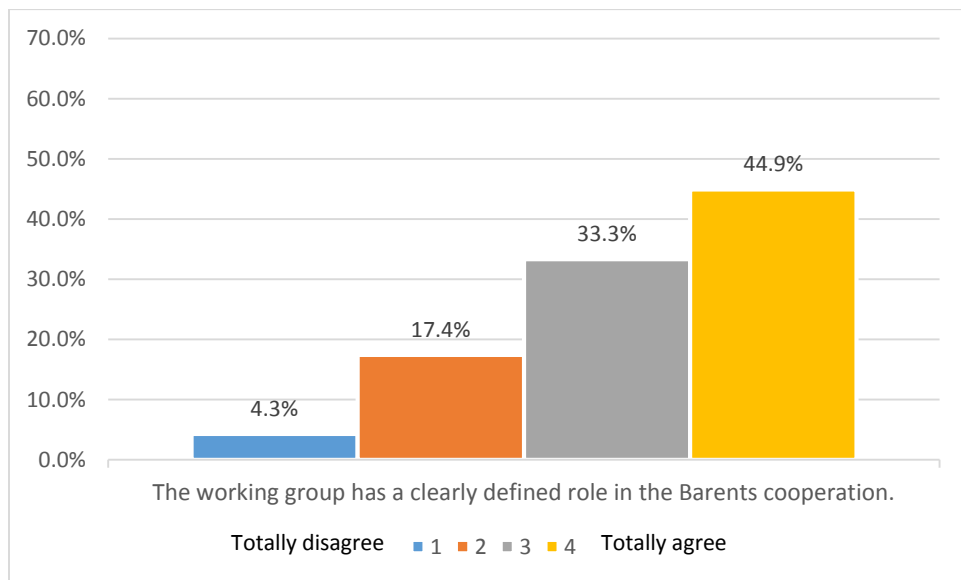


Figure 8

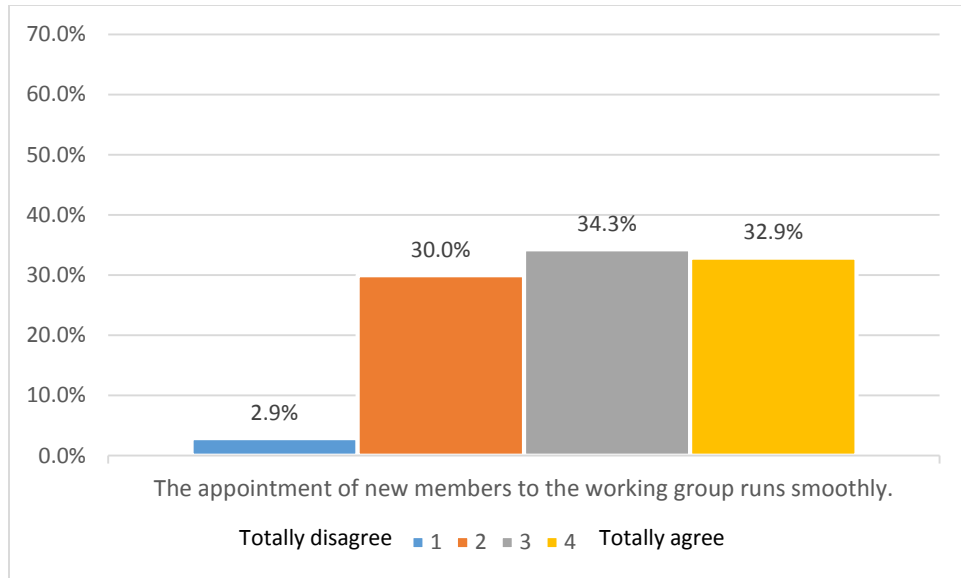


Figure 9