

Arctic Social Indicators (ASI): A Follow-up to the Arctic Human Development Report

By Joan Nymand Larsen

The Arctic Social Indicators (ASI) project is a follow-up to the Arctic Human Development Report (AHDR) and was launched in January 2006. The ASI project seeks to devise indicators to facilitate the tracking and monitoring of human development in the Arctic, and is being developed under the auspices of the Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG) of the Arctic Council. The project period is 2006-2008, with a final report being planned for late summer of 2008, and a presentation of results at the Sixth International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences (ICASS IV) in Nuuk, Greenland, in the summer of 2008.

The project's main objective is to devise a limited set of indicators that reflect key aspects of human development in the Arctic, that are tractable in terms of measurement, and that can be monitored over time at a reasonable cost in terms of labour and material resources. The goal is to weigh the relative merits of a range of proposed indicators of human development in the Arctic, to select a number of indicators that seem most likely to prove successful in this context and to test indicators with existing data and in discussions with representatives from various Arctic communities. The project, which covers the developmental stage in a long-term effort to measure and monitor human development on an integrated basis in the circumpolar Arctic can benefit a wide range of stakeholders, including those involved in Arctic policy making processes, residents of the North, as well as those engaged in the Arctic social sciences.

The scope and significance of the AHDR report has been recognized and widely praised both among those concerned with Arctic affairs and among those who deal with human development in the world at large. It presents a broad overview of the state of human development or social well-being in the circumpolar Arctic as of the early years of the 21st century, and as such, provides a baseline or a starting point from which to measure changes over time in the state of human development. While the AHDR constitutes a unique resource making it possible to compare and contrast the Arctic and other regions with regards to a host of factors, it does not, however, except in a few instances, provide a longitudinal perspective on human development in the Arctic.

This is where the ASI follow-up project will seek to fill a critical gap. The development of a suite of indicators was a part of the original vision of those who articulated the rationale for the development of the AHDR, but it became clear early on that there would be neither the time nor the material resources needed to produce a high quality product of this type. Therefore, the AHDR does not present quantifiable indicators suitable for monitoring or tracking changes in human development in the Arctic. There remains, however, an obvious need for indicators of this sort.

We can look briefly at the basic question of what an indicator is, and how one can select the most suitable ones. An indicator can be defined as a measure used as a gauge of the state of some factor of interest to policymakers and analysts; it is not an operationalization of the factor itself. When determining the usefulness of an indicator and deciding among a group of possible indicators one can look at whether the chosen indicators are generalizable and stable, easy to measure in a broadly accepted manner, and suitable for use in longitudinal analyses. It is clear, that in settings where members of the relevant communities differ in their underlying views regarding the nature of human development or change their perspectives on social welfare over time, it is difficult to devise useful indicators, given the range of communities and the diversity within communities themselves. Thus, the exercise of devising useful indicators is indeed a challenge. From this perspective, then, it is desirable to develop a small suite of indicators that capture the essential features of the phenomenon in question and can be measured empirically in a simple and intuitively appealing manner.

The UN Human Development Index (HDI) is without doubt, the most influential method currently in use in terms of measuring human development. The HDI is a composite of three components: GDP per capita, longevity, and a measure of literacy/education. While the HDI constituted an important point of

departure in the work on the AHDR, lengthy discussions led eventually to the conclusion that the HDI is not a good indicator of human development in the Arctic and for several reasons. For example, as described in the AHDR (2004), GDP per capita typically fails to take into account many goods and services enjoyed by those who participate in subsistence economies or even the mixed economies that are widespread in the Arctic today, and conventional measures of literacy/education omit the production and transfer of knowledge and skills that constitute important features of traditional cultures and societies.

Based on the limitations of the HDI as applied to the Arctic context, members of the AHDR team proposed three elements of human development that seem particularly prominent in the Arctic: fate control or the ability to guide one's own destiny; cultural integrity or belonging to a viable local culture; and contact with nature or interacting closely with the natural world. Indicators, however, were not developed from these three domains. ASI, in following up on the AHDR, has adopted these three elements as important domains for the construction of indicators.

On September 15-17, the first workshop of the Arctic Social Indicators (ASI) project was held in Akureyri, Iceland, hosted by the Stefansson Arctic Institute. About 25 working group members met for two and a half days to begin the work on the construction of social indicators in the Arctic. The main task was, first, to discuss the broad categories which ought to be covered by indicators, and then to discuss and select potential indicators within each of the chosen domains. This was followed by a mock testing exercise of preliminary indicators with anecdotal evidence to help identify a preliminary set of indicators. The group also discussed the steps needed for a proper test of the selected indicators. The working group arrived at six domains for the construction of social indicators, and team leaders were chosen for each of these domains. The first three domains were selected based on what had been proposed in the AHDR as important elements of human development in the Arctic, namely: (1) Fate control and or the ability to guide one's own destiny; (2) Cultural integrity or belonging to a viable local culture; and (3) Contact with nature or interacting closely with the natural world. Three additional domains were identified – namely, the domains used by the UNDP in constructing the Human Development Index: (4) Education; (5) Demography/Health; and (6) Material Well-being. The work on the construction of indicators for these six domains is now underway. A second ASI workshop will take place in late spring of 2007.

Clearly, assessment is a critical component of a project of this kind. There will be a number of components to the project's assessment strategy: it will include a consultation process, which will commence in 2007 and consist of the testing of indicators using existing data and discussions with representatives from various Arctic communities. Community and indigenous feedback will be a critical part of the evaluation process, as the working group will invite feedback from members of the Sustainable Development Working Group and Permanent Participants of the Arctic Council. Traditional peer-review will occur after the consultation process. The project is aiming for a rather large and diverse audience, including the science community, inhabitants of the Arctic, educational institutions and students enrolled in Northern universities and colleges, policymakers at all levels, and the Arctic Council and its Sustainable Development Working Group. It is expected that the ASI report will have a similar audience as the AHDR.

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