



Human Rights and the Arctic

On 29th of September a group of researchers, activists and interested audience gathered to the House of Estates in Helsinki, Finland. Their agenda was to discuss and hear from the specialists about human rights and the Arctic. At first these two topics sound like a surprising combination. How do they link to one another? And does it really matter what the science community thinks of the issues, if we can't convince the politicians to act on the research results?

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“It’s going to be an innovative and thought provoking day”, opened **Jukka Kekkonen** in his welcoming speech. A professor of Helsinki University saw a lot of possibilities in the symposium. “Even though at first human rights and the Arctic may sound like separate issues, they are not. This symposium connects scientists and academics from different fields: it combines the discussions within both the natural sciences and humanistic sciences.” Kekkonen admitted that the subject is difficult and versatile. “Luckily in hard issues we tend to lean more and more on scientific research. As scientists we want to help politicians by giving them information based on scientific research and hope they will make informed decisions. Research is never neutral, there are always interpretations involved, but we need to make science community’s voice heard in political decisionmaking.”

Professor **Hans-Peter Zenner** also brought his welcoming words to the symposium. Zenner opened discussion on human rights of indigenous people living in the Arctic. “There are always ethical questions related to research”, Zenner reminded the audience. “As scientists we have the responsibility to get to the bottom of possible human rights violations on the Arctic and think how to improve rights of indigenous people on the issue.”

Aleksi Härkönen, Finland’s ambassador for Arctic affairs, spoke about the priorities of the Arctic Council and questions that lead to creation of the symposium. “The symposium originated a year ago. We became aware, that human right are not a part of Arctic Council’s programme, even though human rights are strongly related to the core issues of the Council.” According to Härkönen it is vital to secure the livelihood of the Arctic area. “There is a number of different issues we have to take into account while discussing

about the area. Sustainable development of the Arctic, indigenous people's right to the livelihood of the area and their social need are easily neglected. Out of the six main points of the Arctic Council, four deal with environment and only one with people." Härkönen says climate change affects everything in the Arctic cooperation. Even though environment is the main focus while discussing about climate change, it affects the people living in the Arctic and indirectly all other people as well. "We might see globally important passageways generated in the Arctic. All the new activity in the area must be planned in a way that secures rights of the people already living in the area, that's sustainable and rationally designed."

The right to safe environment is a human rights issue

Keynote speaker of the symposium was doctor **Erkki Tuomioja**. Long-term politician who has worked as the minister of foreign affairs emphasized the importance of human rights discussion. "On any discussion on the Arctic we have three approaches: economy, human rights and environment. These shouldn't be separated into different categories, as if they were not linked to one another", Tuomioja reminded. "Climate change can have catastrophic effects on the Arctic region. We have already seen how dramatic changes climate change has caused. In the United States the administration of **Donald Trump** denies climate change. This makes it very hard to stop the global warming to two degrees Celsius." Tuomioja saw as a huge problem that most people don't accept the urgency of the matter. "Global warming is melting the polar ice, which in turn accelerates release of methane in to atmosphere, which again accelerates global warming. This is a vicious cycle." According to Tuomioja new possibilities in the Arctic also create new threats. The gas and oil reserves in the area will be highly sought after and pursuit in securing them might lead to conflicts.

Tuomioja also emphasised on taking greater responsibility on our actions in the area and the importance of making sustainable decisions. "It takes decades for the natural environments to recover from destruction. Climate change caused by humans is by far the biggest threat ever to encounter the Arctic. How can we think of exploiting natural resources, if we want to protect the Arctic? There's an easy solution: We have to target the money from Arctic drilling to development of sustainable energy sources and regulate the mining industry. Vulnerability of the Arctic environment and the indigenous people's rights have to be taken into account in all decision making." Tuomioja says he has spoken in purpose about the climate for so long, even though the symposium focuses on human rights. "Environment and human rights are closely related to each other. Toxic waste, destruction of nature, animal deaths: all these are directly linked to health and well-being of the people in the area. New diseases and extreme conditions are also a new threat. The right to safe environment is a human rights issue. When we think of new development- and business-ideas on the region, we must take human rights into account." Tuomioja also demanded involving the people of the Arctic regions into the decision making on the region's issues. "At the best the indigenous people across the world have suffered from neglect, at the the worst from exploitation. Human rights are universal and belong to everybody. In Finland this issue is linked to the Sámi people. Sámi people's rights and the past abuse have finally been brought into discussion. The rights of Sámi people must be secured better in our legislation."

Tuomioja thought symposium's agenda was very important. "Still I trust more on the science community's ability to discuss about these issues than I trust the ability of the politicians to use this information", Tuomioja however concluded.

The morning's commentary and discussion were curated by research professor **Timo Koivurova** from University of Lapland. "Quite a few people think there aren't many people living in the Arctic area, they think mainly animals live there. This of course is not true: up to 4,5 million people live on the area, depending on the way we count them. When discussing about the human right and the Arctic most people think we only speak of indigenous people. Actually up to 90% of the people living in the area are not indigenous."

During the discussion audience asked questions particularly about the operations of Arctic Council and the Council's relation to climate change. Tuomioja insured that the Council doesn't have any difficulty admitting and handling the problem. "But it is another question how do we act on our knowledge. Fortum is investing 8 million euros to Swedish company that focuses on coal: is this a good development concerning climate change?" It was also discussed who should regulate the mining of Arctic regions and how to direct resources into developing sustainable energy solutions.

The Arctic area is in extremely high danger

Both professor **Atte Korhola** from University of Helsinki and professor **Antje Boetius** from University of Bremen spoke of climate change's effects on the Arctic environment and its effects on livelihood of the region. As the effects of global warming in the Arctic region professors listed temperature rise much larger than global average, decrease in Arctic sea ice coverage, rise of the sea level and biodiversity loss. "Early warning signals have been seen previously before great environmental catastrophes. Environments' resilience decreases before the system collapses", Korhola said. "There are signs that the Arctic region is in extremely high danger at the moment, there are issues where resilience has decreased significantly. The signs look threatening, but we would need long term data and observation in order to understand what is happening and how we could prepare for the consequences. The problem on the other hand is that we don't have the time to collect data, we should act quickly to fix the situation."

Boetius has seen the change in the area with her own eyes. In 1993 and 2012 Boetius went to research the Arctic on location and told she could see the decrease of ice coverage. "In 1993 climate change wasn't perceived as such a great danger. We have now collected and compared satellite pictures from time period of 20 years. Different models and scientists are unanimous about the fact, that ice coverage's situation in the Arctic is alarming." Boetius saw climate change as a great danger to livelihood of Arctic region. "When we speak about the livelihood, we have to take multiple issues into account. Environment and nature are one big issue. Due to climate change we have the possibility for the livelihood of the area collapsing and thus the human rights to become threatened."

Timo Koivurova concluded the discussion by speaking about the rights of future generations. Koivurova saw precisely securing the livelihood of the Arctic regions as a key human rights issue to indigenous people. "In 2005 inuits launched a human rights petition against the United States. It was stated in the petition that USA is violating inuits' human rights and right to live with greenhouse gas emissions. Their culture is dying and they are vanishing as a nation."

To the questions on whether we should focus on political projects or research Koivurova said we'll need all of it. "Unfortunately politicians haven't got the time to familiarize themselves with our research. We're happy to show our results, but there is a great deal of scepticism on whether politicians have the time to even process the information that is being brought to them. Taking scientific research into account would be essential in political decision making."

Indigenous people and ethical research

The last part of the symposium dealt with research amongst indigenous people and possible ethical problems related to it. Doctor **Anu Lounela** from University of Helsinki reminded of anthropological discussion and the laws about human rights of indigenous people. Lounela stressed we have to remember to take into account local laws and communities own customs besides national laws. **Marjo Lindroth** from University of Lapland also reminded that unfortunately colonialism is not a thing of the past. "We see colonialism as something that happened 50 years ago. It still affects us though, we haven't been able to set ourselves free from colonialism." Lindroth stressed how important it is to include indigenous people in a research about them. Doctor **Nuccio Mazzullo** spoke about same issue and asked some difficult questions:

“Have we got the right to research Arctic regions? Are we contributing to a greater good, why should we have the right to study the subject? Research should empower minorities and make decision making in the area democratic. Are we doing research only for us, the researchers?”

Professor **Gail Fondahl** continued with similar hard questions. Fondahl agreed that research on indigenous people should be participatory, but asked if participating in the research endangers indigenous people if they actively co-operate with researchers who are not indigenous. “Indigenous people should have the possibility to decline the research or even *veto* the publication of the results”, Fondahl suggested. Fondahl encouraged universities and other science institutions to ask hard questions from themselves: “How does my research affect my colleagues and my research subjects? Do I have the freedom to express myself? Do I have the obligation to do so? When it is unethical to practice self-censorship? When it is unethical not to do it?”

On the subject of Finland’s only indigenous people, the Sámi people, the symposium had two speakers: **Ari Laakso** from University of Lapland and **Tiina Sanila-Aikio**, president of the Finnish Sámi Parliament. Laakso spoke of the difficulty in defining who are indigenous people based on his own experiences, Sanila-Aikio addressed the status of Sámi people in Finland. Laakso was worried about assimilation of indigenous people into other cultures. “Young people’s connection to nature is getting weaker all the time”, Laakso said on the issue on Sámi youth. Sanila-Aikio said that the development of the Arctic is not only a positive issue. “For example building railways across six Sámi reindeer areas in Finnish Lapland is a threat.” Sanila-Aikio was also worried about Sámi language and culture vanishing. “Only 24% of the Sámi speak Sámi language as their first language. The future of Sámi people doesn’t look very bright.”

Adjunct professor **Reetta Toivanen** from University of Helsinki stressed the importance of Arctic research. “The research of Arctic areas tells us about so many subjects: the people, the nature, the economy. We don’t often take into account the research, but rely on the companies or different states’ reports. In these reports people are often not mentioned or if they are, they’re seen either as a part of the nature or as obstacles to development. There is a huge contradiction to a humanist world view. In Carta Marina-maps drawn in 1539 we see the Arctic region full of life. In maps nowadays one can mainly see minerals in the Arctic, in the old maps we see churches, places of business, life. The Arctic is full of life, we shouldn’t forget that.”

Jukka Kekkonen ended the symposium. “The amazing Arctic area and its inhabitants are threatened by climate change. Our mission should be to protect them.” When speaking of restraining the effects of climate change and the rights of indigenous people one stumbles into hard questions. Sometimes protecting the nature and the human rights are in contradiction. “The question is about what do we prioritize, and there are no easy answers to that.”