



THE BARENTS WORKING GROUPS ANNUAL REPORT

Name of the Working Group: Working Group on Youth, WGY
The current Chair and the Chairmanship period: Norway 2019-2021

1. Priorities of the Chairmanship

The **Finnish Presidency** will focus on the areas of sustainable development and healthy environment, people-to-people contacts with an emphasis on young people and transport and good connections. For the Finnish Presidency, the European values, including young people's access to rights, equal opportunities, promoting respect to diversity and mutual understanding, are an important cornerstone for developing youth policies and youth work in the Barents region. The Presidency priorities include young people's meaningful participation in decision-making in all matters affecting their lives, youth sector capacity-building, mental health, and digitalisation. All these areas contribute to the social inclusion of young people.

The Norwegian Chairmanship of the Barents Euro Arctic Council 2019-2021 has had the following key priorities: health, people-to-people contact and knowledge. The overall priorities of Norway's Chairmanship have been reflected in the running of JWGY. The Norwegian and Västerbotten chairmanship has, in cooperation with the group, worked to operationalize and implement the youth recommendations from the preceding Swedish Chairmanship, i.e. ensuring that youth issues are a natural part of all aspects of the Barents cooperation and to formalize the role of the BRYC.

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

JWGY has met twice in 2021; on the 25th of March and the 28th of October. Both were held digitally due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and both were productive meetings.

The theme of the Barents youth conference was discussed in the working group in March. Suggestions ranged from climate change and employment prospects for youth in the Barents region, to sports and health. The meeting in October was held to mark the transition from the Norwegian-Västerbotten chair period, to the Finnish-Nenets Autonomous Okrug chair period of 2021-2023. The participants spoke of their plans going forward, the BEAC Ministerial meeting and Barents Youth Summit, and upcoming events relevant to the working group.

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

The Barents youth conference on Physical and mental health among youth in the Barents region was organized online on 1 September 2021 together with the Barents Euro-Arctic Council Chair Norway and the Barents Regional Council Chair Västerbotten. Participants agreed that the pandemic has had many effects on physical and mental health among youth in the Barents region. There is a need for dialogue between different stakeholders in mental health issues. Speakers spoke about young Sámi

identity and mental health, inter partner violence among Swedish youth, the impact of the pandemic on youth in Arkhangelsk, youth work and mental health, and physical literacy.

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

In addition to the Barents Youth Conference, many several processes about youth policy in the Barents region have reached important milestones. First, the Barents Financial mechanism was approved by the Ministerial meeting on October 26th. The objective of the mechanism is to enable funding of projects in the Barents region. The mechanism shall contribute to developing the Barents region as a unique Arctic region based on sustainability and people-to-people contacts. This can lead to projects that benefit youth being funded.

Furthermore, the International Barents Secretariat (IBS) has increased their staff with two advisors who work with youth. The IBS is an important part of the Barents cooperation, and the additions will contribute to strengthening youth in the cooperation and in the Barents region.

Lastly, the Barents Regional Council approved the Barents Youth Program for 2021-2024. The Program is a concrete follow up to the Youth Recommendations welcomed at the Barents Euro Arctic Council meeting in 2019. The program aims to highlight the quality of life in the High North. An active Youth Policy in the Barents Region is required to secure a sustainable population in the region, and the Program lays the foundation for a strong and lasting youth cooperation in all areas of the Barents cooperation.

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

Keeping youth issues high on the agenda and ensuring that youth issues become a natural part of all aspects of the Barents cooperation have been goals of the working group. To that end, the role of the Barents Regional Youth Council (BRYC) has been formalized within the cooperation, and the IBS expanded with two youth advisors. All working groups are encouraged to report on their youth-related activities in their annual reports, and to invite BRYC representatives to their meetings.

JWGY have continued to have representatives from BRYC present at meetings. BRYC members were present at all meetings in the working group. The Barents Youth Summit was held after the Ministerial meeting on October 26th, lifting youth issues to the ministerial level directly.

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

Due to the covid-19 pandemic, the working group has had relatively little activity. While the group functions well, there is room for more concrete policy discussions about how the cooperation can keep improving its initiatives and structures for youth and youth participation. We hope to speed up the work again when the covid-19 situation is more under control.