



Joint contribution of the Secretariats of COMECE and Justice & Peace Europe to the public consultation on the **future EU Arctic policy**

Let us listen to the cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth

1. Assessment of the 2016 EU Joint Communication on the Arctic: are its three priorities still relevant? Which new priorities should be added?

Climate change & safeguarding the environment, sustainable development and international cooperation - these three priorities of the 2016 EU Joint Communication on the EU Policy for the Arctic¹ **remain valid, but** they need to be **updated, complemented and better integrated**.

Overall, the Arctic region should be a **priority for the European Union**. It is home to **over four million people**, including **over 40 different indigenous ethnic groups** and **half a million EU citizens**, with **three** of the Arctic countries being **EU Member States** (Denmark, Finland and Sweden). Although being increasingly recognised as **central to human and planetary survival**, the Arctic region is becoming a **focal point of economic and geopolitical competition**. Climate change, along with the **rapid Arctic warming** and **ice melting at an unprecedented rate**, have opened the region to business, and this has accelerated geopolitical change, leading to a **multiplication of actors and interests** in the region. The EU has a **natural role and a responsibility** to ensure a **sustainable and peaceful Arctic** that puts its **people** in the focus.

The signing and the ratification of the “*International Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean*”² can be regarded as **one of EU’s major achievements** regarding the Arctic in recent years. It is expected to enter into force later this year and the EU should **actively promote its ratification** by the remaining two signatories.

On the other hand, more should be done in the future Arctic policy framework to **strengthen the coherence and the inter-connections** between the pillars of the EU’s strategy. In this regard, the EU should **mainstream** its Arctic objectives into all areas of EU action – from human rights, social, environmental to transport and energy, agriculture, fisheries, investment, as well as research and innovation policies.

Moreover, the **human dimension** should have a stronger articulation in the future policy framework. In the light of the thawing permafrost and its implications related to the release of dissolved organic carbon and other biological and chemical contaminants into drinking water supplies, **health and safety of local communities** and **migrant workers** present in the region should be better prioritised in the new strategy, along with strengthening the

¹ https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/arctic_region/docs/160427_joint-communication-an-integrated-european-union-policy-for-the-arctic_en.pdf.

² <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/38356/st10788-en18.pdf>.

protection and promotion of human rights, including land, social, cultural, religious and linguistic rights of indigenous communities. In view of the necessary adaptations induced by climate change and its ramifications, **fostering of resilience of local communities** should be high among the future priorities as well.

It would also be important to incorporate into the future policy framework a **binding** mechanism for **corporate social responsibility**, ensuring that companies performing economic activities in the Arctic region fully comply with internationally recognised **human rights, social and environmental standards** throughout the entire supply chain, and that **victims** of serious corporate abuses have **fair access to an effective remedy**.

All in all, the updated and revised EU Arctic policy should be **knowledge-based** and built on a **genuine understanding of the region** by **effectively involving all regional and local stakeholders**, including indigenous communities, in its shaping as well as its consequent implementation.

2. What can be done at EU level and in cooperation with other actors to reduce the environmental impact of being a major consumer of Arctic resources?

The Arctic is **disproportionately affected** by climate change due to its greater sensitivity to global temperature changes, causing sea ice and snow in the region to melt at an **unprecedented rate**. In turn, **thawing permafrost** has the potential to **release billions of metric tonnes of carbon dioxide**, which again fuels global warming. This is having grave repercussions on Arctic **populations, biodiversity, and ecosystems**, but also on the world as a whole, leading to **more frequent extreme weather events globally** – droughts, rainstorms and floods.

This **vicious circle** is further aggravated by the fact that **human activity** in the region **intensifies**, driven by the new opportunities of a **more accessible Arctic**, since as the Arctic sea ice melts, its vast **natural and mineral resources** become more available. This also leads to an **intensification of maritime traffic**, including heavy ships and tankers. Besides releasing carbon dioxide and black soot, and contributing to **plastic pollution**, this also bears an **increased risk of fuel spills in Arctic waters**.

While **Antarctic waters are protected by stringent regulations**, including a ban on heavy-grade oil adopted in 2011, the **rules for sailing the Arctic are far looser**. In this respect, the EU should **support the efforts** of the *International Maritime Organisation (IMO)* towards an **effective full ban on both the use and carriage of heavy fuel oil in vessels navigating the Arctic seas by 2024**. Moreover, in order to **ensure protection of Arctic waters** until 2024 and to compensate for potential loopholes in the future IMO regulation, the **EU should adopt rules for vessels calling at EU ports** subsequent to, or prior to, journeys through Arctic waters, with a view to **prohibiting the use and carriage of heavy fuel oil**.

In addition, the EU should also support IMO's efforts for **reducing the impact of black carbon emissions** from international vessels in the Arctic and ensure that **shipping** in the region be **safe and sustainable**, promoting an **effective conservation of Arctic biodiversity** in line with

the provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity³ by creating a network of marine protected areas and marine reserves in the Arctic.

The EU should also promote **raising public awareness** about pertinent concerns over the challenges in the Arctic region, underlining the **responsibility of each citizen** and encouraging **sustainable consumption practices**. As networks of faith, trust and hope, **Churches, religious communities and faith-based organisations** have the potential to offer a contribution as **drivers and multipliers** of the necessary transformations and support sensitizing efforts, both at the **level of advocacy** as well as at the **community level**.

3. How could the EU Arctic policy contribute to addressing more effectively the balance between the need for preservation and precaution and the sustainable use and development of the economic potential across the Arctic regions?

In his encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*⁴, Pope Francis develops the concept of “**integral ecology**” by underlining that “*everything is inter-connected*”. In this regard, he particularly highlights the **link between the safeguarding of Creation and the building of a truly just and equitable social and economic order**.

In the light of the wealth of natural resources present in the Arctic region and along with their increasing accessibility, the **potential for worrying predatory practices** also grows, taking control of and benefitting from the Arctic regions’ natural wealth, while **not empowering local populations**. Such exploitative tendencies may not only **exclude local communities from a fair share in the profit**, but also lead to grave **human rights violations** and cause irreparable **environmental damage**.

In order to prevent European business companies from becoming accomplices or remaining indifferent to such corporate abuses by their subcontractors, it would be important that the EU adopt **binding due diligence rules for business** operating in the Arctic region to ensure compliance of their actions with internationally recognised **human rights, social and environmental standards** throughout the entire supply chain, and to provide **victims** of serious corporate abuses with **fair access to an effective remedy**.

Moreover, in view of the reserves of oil and attempts by some countries to undertake drilling activities in the Arctic region, the EU should promote **strict precautionary regulatory standards** and **impact assessments** in the field of **environmental protection and safety** for oil exploration, prospection and production internationally. It should also adopt a **ban on oil drilling** in the Arctic waters of the EU and the EEA and **promote comparable precautionary standards** in the Arctic Council and for Arctic coastal states.

³ <https://www.cbd.int/>.

⁴ Pope Francis, Encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* (2015), http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

4. What more could be done at EU level to help ensure the sustainable development of the Arctic region which meets the needs of Arctic communities and respects the rights of indigenous peoples?

As outlined above, it is important to ensure an **effective participation and a fair share of local populations** in the benefits resulting from a **sustainable and responsible use of natural resources**.

Moreover, in the light of climate change and its implications for **local communities**, the EU should support efforts for improving the **climate resilience, adaptation and mitigation** by way of **capacity- building and training**.

The approximately four million inhabitants of the Arctic region include **more than 40 different indigenous ethnic groups**. Due to the particular links to their natural environment and their distinct political, cultural and religious features, they are often **disproportionately affected by socio-economic and ecological challenges** which may lead to political and economic marginalisation, loss of land and resources, human rights violations, discrimination, trafficking and unemployment. Indigenous peoples in the Arctic region depend on hunting for polar bears, walrus, seals and caribou, herding reindeer, fishing and gathering not only for **food to support the local economy**, but also as the **basis for their cultural and social identity**. Some of the major concerns facing indigenous peoples in the Arctic include the **change in species and availability of traditional food sources**, perceived **reduction in weather predictions** and the **safety of traveling** in changing ice and weather conditions, posing serious **challenges to human health and food security**.

The EU should thus **prioritise** in its future Arctic framework policies that enable **sustainable and integral development of indigenous communities**, while respecting their life, specific identity, culture, language and religious beliefs. This should include an increased **protection and promotion of the rights of indigenous peoples**, including their social, cultural, religious, linguistic, land, intellectual property, food and environmental rights⁵.

Special attention should be paid to the **Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) No. 4.5** which includes **ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training** for indigenous peoples, also **in their own languages**. Moreover, it is important to ensure that indigenous peoples and other vulnerable communities in the Arctic facing poverty and social exclusion have unhindered **access to healthcare and decent housing**.

A future **people-centred EU Arctic policy** should moreover encompass **specific informative and capacity-building measures** and mechanisms allowing an **inclusive participation of indigenous representatives** with regard to consultation, decision-making and implementation processes in all administrative and legislative matters that may affect them⁶. In this regard,

⁵ Justice and Peace Europe, «*Indigenous peoples are a living appeal for hope*» (2019), <http://www.juspax-eu.org/en/dokumente/JPE-HR-Day-Statement-2019.pdf> .

⁶ COMECE, *Contribution to the future EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy* (2019), [http://www.comece.eu/dl/supOJKJKKNOoJqx4KJK/COMECE contribution EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy.pdf](http://www.comece.eu/dl/supOJKJKKNOoJqx4KJK/COMECE%20contribution%20EU%20Action%20Plan%20on%20Human%20Rights%20and%20Democracy.pdf) .

the principle of **Free Prior Informed Consent** as enshrined in the *ILO Convention No.169*⁷ and in the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*⁸, should be fully respected and implemented.

Since **science-informed decision-making**, based on **local and indigenous knowledge**, is key to safeguarding the fragile ecosystems of the Arctic, managing natural resources in a sustainable manner and promoting human development, the European Union should provide local communities with a **better access to relevant information** on specific EU programmes, funding opportunities and best practices in their respective language. In this regard, an **Arctic representation of indigenous peoples in Brussels** could be established to make their participation to consultation and decision-making processes more effective.

5. How could the EU Arctic policy best complement EU Member State action in the Arctic to address socio-economic challenges and demographic development?

The future EU Arctic policy framework should above all be understood as a **partnership for sustainable and integral development of persons, families and local communities**.

As foundations of the social edifice, **families** should receive a particular attention in the future EU Arctic framework in view of **fostering the socio-economic conditions** for their development, including in the business sector. In this regard, **financial and technical incentives to family enterprises** and to other micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) could be made available in areas, such as fisheries, agriculture or tourism. In addition, an **improvement of human connectivity** across the Arctic region, including in the distant and sparsely populated areas, could **bridge the rural-urban divide** and **foster social cohesion**.

In order to better address demographic challenges in the region, the role of **young people** as drivers of transformative processes in the society should be adequately recognised and their **empowerment at all levels of economic, social and political life** be supported. Tangible and sustainable local perspectives should be created to **counter “brain drain”**. With regard to youth unemployment and job-skill mismatch, projects for **education, formation, vocational training** as well as study **exchanges** should be developed, while taking into account **digital skills** in the context of new digital technologies. A future people-centred EU Arctic policy framework could also promote sustainable investments that will focus on creating **decent employment opportunities for local youth and strengthen the local social and economic systems in the longer-term**, while respecting the **environment**.

A specific attention should also be paid to **migrant workers** who are employed in the extractive sector, in tourism or as seafarers, and are often confronted with **particular socio-economic and human rights challenges**, including a lack of decent labour conditions and of decent housing, as well as human trafficking.

⁷https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C169 .

⁸ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html> .

6. How could intergovernmental and regional cooperation in the Arctic be improved for the benefit of the Arctic region and what should the EU's role be in this?

An important part in the chain of **inter-related challenges** facing the Arctic is the issue of its **governance**. The greater accessibility of the region and its natural resources due to climate change leads to a **proliferation of different actors** – public and private, from the region as well as beyond –, performing exploration, extractive, investment or even military activities. Often driven by **economic or geopolitical interests**, several actors have recently undertaken initiatives posing a **threat to multilateralism** and undermining the **regional cooperation framework** that had ensured stability and peace in the region for decades.

With its new Arctic strategy, the European Union should strengthen its role as a **beacon of multilateralism** and **promoter of regional cooperation**. Since lasting peace cannot be built merely on interests, the future EU's Arctic approach should be **deeply rooted in and guided by the Union's founding values**, in particular *“democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law”* (Art 21 TEU).

As highlighted by Pope Francis in his recent encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti*⁹, it is essential *“to uphold the need to be **faithful to agreements undertaken** [...] and to avoid the temptation to appeal to the law of force rather than to **the force of law**”*. The Pope also stresses the importance of the principle of **subsidiarity**, allowing an **effective participation of organisations and actors from the grassroots**, complementing the efforts of public institutions.

Thus, in order **to address the risk of a fragmentation** of the region, the EU should seek to **reinforce** cooperation, coordination and interaction within **the existing cooperation frameworks**, notably the *Arctic Council*, but also promote new **inclusive ways of multilateral engagement with all regional and local stakeholders**, including local populations and indigenous communities. It should also **counter any tendencies towards militarisation** of the Arctic region and **promote civilian efforts in pre-emptive peace-building**¹⁰, including preventive diplomacy, as well as early warning and action mechanisms in line with the Union's integrated approach to external conflicts and crises¹¹.

For a **better integration** and a **more effective mainstreaming of its Arctic objectives into all areas of EU action**, some **adaptations to the current EU institutional set-up** may be necessary. In this regard, a **coordinating function** regarding the breadth of policies pertaining

⁹ Pope Francis, Encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti* (2020), http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html .

¹⁰ COMECE, Europe's vocation to promote peace in the world (2016), http://www.comece.eu/dl/pklOJKJKoKMKJqx4KJK/20160614_PEACE_report_EN.pdf .

¹¹ Cf. Council Conclusions on an Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises (2018), p.5, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5413-2018-INIT/en/pdf> : *“These analyses should comprise all relevant actors, including **religious** and cultural, in order to ensure a broad ownership [...]”*.

to the Arctic could be entrusted in the future to **one of the Vice-Presidents of the European Commission**. The **European External Action Service** should **maintain its successful Arctic ambassador scheme** and strengthen this position with adequate resources. The **Council of the EU** could have a specific **working party covering Northern Europe and the Arctic** in a comprehensive and **more integrated** manner. While strengthening the role of the **European Parliament** in shaping the EU's Arctic policy, a **specifically designated Interparliamentary Delegation** could be established, which would have a special responsibility for the Arctic cooperation.

7. How can the impact of EU science and technology/research and innovation efforts be further enhanced, as a means of supporting the priorities of the EU's Arctic Policy?

In the light of the ecological challenges facing the Arctic, the deployment of various **climate-altering and space technologies** is being increasingly considered. While technology and innovation may indeed contribute to mitigating climate change and safeguarding the environment, technological progress has to be accompanied – as Pope Francis highlights¹² – *“by an ethic inspired by a **vision of the common good, an ethic of freedom, responsibility and fraternity, capable of fostering the full development of people in relation to others and to the whole of creation**”*.

Possible benefits from deploying new technologies in the Arctic should thus always be weighed against the degree to which they are employed in an **ethical manner**, especially regarding their **impact on local populations and on the environment in the longer term**. Therefore, pertinent **impact assessments based on strict precautionary standards** should be applied to research, development and deployment of geoengineering and climate-altering technologies.

Since the EU Arctic policy should be **science-based** and take into consideration **local and indigenous perspectives**, the EU should promote and facilitate **regional and international scientific and research cooperation among all stakeholders** and support the establishment of pertinent **research infrastructures**.

8. Which other relevant issue should be addressed in the future EU Arctic Policy?

Religious actors and faith communities are deeply rooted in local realities of the Arctic region. They are often among the frontline **promoters of sustainable human development and peace at the grassroots** by offering basic social services, education, healthcare or engaging in mediation and reconciliation, as well as by fostering social cohesion. As outlined above, Churches and religious communities can also act as important **multipliers of awareness raising** efforts regarding the challenges facing the Arctic and as drivers of the necessary transformation of consumption practices.

¹² Pope Francis, Address to the participants of a conference on “*The Common Good in a Digital Age*” (2019), http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/september/documents/papa-francesco_20190927_eradigitale.html.

The future EU Arctic policy could thus recognise **religious and faith-based actors as natural partners**¹³ in jointly addressing the challenges pertinent to the Arctic. It could also **better integrate the actions of religious actors within local peacebuilding mechanisms and resilience-fostering efforts**¹⁴.

Moreover, the new EU Arctic strategy should respect **the existing religious and cultural diversity**. **Religious heritage** is an important pillar of culture and identity. In the new framework, the EU could better recognise the spiritual, historical, artistic, as well as social contribution of religious heritage. Such initiatives could **reinforce a spirit of encounter, dialogue and better mutual knowledge and understanding**.

***The Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union (COMECE)** brings together the Bishop delegates from Bishops’ Conferences of the 27 Member States. For forty years, COMECE has been closely involved in the process of European integration and sharing its reflections with EU institutions. COMECE is the Catholic Church partner of EU institutions in the Dialogue foreseen by Article 17(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Its permanent General Secretariat, based in Brussels, analyses EU policies on a day-by-day basis, striving to bring the specific contribution of the Catholic Church into the European debate*

***The Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions (Justice and Peace Europe)** is an alliance of more than 30 Justice and Peace Commissions in Europe, working for the promotion of justice, peace, respect for human dignity and the care of Creation. Justice and Peace Europe contributes to raising awareness of the Catholic social doctrine in the European societies and the European institutions. Its General Secretariat is based in Brussels.*

CONTACTS

<p>COMECE</p> <p>Square de Meeûs 19 – B-1050 Brussels Tel: +32 2 235 05 10 Email: comece@comece.eu Website: www.comece.eu</p>	<p>Justice and Peace Europe</p> <p>Square de Meeûs 19 – B-1050 Brussels Tel: +32 2 235 05 17 Email: secretary@jupax-europa.org Website: www.jupax-europa.org</p>
--	--

Brussels, 6 November 2020

The Secretariats of COMECE and Justice & Peace Europe

¹³ European Parliament resolution of 3 October 2017 on *addressing shrinking civil society space in developing countries*, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0365_EN.html .

¹⁴ Cf. Council Conclusions on an Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises (2018), p.5, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5413-2018-INIT/en/pdf> : “These analyses should comprise all relevant actors, including **religious** and cultural, in order to ensure a broad ownership [...]”.