Sustainability in the Urban Arctic: Waste, Tourism, and other Contemporary Challenges

Leif Schenstead-Harris

Urban spaces in the Arctic are distinguished from those of the world lying south of the 60th parallel by what come call an urban paradox (Nyseth 2017) and others, more pessimistically, a “condition of permanent disaster” (Zamyatina and Goncharov 2018). While smaller than their more temperate counterparts, the challenges to sustainability that Arctic cities face include a host of issues that are either new or exacerbated by the geography, climate, and social valence of the Arctic. Even as the Arctic is often characterized as uninhabited, its cities are growing rapidly and in contexts of precarity and substantial inequality. Fifty years ago the North American Arctic was seen as a paradise for ambitious planners, such as Ralph Erskines whose 1972 design of Resolute Bay brings the whole edifice of High Modernism to bear in the Arctic, part and parcel of a modernizing and “totalizing transformation” of northern Canada through forced relocation practices (Tester 1994). Descriptions of sustainability in research at a national level in Canada (eg. Roseland and Spiliotopoulou 2018) have a hard time capturing these complexities of the Arctic.

Today, though they have smaller populations in absolute terms, many Arctic regions are proportionally more urban than their corresponding countries in the south, and there are continued demographic trends of increased urbanization and population concentration in the Arctic (Heleniak and Bogoyavlensky 2014). Although Canada’s Arctic is less urbanized than other regions, it is more starkly inequitable (Duhaime, Caron, Levesque, Lemelin, Maenpaa, Nigai, and Robichard 2017). It is especially poignant that in Iqaluit just this November, one of the two major grocery and general goods stores was shuttered due to a fire likely caused by a pair of teenage boys, themselves at the cruel end of societal inequity.
I propose to discuss some of the contemporary challenges across the circumpolar Arctic, including challenges to sustainability such as logistics, waste, tourism, and food security. My discussion will focus on two in particular sustainability challenges: solid waste management and tourism. To do so, I will compare strategies for managing waste and tourism from Canada, Finland, Norway and Iceland, including perspectives on sustainability from indigenous organizations and states. While broad reports on sustainability and resilience such as the Arctic Resiliency Report (2016) have focused on ecological change, they often neglect to focus on social drivers and reactants such as waste management and tourism.

My case study in Arctic sustainability and solid waste management will focus on the question of the intake and disposal of solid waste in especially small communities and cities in Canada and Finland. Here, I will argue that it is urgently necessary to consider both locally-adapted strategies of circular economic principles (cf. Ontario 2015) while also recognizing the geographic and social differences of the Arctic. The high costs of waste collection result in small urban centres yielding anecdotes of illegal dumping, waste burning, and other undesirable practices, while recognized practices of sprawling landfills and open burning are endemic to urban centres without road access (Sebalo 2018, in print). As the challenge of growth imperils the sustainability of Arctic urban centres, community outreach and integrated circular waste management will be critical to future livability and adaptation.

Turning to tourism, I will argue that this mixed-blessing requires major investments of state and society-level resources to transform into a usable if parasitic influence on Arctic cities. While the seemingly “natural” qualities of Arctic urban centres attract tourists (Viken 2011, Nyseth 2017), this illusion obscures the weight of urbanization on Arctic environments already intensely at risk through climate change (IPCC 2018). This is demonstrated by Finland’s and Norway’s recent success in this area, even as local urban centres themselves demonstrate “conflicting discourses” about whether tourism should be developed (Makitie and Ylisirnio 2013). However, from a sustainability perspective, the benefits of tourism may not be worth the trade-off, as examples in Canada and Iceland demonstrate.