

2024 Arctic Circle Assembly: Reflections

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The Arctic region, with its unique and fragile ecosystem, has a tremendous impact on global weather patterns. For example, melting ice in the Arctic has an adverse impact on monsoon rain patterns in faraway, non-Arctic India, where billions of people rely on monsoon rains for agricultural yield and a respite from the scorching summer heat. This is simply one of the many examples of the influence of the Arctic on weather patterns across the world. Therefore, it is evident why the Arctic Circle Assembly was formed in 2013 to address the myriad challenges that the Arctic faces, chief among them, climate change. The future of the planet depends on the future of the Arctic. This is something that many countries seem to recognize, as evidenced by the fact that several non-Arctic countries, such as France, India, Italy, and Brazil, among others, are clamoring to play a bigger role in the Arctic Circle Assembly.

Given my own academic and professional interest in climate change policy and the energy transition, I'd always been keen on attending the Arctic Circle Assembly. By attending the conference, I'd hoped to learn about the energy transition in the Arctic and meet with experts and stakeholders who'd had hands-on experience bringing about the energy transition in the region. In particular, I was interested in learning how Arctic countries were engaging with the indigenous people of the region as they moved forward with the energy transition. Attending the 2024 Arctic Circle Assembly fulfilled all these objectives and much more.

At the conference, various experts spoke about the strategies that were being adopted by Arctic countries to switch to cleaner sources of energy. The Arctic region has tremendous wind, geothermal, tidal, and hydropower capacity, and governments have been focusing on harnessing these sources of energy, as they look to move away from oil and gas. But what struck me about all the clean energy initiatives in the Arctic was the efforts being put towards engaging with the indigenous community and those who were employed in the oil and gas sector. There was a lot of care being taken to ensure that there would be a just transition. Many interesting mechanisms were being undertaken to achieve this. For example, in Scotland, they enacted a deliberative democracy method and formed climate groups to help local communities understand the need to move towards cleaner sources of energy and to make the local community feel as though they have a stake in the clean energy projects being set up in the region. Efforts were made to retrain people who worked in the oil industry, reskill them, and prepare them for jobs in the renewables sector, such as nuclear energy jobs. Additionally, efforts were also being made to design projects in a manner that the indigenous or local communities would own clean energy projects and sell the power generated by the system to the utilities. This was another innovative mechanism being implemented to ensure that the interests of the local communities were also geared towards the success of the energy transition.

The Arctic will also influence the course of the energy transition through its vast reserves of critical minerals. While recognizing the economic, strategic, and environmental potential of these critical mineral resources, Arctic states are also ensuring that these resources are being mined in a sustainable manner. For example, Norway aims to develop the most sustainable mining industry in the world. However, the process of mining critical minerals is a carbon-intensive process and many of these reserves are located on indigenous land. Thus, Arctic states are trying to ensure that mining activities are undertaken only with the free and informed consent of indigenous people. One idea that had been proposed during the Conference was that of requiring mining companies to have indigenous representation on their boards, so that indigenous rights are not steamrolled in the process of mining critical minerals.

The conference gave me the opportunity to hear heads of state speak, to meet indigenous Sami people and hear their experiences of adapting their lifestyles to the changing Arctic climate, and to connect with experts from across the world, who were driven purely by the purpose of bringing about change. The conference was an incredibly insightful and exhilarating experience for me and left me with much food for thought. It painted a realistic picture of a changing Arctic, but also brought forward stories of passion, innovation, hope, and a determination to make the Arctic, and thereby the world, more sustainable. Attending the conference was a perfect complement to my studies at Fletcher, and I am certain that I will use the learnings from this conference through my coursework at Fletcher as well as in my professional life. But more importantly, it left me inspired and renewed my hope in the ability of people to bring about change.







