

New Perspectives on Northern Economies

Reflection

Building a Policy Muscle: Learning from Northern Youth about Arctic Tourism

Steven Showalter
The Gordon Foundation

Abstract: This article reflects on policy recommendations from the third Arctic Policy Hackathon, the importance of cross-Arctic collaboration, and why young leaders from the Canadian North should engage with policy development. Policy Hackathons see young leaders from diverse backgrounds collaborate on a significant policy issue, in this case how to keep the next generation of leaders in the Arctic. It is a model of learning about policy that prioritizes the voices and lived experience of the next generation of leaders, brings their ideas to the forefront, and gives them the skills to turn ideas into action. The third Arctic Policy Hackathon, organized by the Gordon Foundation in partnership with the Arctic Mayors' Forum and with support from Global Affairs Canada, saw emerging leaders from the Canadian North join their counterparts from across the Arctic in Reykjavik, Iceland. Participants also engaged with policy leaders and shared their recommendations at the Arctic Circle Assembly, taking valuable lessons back to their home communities.

Nouvelles perspectives sur les économies du Nord

Commentaire

Renforcer les capacités d'intervention politique : Apprendre de la jeunesse nordique à propos du tourisme arctique

Steven Showalter

The Gordon Foundation

Résumé: Cet article présente les recommandations politiques issues du troisième Hackathon politique pour l'Arctique, souligne l'importance de la collaboration circumpolaire, et explique pourquoi les jeunes leaders du Nord canadien devraient s'impliquer dans l'élaboration des politiques. Les Hackathons politiques réunissent de jeunes leaders de divers horizons pour collaborer sur une question politique majeure, ici comment assurer la relève des leaders en Arctique. Ce modèle d'apprentissage politique met en avant les voix et l'expérience vécue de la nouvelle génération, valorise leurs idées et leur donne les outils pour les transformer en actions concrètes. Le troisième Hackathon politique pour l'Arctique, organisé par la Gordon Foundation en partenariat avec l'Arctic Mayors' Forum et avec le soutien d'Affaires mondiales Canada, a rassemblé des leaders émergents du Nord canadien avec leurs homologues de tout l'Arctique à Reykjavik, en Islande. Les participants ont aussi échangé avec des décideurs politiques et partagé leurs recommandations lors de l'Assemblée du Cercle Arctique, ramenant des leçons précieuses dans leurs communautés.

Effective public policy prioritizes the experiences of the communities it affects. However, across the Arctic, policy is often shaped by external forces rather than the people directly impacted.

The Gordon Foundation's Policy Hackathons¹ aim to help shift this imbalance in policy-making. Hackathons bring together passionate young leaders from diverse backgrounds to collaborate on a significant policy issue. Participants discuss, question, and brainstorm, then develop innovative policy recommendations drawn from their lived experience. This model of learning about policy prioritizes the voices of the next generation of leaders, brings their ideas to the forefront, and gives them the skills to turn ideas into action.

Policy Hackathons were first convened by the Foundation in the Canadian North. The first Northern Policy Hackathon took place in Nain, Nunatsiavut, in 2017, when participants developed policy recommendations about country/traditional food.² The next year, young leaders gathered in Iqaluit, Nunavut, to focus on policy for small and medium sized enterprises.³ In 2019, a third group came together in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, to address housing policy.⁴

The success of the Hackathon program led to an international expansion. In 2022, the first Arctic Policy Hackathon took place in Reykjavik, Iceland, with emerging leaders from across the Arctic collaborating on policy recommendations addressing food sovereignty in the Arctic.⁵ The following year, a new group of participants examined how to keep the next generation of leaders in the Arctic.⁶

The Third Arctic Policy Hackathon, 2024

Following the success of the first two international Hackathons, The Gordon Foundation, with support from Global Affairs Canada⁷ and in partnership with the Arctic Mayors' Forum,⁸ hosted the third Arctic Policy Hackathon in Reykjavik, Iceland, in October 2024.⁹ Sixteen emerging leaders from Arctic Indigenous and local communities in Sweden, Finland, Norway, Sápmi, Greenland, Canada, and Alaska came together for two intense days of policy development.

From the moment the young leaders arrived in Iceland, it was clear they were there to make a difference; they were committed and excited to begin working together. Much like the fresh volcanic steam rising from the land surrounding Reykjavik, the curiosity and eagerness of the participants were plain to see.

Canadian participants included Andrea Andersen (Iqaluit), Melynda Ehloak (Cambridge Bay), Samantha Saksagiak (Nain), and Jake Olson (Yellowknife), who each brought their unique perspectives and experiences to the forefront. Representing the Canadian North, they shared the concerns, challenges, and opportunities facing their communities.

For this Hackathon, the policy topic was *Sharing the Arctic: A Sustainable Future for Arctic Tourism*. Currently, the positive economic impacts of Arctic tourism do not always stay in the Arctic to benefit the communities and people living there, which highlights the need to strengthen communities socially, culturally, and economically. Relationships should be mutually beneficial, ensuring that local communities—not just tourists and companies—retain the rewards.

Canadian perspectives relating to tourism and sustainability differed between each community represented at the Hackathon. In some cases, tourism is perhaps growing too rapidly, whereas in other areas, an increase would boost economic growth. While some communities have infrastructure in place, others are concerned about developing sustainable infrastructure to support growth in the industry.

Together, emerging leaders discussed the challenges and opportunities related to sustainable Arctic tourism, including prioritizing local needs and supporting infrastructure, health services, and sustainable access to natural resources. Throughout the Hackathon, participants were focused on policy that empowers local communities in decision making and increases local employment opportunities.

Through these discussions, four key themes emerged: Indigenous Peoples, Environmental Stewardship, Community, and Infrastructure. Together, emerging leaders discussed the challenges and opportunities related to sustainable Arctic tourism, including prioritizing local needs and supporting physical infrastructure, transportation costs, market prices, health services, emergency planning, and sustainable access to natural resources. Sharing their thoughts, opinions, and stories helped each participant determine which theme they would focus on in a small group. Each thematic group then agreed on a final set of policy recommendations, ranging from mandating the prioritization of Arctic Indigenous guides in hiring processes to pan-Arctic environmental standards.

By the final hours of the Hackathon, the participants had developed practical solutions to ensure tourism benefits the Arctic and its inhabitants. These recommendations were targeted directly at policy- and decision-makers, as well as tourism organizations and operators, offering many opportunities for collaboration and improvement. As the participants expressed in the final document's opening statement: "The paradox of Arctic tourism is clear: while visitors want to experience this environment before it is further altered, tourism itself accelerates that transformation."¹⁰

A key principle throughout the Hackathon was, "Nothing about us, without us"—emphasizing that Arctic youth must guide tourism practices, and Indigenous voices and local communities must be accurately represented in policy-making:

Regulations must be informed locally, rather than imposed from afar, fostering genuine representation of the diverse lifestyles within these communities. Recognizing and respecting our unique way of life across the Arctic is essential to fostering a more equitable and sustainable approach to tourism.¹¹

Immediately following the Hackathon, several participants attended the annual Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik¹² and presented their recommendations. Melynda Ehaloak and Timo Tuuha of Salla, Lapland, Finland, presented the group's work during a panel moderated by Selma Ford, Program Director, The Gordon Foundation, from Nain, Nunatsiavut, alongside panellists Frigg Jørgensen, Executive Director, Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators (AECO), Norway; Ásthildur Sturludóttir, Mayor, Akureyri, Iceland; and Teah Dickson, Tourism Professional and Resource Management Specialist from Yukon, Canada. The session was overflowing with Arctic leaders, media, and other stakeholders. The freshly printed Hackathon policy recommendations were quickly dispersed and not a single copy was left behind.

During their time in Iceland, participants also learned about policy development from political leaders. At the Hackathon, they met with Jenny Hill, the Canadian Ambassador to Iceland, who helped lay out the context for their policy discussions and spoke with the participants: "I could have sat there all morning listening to these leaders talk about best approaches for developing sustainable, positive and locally beneficial tourism in the Arctic."¹³

Meanwhile, at the Arctic Circle Assembly, participants spoke with Robert Sinclair, Senior Arctic Official and Director General, Arctic, Eurasian, and European Affairs for the Government of Canada; Nunavut Premier PJ Akeagok; and the European Union Special Envoy for Arctic Matters, Claude Véron-Réville. These discussions left the participants prepared to share their policy recommendations more broadly.

Building Policy Muscle

Participants left the 2024 Arctic Policy Hackathon and Arctic Circle Assembly feeling inspired and determined to continue the work they started in Reykjavik. Each of them was proud of what they had accomplished in a short amount of time and were excited to share their recommendations.

The young leaders had exercised and built their policy muscle—learning how to be part of the policy process, seeing that their perspective is valuable, and knowing that change can happen. In the weeks and months following the Hackathon, participants shared the recommendations and their message with their communities, peers, and decision makers.

The participants, including those from the Canadian North, clearly understood the needs of their communities, and it was inspiring to hear them elevate these perspectives. They spoke passionately and constructively with one another, demonstrating their understanding of one another's situations and the importance of striving for a balanced approach.

Through each iteration of the Gordon Foundation's Policy Hackathon, we are inspired and impressed by the knowledge sharing, commitment, collaboration, and passion that new participants bring to the table. It is their hard work, determination, and desire to engage that allows this important work to continue with such success. As participants come together from across the Arctic, they bring important issues in their home communities to light on an international stage.

The relationships the participants made were foundational in creating and developing a policy document that reflects the cooperation needed among Arctic states. The Hackathon served as an exciting forum for these emerging leaders to connect and exchange ideas with one another—a reflection shared by several participants. The enthusiasm, dedication, and commitment expressed by the entire group were astounding. The future of the Arctic is in very capable hands.

Notes

1. The Gordon Foundation, Policy Hackathons, last modified 2025, <https://gordonfoundation.ca/initiatives/policy-hackathons>.
2. Northern Policy Hackathon Participants, *Recommendations on Country/Traditional Food from the Northern Policy Hackathon*, The Gordon Foundation, accessed April 3, 2025, <https://gordonfoundation.ca/resource/recommendations-from-the-first-northern-policy-hackathon>.
3. Northern Policy Hackathon Participants, *2018 Northern Policy Hackathon Recommendations on Small and Medium Sized Enterprises*, The Gordon Foundation, accessed March 29, 2025, <https://gordonfoundation.ca/resource/recommendations-from-the-second-northern-policy-hackathon>.
4. Northern Policy Hackathon Participants and the Gordon Foundation, *Northern Policy Hackathon Recommendations on Housing*, accessed April 3, 2025, <https://gordonfoundation.ca/resource/recommendations-on-northern-housing>.
5. Arctic Policy Hackathon Participants and the Gordon Foundation, *Arctic Policy Hackathon: Food Sovereignty in the Arctic*, October 2022, https://gordonfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/APH_Policy_Recommendations_web.pdf.
6. Arctic Policy Hackathon Participants and the Gordon Foundation, *Arctic Policy Hackathon Arctic Policy Recommendations—The Future of the Arctic: Keeping Next Generation Leaders in the Arctic*, October 2023. https://gordonfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Arctic_Policy_Hackathon_Recommendations.pdf.
7. Global Affairs Canada, “Global Affairs Canada,” last modified May 14, 2025, <https://www.international.gc.ca/global-affaires-affaires-mondiales/home-accueil.aspx?lang=eng>.
8. Arctic Mayors' Forum, “Arctic Mayors' Forum: Our Mission,” 2024, <https://arcticmayors.com/>.
9. Gordon Foundation, “Young Leaders Set Out Ambitious Plan for Sustainable Arctic Tourism,” October 30, 2024, <https://gordonfoundation.ca/resource/young-leaders-set-out-ambitious-plan-for-sustainable-arctic-tourism/#:~:text=October%2030%2C%202024&text=That%20is%20the%20message%20from,solutions%20using%20their%20lived%20experience>.
10. Arctic Policy Hackathon Participants and the Gordon Foundation, “Arctic Policy Hackathon 2024 Policy Recommendations—Sharing the Arctic: A Sustainable Future for Arctic Tourism,” 5, accessed April 3, 2025, <https://gordonfoundation.ca/resource/2024-arctic-policy-hackathon-policy-recommendations>.
11. Arctic Policy Hackathon Participants, “Arctic Policy Hackathon 2024.”
12. Arctic Circle, 2024 Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavik, Iceland, October 2024. <https://www.arcticcircle.org/assemblies/2024-arctic-circle-assembly>.
13. Jenny Hill, Canadian Ambassador to Iceland, “The perfect way to start off my first Arctic Circle Assembly.” LinkedIn, October 2024, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/jenny-hill-3a2b641b0_arcticpolicyhackathon-assembly2024-activity-7252008882842050562-xxt?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAAkuN_oBnNc-9nmmP-2sS7LHqI2VMr-ZR7Q.