Investigating Reflections on Social Sustainability: The Case of EU-Funded Projects in Remote Northern Communities

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Abstract:

There has been a general population decline in the European Arctic and northern periphery, with out-migration being one of the main drivers. The population is ageing and less able to contribute to the economic welfare. The EU has implemented a series of projects in the region in an attempt to remedy the out-migration and make the regions attractive for further investments and development. The study investigates how actors within a number of EU-funded projects perceived local social sustainability, in their communities and within their projects. It aims to gain a better understanding of what social sustainability means in northern contexts, and how EU-funded projects could improve social sustainability. Using coding inspired by the Arctic Social Indicators, the study mapped perceptions and reflections through conducting a series of interviews with actors attached to EU projects. The results show that a majority of projects potentially have had a higher impact on social sustainability than the actors reflected upon, such as the impact on cultural wellbeing that comes from improving local slow tourism, focussing on local traditions and heritage. The study also finds that transnational cooperation is perceived to be beneficial for socially sustainable outcomes with benefits including knowledge transfer and business cooperation. Transnational cooperation, however, comes with challenges such as communication issues due to language barriers, and policy difficulties when working across borders. Overall the study concludes that the EU projects are perceived to have positive outcomes on the social sustainability in northern communities. Not only did the actors perceive these EU-funded projects to be important for monetary development, but also in creating invaluable bonds between partners.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, social sustainability, northern communities, Arctic communities, EU projects, transnational cooperation

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Summary:

There has been a general population decline in the European Arctic and northern periphery, with out-migration being one of the main drivers. The population is ageing and less able to contribute to the economic welfare. The EU has implemented a series of projects in the region in an attempt to remedy the out-migration and make the regions attractive for further investments and development. The study investigates how actors within a number of EU-funded projects perceived local social sustainability, in their communities and within their projects. It aims to gain a better understanding of what social sustainability means in northern contexts, and how EU-funded projects could improve social sustainability. Using coding inspired by the Arctic Social Indicators, the study mapped perceptions and reflections through conducting a series of interviews with actors attached to EU projects. The results show that a majority of projects potentially have had a higher impact on social sustainability than the actors reflected upon, such as the impact on cultural wellbeing that comes from improving local slow tourism, focussing on local traditions and heritage. The study also finds that transnational cooperation is perceived to be beneficial for socially sustainable outcomes with benefits including knowledge transfer and business cooperation. Transnational cooperation, however, comes with challenges such as communication issues due to language barriers, and policy difficulties when working across borders. Overall the study concludes that the EU projects are perceived to have positive outcomes on the social sustainability in northern communities. Not only did the actors perceive these EU-funded projects to be important for monetary development, but also in creating invaluable bonds between partners.

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Abbreviations

AHDR – Arctic Human Development Report
ASI – Arctic Social Indicators
ERDF – European Regional Development Fund
EU – European Union
GDP – Gross Domestic Product
GRP - Gross Regional Product
NPA – Northern Periphery and Arctic (programme)
SDG – Sustainable Development Goals
SME – Small Medium Enterprise
UN – United Nations
WCED – World Commission on Environment and Development
1. Introduction

Why is the countryside dying in the north? My father grew up in Bastuträsk, Västerbotten in the north of Sweden, and my mother grew up in Delsbo, Hälsingland, and I spent many of my childhood summers in these places. The community decay is visible to the bare eye. One by one stores, factories, hospitals and schools close down. There are fewer and fewer reasons to stay. Lately however, there has been an increase of attention brought to northern communities, not only in Sweden. People are starting to open their eyes to the effects of climate change, and how exposed the already vulnerable northern periphery and arctic regions are. Reports such as the Arctic Human Development Report (AHDR) (2014) and Arctic Social Indicators (ASI) (2014) explore the complex dynamics and challenges that these regions face, and to identify the factors that contribute to the out-migration, especially of young people, and thus to the population decline. Left in villages are often the older people. An ageing population comes with many different challenges, including a declining local economic base, as young people tend to be more productive than the older (Heleniak, 2014).

There is thus a necessity to increase the incentives for younger people to stay in their hometowns and villages, or to return to contribute to the local economy after intervals of living elsewhere. Practical societal functions such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and work security needs to be in focus in order to attract the population to stay in communities that are exposed due to remoteness (Nymand Larsen, 2014a). Incentives to invest time and capital in the rural regions should be improved, and local gain from resource export promoted. Many of these regions have long histories both from Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (ibid.) With the decline of the communities, much of the rich culture and heritages may be lost. Many regions have an extensive tourism season, creating value for both the local community and nation, but also to attract international visitors and investments (Steenholdt and Chimirri, 2018).

This study focusses on the European arctic and what is sometimes called Europe’s northern periphery regions, and specifically on remote communities that are vulnerable to out-migration and are undergoing a shift in demographic to an ageing population. Since the arctic area is spread over several different nations, this study will also investigate how actors within European Union (EU)-funded projects perceive the transnational cooperation. In order to achieve this aim, interviews with actors within the EU-funded Interreg Programme, Northern Periphery and Arctic (NPA) were conducted to get an understanding of how these actors perceive social sustainability within their projects and in their communities.

There is a need for national policies to understand and adapt to rural contexts, if such communities are to survive. The study could be helpful for future projects in the region to understand social impacts that may be affected, and how to make the most of potential social outcomes. Both national and international actors could potentially benefit from the results of the study.

1.1. Problem Statement

Harsh socio-economic climate in rural communities in the northern periphery is contributing to population decline and therefor also to an ageing population in the region. To change the trend will require addressing social challenges such as access to education and health care, where a lack of action will lead to shortage of labour force necessary for meeting key municipal responsibilities, especially in areas where the older population needs care. The population decline of these communities is part of a larger process of rapidly increased urbanisation, with not only local but also regional and national policy implications. Furthermore, if the problem of population decline is not remedied there is a risk that these communities will disappear completely, followed by loss of cultural heritage.

EU-projects that are implemented in these northern regions attempt to bring investments and attraction to the community, and this study will use qualitative interviews and text analysis to investigate a number of these projects and how actors within the projects reflect upon the impact(s) they have on the local sustainability. The study is limited to social impacts and will only touch upon other sustainability aspects briefly.
1.2. Aim and research questions

This study assesses the perceived social impacts that EU-funded projects have on communities in the northern periphery and arctic, according to actors in the EU-projects, to improve the understanding of what social sustainability means in this context. In order to do this, the following research questions have been identified:

RQ1: How do actors within EU-funded projects for remote northern communities reflect on social sustainability in their communities and in their projects?

RQ2: How do EU project actors in remote northern communities reflect on trade-offs with other aspects of sustainability within their projects?

RQ3: What role can transnational cooperation play for supporting social sustainability in remote northern communities?
2. Background

This chapter presents the theoretical background and literature as a foundation for the empirics in chapter 4 and to explain theories concerning social sustainability.

2.1. Defining social sustainability

This chapter delves into the definition(s) of social sustainability and the origin of the concept to create a base for the research.

2.1.1. Origins from the sustainable development discourse

Social sustainability is a concept often found in the paradigm of sustainable development. The discourse of sustainable development was established during the 20th century (Petrov et al., 2018) (Sachs and Ban, 2015), and reached a broader audience with the so-called Brundtland Report of 1987, published by The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). Sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). It also provided a framework that combined natural or environmental limits with social development contained within those limits (Petrov et al., 2018). In general, the term sustainable development is categorised into three main fields: environmental, economic, and social sustainability (Sachs and Ban, 2015). In broad terms, the concept of sustainable development combines challenges and concerns on a range of environmental issues with socio-economic issues (Hopwood et al., 2005).

Both the concept of sustainable development and social sustainability are often criticised by scholars and researchers for being vague and diffuse, something that arguably can compromise the utility of the term (Vallance et al., 2011). Some even argue that the vagueness of the term “sustainable development” means that companies and businesses can interpret and use the term to their advantage without actually being sustainable (Missimer et al., 2017). Using sustainable development rhetoric has become mainstream in both national and international policymaking, including the launch of the global sustainable development goals (SDG) Agenda 2030 in 2015. However, there is relatively limited literature that focuses on social sustainability, even if similar issues have been discussed using other concepts such as social capital, social cohesion, social inclusion and exclusion (Dempsey et al., 2011).

The “social” was introduced rather late in the debate of sustainable development, and theoretical and empirical studies on the subject are few. Social sustainability can be described as striving to confront risks while addressing social concerns, although a new framework is necessary with increased focus on the risk and vulnerability that humanity faces from environmental externalities such as natural disasters and climate change. They also highlight the importance of equity and fair distribution of resources geographically as a remedy for injustice and as a means for economic restructuring, with public involvement to create a sense of inclusion and community (Eizenberg and Jabareen, 2017).

The term sustainable development is also criticised for the trade-offs that are presented within the paradigm. Planetary boundaries and human development presents an imposing challenge in the practical implementation of sustainability oriented initiatives (Messerli et al., 2015).

2.1.2. Social sustainability and related concepts

Social sustainability adheres to an anthropocentric perspective and focuses on human wellbeing as a condition for societal advancement and security. Social sustainability ranges from ensuring support for major essential needs such as food security and safe living environments, adequate education, work security and access to adequate health care (Sachs and Ban, 2015). These, amongst other factors, are different push and pull factors for migration and movement amongst people (Hare, 1999). The United Nation (UN) has developed 17 sustainable development goals in the 2030 Agenda, of which some
goals count as social sustainability goals such as (1) no poverty, (2) zero hunger, (3) good health and wellbeing, (4) quality education to name a few. These aspects will be explored further in a northern context in chapter 2.2 (UNDR, n.d.).

Other concepts within the paradigm of sustainable development relate to social sustainability and possess some shared aspects. These concepts are, much like sustainable development, understood in different ways depending on who interprets them. In order to find workable definitions this study avails itself of UN reports.

Human development is one of such concepts that have strong linkages to social sustainability, and some may claim that human development is indeed a part of social sustainability, as found in the United Nations Development Report (UNDR, n.d.). The term human development grew out of global discussions arising regarding the links between economic growth and development during the 1990’s (ibid.). At the time, economic growth had become the main indicator to measure wellbeing through Gross Domestic Product (GDP), even though the founder of the concept, Simon Kuznets, strongly warned against doing so (ibid.). As more voices demanded new approaches to measure wellbeing, human development was introduced as a way to expand richness of human life, rather than simply the richness of the economy. This approach focuses on income growth as a means to development rather than an end in itself (ibid.). The difference between human development and social sustainability is that human development was developed as an alternative to the GDP measurement system, as a means to measure wellbeing rather than economic growth, whereas social sustainability is one of the pillars of sustainable development (ibid.).

Another concept that is related to social sustainability and arguably also a part of the concept is human security. Human security refers to the idea of strengthening the protection and empowerment of all people, from threats such as protracted violence, violent conflicts, natural disasters, persistent poverty, famine, epidemics, and economic crisis according to United Nations Trust Fund Human Security (UNTFHS, n.d.). This approach is perhaps more relevant than ever, due to the increased threat that climate change brings to vulnerable people and communities (Barnett and Adger, 2007). It differs from social sustainability in the sense that it mainly addresses physical threats, whereas social sustainability encompasses both physical and as well as socio-economic, and mental well being (ibid.). One could therefore argue that human security is an important component to social sustainability, and the latter is incomplete without a functioning human security. The concepts also differ in terms of time perspective – while social sustainability aims to create a sustainable future, human security is looking to improve the present.

There are limitations to creating a structured and coordinated framework for identifying sustainability due to the social dimension lacks sufficient scientific base, and is in need of development (Missimer et al., 2017). As communities are subject to constant change, resilience is an essential contributor to social sustainability, through adaptation and transformation (Magis, 2010). A society needs to be prepared to change in order to survive the different challenges that arises. The resilience theory approach is one way to do this. Resilience attempts to embrace human and natural systems, and the natural cycles that theses systems go through in order to achieve sustainability (Walker et al., 2012).

2.2. Social sustainability in northern context

The arctic generally includes eight arctic nations: Alaska (United States), Canada, Greenland & Faroe Islands (Denmark), Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia (Nymand Larsen, 2014a). This study includes European Arctic states, in order to limit the findings and to hold a European focus on the project selection. Furthermore, the geographic focus has been expanded to include peripheral communities of the UK and Ireland, as they face many of the same challenges as remote Arctic communities in Europe. As will be evident in the chapter below, studies and research show that the arctic and northern communities are vulnerable not only to climate change, but due to the geographic isolation, social factors play a role in social wellbeing and the population of these communities. The
Arctic Social Indicators (discussed more in detail in chapter 3.1) identified a number of domains of social development as especially relevant for the Arctic. These have been used to organise the background on social sustainability in the Arctic.

2.2.1. Health and population

Social sustainability varies widely from urban to rural context, with different needs, challenges and opportunities presenting themselves depending on the size and socio-economic status of the area (Dempsey et al., 2011). Unlike the general steady growth of the world population, the population growth around the arctic varies, with a general decline in the European and Russian arctic (Heleniak, 2014; Sachs and Ban, 2015). One could argue that this fact emphasises the need to identify the social factors that drive this population decline, since human behaviours are connected to the social aspects of communities. The diminishing population in northern communities can be caused by various different factors, such as out-migration and declining birth-rates (Wennberg, 2017). Since communities in northern regions are often small, they are more affected by the movement of people in and out of the community (Heleniak, 2014).

Gender inequality has long been a major issue in the context of global social sustainability, with girls and women being less educated, receiving lesser health care, and generally making less money than boys and men by being more prone to engage in unpaid work (OECD, 2017). In general, women are underrepresented in the health care system, both in the administrative and policymaking sector, but also in terms of research on women’s health, and in practical health care (Dhatt et al., 2017). Overall, gender equality plays a major role in achieving social sustainability in society (Sachs and Ban, 2015). One of the major challenges that are specific to rural northern communities is the different gender ratio in communities (Wennberg, 2017). The northern communities mainly focus on male-dominated industries such as fisheries, transportation and resource extraction, leading to a higher marginalisation of women in the region (Lahey et al., 2014). Despite the fact that numerous organisations have been founded to support research, policy analysis, and development regarding gender issues in the northern region, few legislations or policies have been implemented with integrated gender solutions (ibid). As shown in Figure 1, it is evident that the gender ratio is askew in the Nordic Arctic regions.
Figure 1: Gender distribution in Nordic northern municipalities. Picture source: Nordregio (2015)

The top map (in blue) shows the gender balance at municipality level and the one below (yellow) shows the balance in settlements and outside settlements. The male dominance in the top map is clear, with the exception of some regional centres shown as pink on the map, showing female dominance (“Females and males in the Nordic Arctic 2014 and 2015,” 2015). The eight Arctic nations are all ranked amongst the highest in the world when it comes to human development, but this does not necessarily guarantee that there is equality between the genders in these countries. Lahey et al. (2014) argue that the results of equality research would have different outcomes in the arctic regions if they were evaluated separately from their respective nation.

Communities in the arctic and sub-arctic have a high level of exposure to the effects of climate change, for example in terms of thawing permafrost, sea-ice reduction, coastal erosion and flooding. The forced migration caused by such effects of climate change is known as climigration, coined by Alaskan lawyer Robin bronen (Hamilton et al., 2016). Other push and pull factors also affect the out-migration, such as economic, educational and social opportunities elsewhere (ibid.).
As a result of the diminishing population in northern communities, the current population age is steadily increasing, and the population over the age of 65 is expected to nearly double by the year 2040 (Nørtoft et al., 2018). An ageing population comes with various different social and economic challenges. One of the future risks of an ageing population in an already sparsely populated region is that there will be insufficient number of tax-paying adults to contribute to the social welfare of the community and thus pose a threat to the standard of care for the elderly population (Wennberg, 2017). Policymaking regarding the care and wellbeing of an ageing population is challenged by the fact that national laws fail to incorporate the needs and challenges that the northern part of the country faces (Nørtoft et al., 2018). Most nations that are included in the European arctic provide universal health care, which includes free hospitals and health clinics, transportation, and help in the house if possible, with the possibility of adjusted apartments or nursing homes if not (ibid.). There’s a risk that elderly people who suffer from reduced mobility become isolated in their homes if sufficient infrastructure and aid is not available to them, a risk that is greater in remote communities (Wennberg, 2017). Figure 2 depicts the younger population in the Arctic region. Notably, this map includes regions not related to this study, and misses some states that are part of the geographical scope. It does however give an indication of the youth population in similar areas.
As the health status of a population is often measured on a national level, it poses some difficulty when trying to convey statistics of a region that encompasses eight different nations (Heleniak, 2014). One can however identify some disparities between communities in the Arctic region, and the rest of the nation, as well as disparities between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples. These disparities include differences in child-mortality, life expectancy and the occurrence of diseases (Rautio et al., 2014). Health risks that are connected to urbanisation are relevant to certain areas of the arctic and northern periphery. As people see themselves moving to cities, challenges that arise include food and water security and environmental contaminants (pollution) (ibid.).

2.2.2. Material wellbeing

In the global context, poverty can be defined as the individual’s inability to acquire basic material needs, including food, clean water, sanitation, shelter, clothing, access to health care, access to basic education and access to essential services such as transportation and electricity (Sachs and Ban, 2015).
The arctic economy extends from local traditional products, to large-scale international production and distribution of natural resource (Huskey et al., 2014). Grasping an overview of the arctic economy poses a challenge since the area consists of several different countries that all have their own economy. Looking at Gross Regional Product (GRP) could be a way to receive an overview of the status of the arctic economy, but it would fail to relay any real information on livelihood and living conditions in the area (Glomsrød et al., 2017). Another issue with measuring GRP in the arctic is the unrealistic perception it would give since a substantial part of the arctic GRP is from income revenues from petroleum extraction and mining activities that would be taxed outside of the region (ibid.). Petroleum extraction and mining activities are alongside fisheries the three pillars of arctic economy. Contributions to the informal economy, such as fishery and hunting for personal consumption, is a major source to subsistence livelihood in the region (ibid.). The arctic economy is very much affected by the changes to the climate, both in negative aspects such as loss in tourism revenue due to a shorter and milder winter seasons. Climate change also mean, for example, migration of fish that are temperature sensitive, that come further north due to temperature rise, and contribute to incomes from fisheries that previously did not exist in the area (ibid.).

The arctic economies are relatively small in the global context, making them vulnerable to abrupt changes in demand for exports. Most communities in the arctic regions are subject to narrow economies, with one major employer in the region, for example a mining company or fishing company. Since most arctic regions are dependent on raw material export, it is of importance to take into account the fluctuating global market price and the effects on the arctic economy, especially in the aftermath of the global economy crisis in 2008. (Glomsrød et al., 2017)

National policymaking plays a huge role in the development and survival of the rural communities, as seen in the article by Skillemar (2016). If the policies are sensitive to the needs of rural societies and are able to adapt to them, there is a higher chance of financial investment and work opportunities in rural areas, and a higher chance that the countryside survives. For example if there are incentives to reduce the general payroll tax in smaller regions in order to promote regional growth, as compared to large cities, it would make it easier and less risky to open businesses in rural areas. Another benefit to rural northern communities would be for them to govern over their own resources and export, and in doing so receive some of the revenue, as opposed to the revenue going to either the state or the companies (ibid.).

As mentioned above, petroleum extraction is a major income source in some parts of the arctic. Many of the resource extracting activities are state regulated, and in many cases also state owned (Moe, 2014). According to researchers, the arctic contains a quarter of the global undiscovered petroleum resources, although they are located where the costs of extraction are high. The future market of arctic petroleum is highly dependent on global oil and gas prices, especially the outcome of the large market in the Middle East (Lindholt and Glomsrød, 2012).

The value of the unique and exclusive arctic nature indirectly shows up in the revenues from tourism (Glomsrød et al., 2017). Arctic tourism is generally defined by high-latitude northern environments vulnerable to change, where extreme nature, landscapes and wildlife attract visitors (Kaján, 2014). Tourism is often a focus in businesses in rural and peripheral areas, but many times as a last resort by communities in the north due to the unstable foundation of the industry (Brouder, 2014). There is however a shortage of research on the monetary significance and socio-economic dimensions of tourism in the northern areas (Steenholdt and Chimirri, 2018). While visitors in the arctic and northern periphery used to be mainly niche tourists, the number of tourists has over the past years increased and now includes leisure tourists as well (Dixit, 2018). As northern tourism is dependent on weather due to the nature of activities, arctic tourism is vulnerable to changes in climate, with extreme weathers affecting the outcome for visitors; possibilities to see northern lights, outdoor activities, transport accessibility, and infrastructural issues (such as pipes freezing and bursting) are all highly dependent on local weather and in turn affect the outcome for visiting tourists (Kaján, 2014). There are however positive tourist effects of weather changes, such as increased indoor activity revenues such as spa and
cafés (ibid.). Overall, arctic and northern tourism is arguably an unstable source of income due to vulnerability and demand, but holds an impact on economic and socio-economic outcomes.

2.2.3. Education

An adequate education system is the base for all functions in a society, where development and prosperity can thrive thanks to an educated population (Sachs and Ban, 2015). Education leads to multiple social benefits, such as improved health including decreased age-specific rates of morbidity, disability, and mortality (Ross and Mirowsky, 2010). An education teaches students more than just to read and write, but also how to think critically, analyse, how to communicate with peers and authorities, solve problems, cooperate, and develop ideas, making it an essential platform for creating well functioning adults (ibid.).

Access to higher education in rural areas is considered an incentive for the younger population to stay in an area (Hirshberg and Petrov, 2014). Higher education institutes contribute to research on regional development, and have a known contribution to the social and cultural development in the region of its location. This also increases the incentive for regional actors and agencies to participate in the development (Chatterton and Goddard, 2000).

Education in the arctic varies due to the fact that there are different national educational systems active throughout the region, with a lack of consistent educational data from primary and secondary levels increasing the difficulty of acquiring an overview. There are however trends that affect the majority of arctic and sub-arctic communities. These trends includes challenges in recruiting and retaining sufficiently trained educators due to out-migration from the region (Hirshberg and Petrov, 2014). Out-migration also poses educational issues when local schools are forced to close due to insufficient funds and students, meaning that the pupils in the area travel very long to school. Due to these reasons it’s not unheard of for parents in these areas to send children to larger schools, most often boarding schools. This option of receiving education from other regions severely damages the cultural heritage education that you can receive from a local education, thus damaging both cultural heritage and the continuation of heritage languages (ibid.). Another option that is common for parents to make when the local schools close, is to move to a different region and thus increasing the out-migration and affecting the whole sustainability of a community (ibid.).

Public schools in the arctic and northern areas possess the ability to work as a linkage between societies and the environment, with the possibility to educate on local affects of climate change, and how to best maintain the unique and sometimes harsh nature that characterize the regions (Cost, 2015).

2.2.4. Cultural wellbeing, contact with nature, and fate control

Identity and culture are two concepts that are highly important to address when discussing social sustainability in northern regions, mainly due to historical neglect and the diminishing of Indigenous peoples and cultures (Schweitzer et al., 2014). Current identities and cultures are a product of the past, and since most arctic and northern regions have been inhabited for several thousand years, the diversity of the cultures and identities in the area are well represented through its spectrum of cultures and historic experiences (ibid.). The importance of identity and feeling of belonging is strong in the arctic, due to the stereotypical narrative of being perceived as a distant, exotic, and even a threatening place by the global public (Medby, 2018). There is also the hurdle of national identity contra arctic identity, and how inhabitants can feel torn between conflicting identities in a region (Medby, 2014). Tourism and the increased knowledge sharing may provide an important role in the preserving and spreading of cultural heritage (Medby, 2018). The fact that some northern regions, in Sweden for example, have chosen to add the native Indigenous language on official buildings and signs shows an increased awareness and importance of keeping Indigenous languages alive and in use. It also shows that Indigenous cultures have come a long way in a short while, and have only in recent years begun to reclaim much of its identity, after a long history of suppression (Doubleday, 2003).
The Indigenous peoples of the arctic are not only surviving despite threats of climate change and historical and contemporary colonialism, but are also achieving global recognition and success in both political and cultural fields (Doubleday, 2003). An important aspect of preserving and sharing cultural heritages is through arts, and northern art seems to be in growing demand. Music, fine arts and literature has been prominent sources of northern culture, and lately film production has gotten a bigger demand as well. Creating a platform where accurate representation is involved can strengthen a sense of identity and cultural belonging. Another less recognised aspect of arctic and northern culture is sports, with winter sports such as ice hockey and skiing being major contributors to northern identity (Schweitzer et al., 2014).
3. Methods

3.1. Framework

This study is inspired by the work of the ASI project by Nymand Larsen (2014b) and will analyse the empirical data along the indicators identified by the ASI through domains that are applicable for this study and are shown below. These domains were chosen due to the geographic specification that aligns with this study and thus highlights central issues of “social sustainability” in the context. Other indicators that were considered include the Sustainable Development Indicators (SDI) that are being developed by the UN as a follow-up on the SDG’s. The ASI were chosen over the SDI ones due to the geographical specification, and the fact that SDI are developed with the whole world as a target, whereas the ASI has identified indicators that are specific to the northern and arctic context. The domains were used to direct the interviews and the coding of the empirical data. The ASI has presented important tools for measuring wellbeing and to follow human trends in the arctic, which is important both for policy makers and other stakeholders (Nymand Larsen, 2014b)

The following six domains are the indicators identified by the ASI as a means to monitor human development in the arctic. Since this study will not be looking into statistics in order to measure social sustainability, the indicators are adapted to rather show what types of domains are interesting to investigate in the context of arctic social sustainability. All domains are however the basis for the background chapter of “social sustainability in northern context” where each domain was investigated to create a sense of understanding. The following domains have been adapted from the six indicators that are identified by the ASI:

- Health and population
  The ASI identified infant mortality as the most easily measured statistic to determine health in the region and net migration to monitor population trends. This domain will be investigated in the interviews by inquiring how the projects affect factors relating to population migration and health impacts.

- Material wellbeing
  A number of different indicators were selected for the ASI, such as household income, poverty rate, and unemployment rate, with the goal to capture the complicated and unique arctic economy. These were used to guide interviews and analyses of impact on the economic wellbeing in the region.

- Education
  This ASI focused on completion of post-secondary education opportunities as a means of measuring education in an area. This study will look at education with a broader perspective, since the case studies might have impacts on education that is not directly linked to post-secondary education, and there is an aspect of knowledge sharing that can be perceived as educational outside of academia.

- Cultural wellbeing
  The ASI chose three components as indicators for cultural wellbeing in the arctic context; language retention, cultural autonomy, and sense of belonging. Although this domain holds a great importance for arctic communities, it is deemed complex to investigate in the confines of this study, as it is hard to actualize through interviews with people who may not i) be arctic residents themselves and therefor have a limited perspective and ii) deem the domain as tangible in the context and therefor misunderstand or misinterpret the meaning of the indicators. The domain will however be used for guiding the identification of potential contributions of EU-funded projects on cultural wellbeing.

- Contact with nature
  The ASI identifies three indicators for this domain; harvest per capita, consumption of country food, and number of people or households engaged in traditional economy. According to the ASI, this
domain is intangible, and difficult to measure, which means it will hold significance in the answers of the interview, but will not hold a question itself.

- Fate control
This domain refers to the individual’s ability to guide one’s destiny, both at individual, household, community, and regional level. In the context of arctic, the collective fate is of critical concern both to Indigenous peoples as well as to settlers. Fate control is of interest in the collective term in the arctic context. Sub-domains of fate control includes for example, percentage of Indigenous peoples in governing bodies, and percentage of individuals that speak their native tongue (similar to language retention). This domain is like the previous one difficult to assess, but will be subject to investigation through interviews.

As the empirical data collection was underway, three additional domains were added: environment, policymaking, and transnational cooperation. They are discussed further in chapter 5.

3.2. Qualitative approach

Qualitative research usually emphasises on words and meaning rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data, meaning that words are interpreted and valued (Bryman, 2012). This method was chosen to best represent the different reflections on social sustainability and to let the interview flow more naturally.

1. Research questions were determined
   a. RQ1: How do actors within EU-funded projects for remote northern communities perceive social sustainability?
   b. RQ2: How do EU project actors in remote northern communities perceive trade-offs with other aspects of sustainability?
   c. RQ3: What role can transnational cooperation play for supporting social sustainability in remote northern communities?

2. Selection of relevant locations and interview subjects
   a. The NPA-program was chosen as the main focus area
   b. A selection of relevant projects within the program was chosen
   c. Relevant actors within the chosen projects were approached for inquiries of participation in the study

3. Collection of data
   a. Interviews with the responding actors were conducted via Skype
   b. The interviews were recorded, and later transcribed
   c. The webpages for the chosen projects were used for text analysis

4. Interpretation of data
   a. The transcribed interviews were coded according to the identified domains
   b. The text from the webpages were analysed according to the same domains

5. Theoretical work
   a. Identify a frame for analysis, i.e. The ASI domains
   b. Gather background information on social sustainability in the northern context

6. Results of the data collection and conclusion thereof

3.2.1. Validity and reliability

Respondent validity was maintained in the study through communication with the respondents, that they had the option to review the finished transcription if they so pleased. They were also invited to take part in the finished results chapter. None of the respondents opted to proofread the transcripts.

The external reliability, to what extent the study can be replicated, of a qualitative study is deemed difficult to accomplish, since the social circumstances and situation rarely remain the same for a long period of time (Bryman, 2012). In the case of this study, the projects that were investigated were all completed, and the data that were collected will be deemed out-dated in the future, and other projects
in the field would be more relevant. In order to ensure the reliability of the study, a detailed research process has been explained throughout the method chapter, including selection of case studies, selection of interview subjects, and how the data was processed.

3.3. Collection of data

3.3.1. Literature review

Mainly two search engines, Uppsala University’s library and Google scholar, were used for locating literature of various kinds in order to review previous literature within the chosen field. Peer reviewed articles as well as books have been used to narrate the background, with additional information from trusted webpages, such as the United Nations webpage. This is done to establish what is already known in the field, and how it can best be used in this study. The literature review was written before the collection of data, meaning it was provisional at first and revised as the data collection proceeded. The background is connected to the findings of this study in the discussion chapter.

3.3.2. Selection of case studies

A total of five case studies were chosen from the EU Interreg programme, which is a part of the EU cohesion policy for the 2014-2020 period and is funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) that has a budget of 10.1 billion €. Interreg programmes are a result of this funding, with three types of programmes, cross-border cooperation programmes, transnational cooperation programmes, and interregional programmes. The official aim of the Interreg investment is “to jointly tackle common challenges and find shared solutions in fields such as health, environment, research, education, transport, sustainable energy and more”. The NPA programme is part of the transnational programmes with the aim “to promote better cooperation and regional development within the union by a joint approach to tackle common issues”. The programme supports a wide range of projects related to innovation, environment, accessibility, and urban development. (“About Interreg | What is Interreg and how it works • Interreg.eu,” n.d.)

The NPA is a transnational cooperation programme between nine nations: Sweden, Finland, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland and Norway, with the possibilities of partnership with other countries such as Russia and Canada. The purpose of the programme is to increase the attraction of the region(s) for living, working, studying, and investing in (“Eufonder,” 2018). The thematic objectives of the programme NPA include research and innovation, competitiveness of small medium enterprises (SMEs), low carbon economy, and environment and resource efficiency (“Northern Periphery and Arctic 2014-2020 • Interreg.eu,” n.d.).

A total of five projects were finally selected as case studies through a process of elimination based on a number of criteria. All finished projects that were part of the NPA programme were a part of the selection. The first group to be dismissed were projects with partners outside the geographical area that the study is limited to (i.e. outside Europe). The projects would ideally have similar width and funding, so the funding scope was decided between € 1 million - € 2 million to ensure that the projects would be around the same size. There was also an incentive to choose projects with different lead partner countries and different objectives, so that there would be variety in the selection. The next step in the selection meant to eliminate projects that did not have their own webpage, or an active webpage, since the webpage would be used as empirical material for analysis. The final step meant to analyse the possibility of interview subjects, and how available they might be for the study. After this final step, five projects were approached for participation in the study, and all five projects responded with interview subjects who participated in the study. For a detailed selection process, see the excel sheet in appendix. Below are the five projects that were used as case studies.

1. Grebe was a project focused on renewable energy cooperation, with lead partner in Ireland, and partners in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Finland, Norway and Iceland. The project aimed to create and share support for the renewable energy sector, by connecting suppliers and installers, and creating
mentoring schemes to improve business models. Renewable energy has been identified by the project as a potential alternative to imported fossil fuels, and a strong contributor to local job opportunities (grebe_admin, n.d.)

2. The Cool Route cruising route has been ranked the most adventurous cruising route in the world, taking you around the cost from Cork in Ireland, up to Northern Ireland, further to Faroe Islands and ending in Tromsoe, Norway. Cool Routes aim was to create a product package, and thereby increasing the market reach, and customer base. The project aimed to enhance local revenue and craftsmanship sales in the communities along the route, sharing knowledge about the cultural heritage. The lead partner of the project was Cork Institute of Technology, in Ireland. (“Sail Cool route | Strengthening the market reach and customer base for SMEs in remote communities,” n.d.)

3. The RemoAge project sought new innovations and technologies allowing elderly people to be able to live longer in their homes, in sparsely populated, and remote communities, where long distances and limited resources were some of the challenges. Digital solutions were aimed to support elderly people, their family, and health carers. Lead partners were in Norrbotten, Sweden, with partners in Scotland, Norway, Western Isles, Shetland Isles, Faroe Isles, and Northern Ireland. (“RemoAge,” n.d.)

4. IMPROVE was aimed to improve the public transport in remote areas, overcoming such challenges as long distances, shortage of skilled staff, and high costs of developing and maintaining services. The project wanted to increase the knowledge and skillset of the six partnering countries, by creating an exchange and cooperation between different actors and companies. (“IMPROVE,” n.d.)

5. SAINT stands for Slow Adventures in Northern Territories, and was a project with the aim to increase the market reach and to create tourism packages, leading to direct impacts in the local area in terms of increased revenue and increasing visitors’ stay, potentially stretching the season. Slow tourism is defined as experiencing natural spaces in a slow pace – the opposite of the adrenaline-pumping thrills of convenient adventure packages. (“SAINT,” n.d.)

### 3.3.3 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are one of the most popular means of data collection, with semi-structured interviews being the most commonly used (Kallio et al., 2016). A less structured approach to interviews allows for a more flexible response and a dialogue is more easily established (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Qualitative interviews generally aim to receive more elaborate and detailed answers, rather than general answers that quickly can be coded (Bryman, 2012).

The interviews will be conducted in a semi-structured setting, following five phases of interview identified by Kallio et al. (2016):

5. Identifying the prerequisites for using semi-structured interviews
   a. Wanting to keep the interview open
   b. Letting the interview subject describe much of the interview, rather than asking many narrow questions
6. Retrieving and using previous knowledge
7. Formulating the preliminary semi-structured interview guide
8. Pilot testing the guide
   a. The interview guide was piloted on three separate occasions before it was finalised
9. Presenting the complete semi-structured interview guide

As Bryman (2012) defines semi-structured interviews, it requires a list or guide with relatively specific themes that will be brought up, but with the freedom for the interview subject to explore the answers in their own way. There is also room for the interviewer to expand outside of the interview guide and ask different questions, and also to skip questions from the guide if it is deemed needed. When the technology allowed, the interviews were conducted with video chat, 6/7 interviews were with video, in
order to establish a more personal bond with the interview subject but also to see how the interview subject reacts to questions and answers. The interview subjects all gave permission to be recorded, and transcribed, and the recording technology worked for all interviews.

The interview guide was formulated according to the already written research questions, with the research questions as base for each theme of questions (for complete interview guide, see annex. The questions were thought out based on what language would be both understandable, and without value behind the words. Another important aspect was to keep the questions from being leading to the greatest extent possible. Since the interview subjects all were a part of an organisation or institute of some kind, it was deemed unnecessary to follow up on individual age, gender, and other specific background information, other than their position and role in the project.

The beginning of each interview consisted of a series of ethical questions that were recorded but not transcribed. These questions were:

1. If at any time during the interview you feel unsure about a question, or have other inquiries please feel free to ask
2. Do I have your permission to record this interview, and later transcribe it, as well as taking notes during the interview?
3. Do you wish to be anonymous in the study?
4. If you so wish, you can receive a copy of the transcribed interview and suggest corrections or changes, and/or a copy of the finished results part, although the analysis will be independent and not up for debate
5. If you, before publishing, decide to opt out of participation, you are free to do so.

Six out of the total seven interviews were conducted in English, with one being conducted in Swedish. This was due to the project being implemented in Sweden and the interview subject being Swedish. The author translated the material from this interview.

3.3.4. Selection of respondents

The initial email contact with the project was directed to the lead partner, and more specifically to the project coordinator. The response and willingness to participate exceeded the initial plan, and the interviews were booked with four out of five project coordinators. There was a continued stream of suggestions from the projects for other participants. The goal was to have a total of 10 interviews, two for each project. Due to time restraints in transcribing, it was lowered to seven, in order for all the data to be processed and used for the study within the time frame. After the initial first interview per project, the second interview(s) were selected based mainly on the nation of the interview subject, in order to achieve a geographical spread.

It is understood that these interviews will provide a narrative only from the perspective of the implementers of the projects, and not from the receivers such as local actors.

3.4. Processing of data

3.4.1. Processing of interviews

A total of seven semi-structured Skype interviews were conducted for this study. These interviews were transcribed in a denaturalised way, attempting to create an authentic transcript of what was said, without including unnecessary involuntary vocalisations. The beginning of each interview consisted of the previously mentioned standard questions such as permission to record and question of anonymity, which was not included in the transcript but are still part of the recording for ethical purposes. The finished transcriptions were later colour-coded after a number of themes suggested by the earlier mentioned domains, and three other themes were added as a result of the direction of the interviews. The following themes were used in the coding process: health & population, material wellbeing,
education, cultural wellbeing/contact with nature/fate control, environment, policymaking, and transnational cooperation. The latter three themes were added beyond those determined by the domains, and subsequently is a “finding” of the study and have no background chapter of their own.

The substance of the interviews was considered to be of non-sensitive content, so no special measurements of secrecy such as encryption or similar were taken, the interviews were saved on the author’s hard drive and a copy was kept in the cloud for backup. For the coding the transcribed interviews were kept with the author.

As the transcription and coding was finished, the result was written with quotes from the interviews under the fitting theme.

3.4.2. Processing of text analysis

Each EU-project that were part of the study had a webpage that were used for text analysis based on the same themes as for the interviews. The webpages were read and quotes were implemented under the appropriate theme. Even though some webpages included media such as interactive maps or videos, only text material was used in the results since there needed to be similarity between the case studies, and there was no usage of material from other webpages through links. All webpages were in English.
4. Results

In this chapter, the study’s empirical results are presented. The first section derives from the semi-structured interviews conducted with actors linked with the EU-projects, and the second half derives from text taken from the projects’ webpages.

4.1. Interview results

The following chapter presents the results from the conducted interviews, and is divided into the following domains (and added themes found during the coding): health & population, material wellbeing, education, cultural wellbeing/contact with nature/fate control, environment, policymaking, and transnational cooperation. In chart 1 the interview subjects and their associated are shown. For a more detailed description, see source list.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name in study</th>
<th>Project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview/respondent A</td>
<td>Grebe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview/respondent B</td>
<td>RemoAge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview/respondent C</td>
<td>Cool Route</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview/respondent D</td>
<td>SAINT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview/respondent E</td>
<td>IMPROVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview/respondent F</td>
<td>RemoAge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview/respondent G</td>
<td>SAINT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1.1. Theme 1: Health & population

A concern for impacts on health was raised by the three respondents who were connected to projects directly working with health care technology (B, E and F). The respondents maintained that the main issue their regions faced concerning health care was accessibility, and that the projects working with technological solutions could be a solution to this issue. According to the respondents, technological improvements would not only affect the direct receiver (patient), but to an extent also the family of the receiver and local health care workers:

“Better support frail older people living in remote rural areas, and their families, and their health and care staff who were supporting them.” (Respondent B, 2019)

Interestingly, one respondent found this type of solution to be counterintuitive: if communication is accessed through digital means this may lead to a decline in physical visits from friends and family who live elsewhere. The respondent argued that this could further isolate the elderly individuals who live in remote areas.

A majority of the respondents expressed concerns about population decline, some clarifying the youth decline that the background of this study also suggest. The respondents put forward various reasons for this decline in youth population in the region. Many suggested that better opportunities for education and employment that could be found elsewhere, particularly in larger cities, may have been a driving cause for this demographic change. Additionally, a number of respondents spoke extensively on the necessity of functioning transportation to make their regions accessible and affordable and thus encourage the population to remain. The issue of population decline overlapped with other themes in this study, like education and material wellbeing. Various respondents argued that improving work opportunities was a way to improve the population. The reflections shared by the respondents align with the background chapter on population decline, showing that their reflections also have a base in studies.

4.1.2. Theme 2: Material wellbeing
The theme of material wellbeing was brought up in different ways in all interviews, and the respondents working with projects with a business orientation, like A, C and D, discussed this theme at great length. The main focus of their discussion centred on improvements their projects could have on local employment, and how small changes in local businesses could have a greater impact on employment rates in the long term. Such changes included the possibility to increase work forces in local enterprises, and the impact of increasing part time employment:

“More opportunities to turn those part time roles in to full time roles, so increase the employment as well in rural areas.” (Respondent C, 2019)

4.1.3. Theme 3: Education

When discussing education, many of the respondents expressed that knowledge sharing between partners was key to creating a successful project. This exchange of knowledge could manifest itself in different ways, but mainly through personal interactions and through experts travelling to different partners and sharing their skills and knowledge. As per respondent A, knowledge sharing helped foster transnational cooperation and lasting partnerships during the projects. The results of the projects were also shared with the wider community through national conferences aimed to spread the findings:

“We’ve also been invited to discuss the findings from the project in different national conferences” (Respondent B, 2019)

Respondents who were connected to projects dealing with tourisms stated that knowledge sharing for them also encompassed educating visitors and tourists on local cultures. This included food and handicraft, through the means of story-telling and developing a narrative around local histories.

Various respondents reflected on education and contributions within academia. They described how their projects had led to the writing of academic papers and book chapters. This finding directly links to the background chapter of this study, which discusses the importance of academic research in rural regions to investigate and highlight local subjects.

4.1.4. Theme 4: Cultural wellbeing/contact with nature/fate control

The respondents who were part of projects working with improving health care services talked indirectly about fate control: enabling older people to have the option of receiving care in their home and thus improving their control over their lives and decisions. Securing access to health care provided these elderly individuals with more freedom and safety in their decision to remain in their rural homes, as oppose to moving to larger urban contexts with greater access to health care facilities.

“This also creates larger independence and safety for the citizens, those that are in need of these types of services.” (Respondent F, 2019)

Cultural wellbeing – to preserve and share the culture to visitors – was significant in the projects that worked with tourism. This concept also relates to contact with nature by engaging with country food and a traditional economy. The respondents connected to these tourism projects discussed the possibility of increasing the range of activities available for tourists, to include those that are more low-scale and brings the visitors closer to nature. This would also bring the visitor closer to the local culture through activities like baking traditional bread and guided tours through nature and local communities. One of the respondents reflected on the importance of including an Indigenous perspective when developing tourist experiences, and the challenge of combining this with Western commercialisation. Another respondent reflected on the benefits of shifting the fast motorised tourism to a slower paced human fuelled experience.

The subject of farming, specifically the decline of farms in Iceland along with the loss of stories and cultures of Icelandic farming arose during one of the interviews. The respondent reflected that the
farms that still exist today mainly produces tourist products, which in a way preserves the culture of farming.

4.1.5. Theme 5: Environment

During the coding of the interview data, the theme of “environment” arose as an important concept discussed by the respondents. This theme represents the respondents’ reflections on environmental impacts and the challenges the natural environment posed for the projects. Unlike the “contact with nature” theme, the environment theme focuses on impacts rather than consumption and traditional economy and food. The respondents’ main reflection on the environment encompassed creating environmentally friendly tourism. The aim would be to shift from fast motorised tourism to slower nature-based tourism and thus improved local environment and fewer emissions:

“We are encouraging people to take human powered tourism, have human powered tourism holidays, and also we are trying to educate about the environment as well”. (Respondent D, 2019)

The respondents also reflected on increasing tourism and how that leads to environmental degradation through increased flights. They suggested that spreading the tourist season out over the year would be one way of mitigating this issue by making sure that visitors are not limited to the high-season. The environment was also discussed in terms of trade-offs within projects. One respondent brought up the paradox of being a project on renewable energy, and yet holding physical meetings three times a year, that yielded aviation emissions. The respondent reflected upon how this could be considered unsustainable and how it could be avoided, but with no clear solution as the benefits of in person meetings were high within the project.

4.1.6. Theme 6: Policymaking

Policymaking was the second theme to be added during the coding phase. It was a subject brought up in several interviews in relation to discussing partnerships and highlighting issues and challenges that are outside of the projects’ hands. One subject that came up in two interviews was the current uncertainty around the UK leaving the EU (Brexit), and the challenges this poses for projects that work across borders in and around the UK. The respondents expressed concerns for the vulnerability of businesses that are active in the region affected by Brexit. For example, it was unclear how cross border cooperation and trade would be affected at the Ireland and Northern Ireland border, and how the current situation has seen business development come to a halt. Such reflections suggest a frustration at the uncertainty the situation brings, and how certain outcomes could lead to setbacks in years’ worth of project development. The interviews were conducted when the debate concerning Brexit was at its peak, which made the topic all the more urgent. Such findings reveal the sensitivity that international policymaking poses when it comes to transnational projects, especially funded by the EU:

“We hope, but whatever the outcome of Brexit, that we will be able to work with the partners that the EU has helped us to establish” (Respondent B, 2019)

Policymaking was also discussed in relation to budget management. The respondents expressed a frustration at decision making processes that were outside of the projects’ influence, and the power of governmental decisions to affect the budget and projects overall. Respondent A saw that governmental decision-making had a substantial impact on the project’s outcomes related to renewable energy. The respondent expressed how the renewable energy policy in Northern Ireland had drastically changed during the duration of their project and how the situation is at a stand-still as a result of this.

4.1.7. Theme 7: Transnational cooperation

During the interview coding process, it became clear that transnational cooperation was an important theme to be analysed. When asked about the impact of transnational cooperation on the projects, the respondents expressed outcomes like shared knowledge, business cooperation, and of a support system
that helped the individual partners achieve their goals through motivation and inspiration from other partners. Many respondents expressed that the transnational cooperation they had experienced in their projects was beneficial for various reasons. These included expertise and knowledge being shared across borders, also creating valuable long-term collaborations. In some of the projects, transnational cooperation also involved shared expertise on “production methodology” that are specific to these type of rural communities and the development of tools that required different sets of experiences from different countries. Some respondents expressed a sense of motivation and inspiration from having contact with other partner regions and nations that implemented similar solutions, and how that contact showed others that it is possible to implement the work packages successfully. Additionally, the meetings where transnational partners came together led to exchanges on advise and created a platform to discuss challenges.

As the projects were all part of the EU Interreg programme, one interview question inquired about the impact the EU had on the outcome of the projects, and some respondents reflected on the transnational collaboration to which the EU contributed. The projects would support other EU affiliated projects through collaborations and promotion. Respondent B reflected that the EU was a critical part of bringing consortium together, something that the respondent reflected would be problematic in the future in light of the Brexit situation. Respondent C explained that the EU supported most of their partners with 65% of the total funding, which created opportunities for cooperation across member nations that would not have been possible otherwise. Some respondents discussed how the EU provided a framework that contributed to cooperation between regions with similar challenges and strengths. The respondents expressed a feeling of safety in tackling issues together with other regions who faced similar challenges, which was made possible through the EU programme.

Respondents expressed that communication challenges were a negative side effect of transnational cooperation. Language barriers arose when working across different nations with different languages. As common result of this barrier was the tendency to simplify communication, meaning that a level of detail was lost. Furthermore, some communication difficulties regarding collaboration with Indigenous people was reflected upon by respondent D. The objective of the project was to merge Western and Indigenous perspectives to create a work package in the project, but the lifestyle of Indigenous people presented some difficulties in getting hold of them:

“As you might imagine, getting hold of the Sami people is actually quite difficult due to their lifestyle and so there were issues in terms of engaging properly on that particular work package.”
(Respondent D, 2019)

Some of the respondents discussed what the established relationships during the projects may lead to in the future. Many respondents held a shared view that their projects had created lasting relationships that would bring future collaborations with the involved partners. Many saw indications that there would be future projects in which the partners could be involved together again, and many believed new partners would be involved in the future which would help evolve the outcome(s) of the projects.

4.2. Text analysis

One of the criteria for selecting projects as case studies for this research was that they have their own webpage, which this chapter analysed using the same themes that was identified for the interviews.

4.2.1. Theme 1: Health and population

Health was only mentioned on the webpage for the RemoAge project, which was perhaps to be expected since it was a project with focus on improving health assistance. The project’s webpage described how the project created new ways of supporting the elderly, which would enable older people to live longer in their homes in rural areas of northern Europe (“RemoAge,” n.d.). The webpage also expressed that improving the quality of this type of support would be a critical factor in meeting the demands of an increasing elderly population in rural communities (ibid.).
4.2.2. Theme 2: Material wellbeing

Generally, when discussing material wellbeing, the project’s webpages mentioned improved business opportunities and advancement. This was most evident in the webpages of projects that had a direct focus on business development and cooperation, such as GREBE, but was also included in other projects. The GREBE webpage stated that the project’s aim was to develop renewable energy, and put the unique environment of the northern periphery of Europe in focus. It also mentioned the social and economic vibrancy of these areas and the importance of creating local employment opportunities (grebe_admin, n.d.). The webpage of the Cool Route project stated the importance of strengthening market reach so as to attract high end customers and thus increase revenue of tourism. The webpage explained how the project has achieved this by the development of 40 new marinas and pontoons (“Sail Cool route | Strengthening the market reach and customer base for SMEs in remote communities,” n.d.). The webpage of the SAINT project additionally mentioned marketing reach extension as a way to promote the slow adventure tourism sector. By extending the marketing reach, the project aimed to reach new international and domestic consumers, increase revenue from bed nights, and potentially extending the tourist season (SAINT, n.d.).

4.2.3. Theme 3: Education

Education was found in most projects when it came to the aspect knowledge sharing, as well as in relation to the themes of environment and transnational cooperation, where education was inherent in the subject. The webpage of IMPROVE touched upon education in the sense that the webpage directly mentioned knowledge transfers between regions and stakeholders (“IMPROVE,” n.d.).

4.2.4. Theme 4: Cultural wellbeing/contact with nature/fate control

Fate control was included in the webpage of IMPROVE, where focus was on providing citizens power over the decision-making process in their community, by giving them a platform for debate and voting on matters in the public interest (“IMPROVE,” n.d.). Arguably, this is an addition to the sense of fate control since it gives the community a way of being part of the development process.

Cultural wellbeing was expressed in terms of including cultural heritage in tourism, through experiences and education. For the Cool Route webpage, development opportunities involved culture and heritage attractions as well as local produce and crafts in their marketing model (“Sail Cool route | Strengthening the market reach and customer base for SMEs in remote communities,” n.d.). Furthermore, the SAINT webpage also mentioned the development of tourist activities that included culture and histories, as well as local activities like hunting and fishing in their marketing, to promote a respect for the local nature and wildlife (“SAINT,” n.d.). The webpage also stated that storytelling and education could ensure the survival of local histories and legacies, which also connects to the theme of education as well as cultural wellbeing and contact with nature. As mentioned in the interview, the webpage also explored the idea of combining Western perspective with the Indigenous ones, and explained that one of the project’s work packages aimed to do so. The webpage described this type of work package would help increase understanding of the local culture, health, linguistic and environment, and how these elements could be relevant for the development of future SMEs in other regions (ibid.).

4.2.5. Theme 5: Environment

Environment was mentioned in terms of how the projects dealt with the specific environmental challenges that the region poses, and how these affected business opportunities for the specific projects. Such challenges they mentioned included a lack of critical mass, dispersed settlements, poor infrastructure and accessibility, and vulnerability to effects of climate change (grebe_admin, n.d.). The webpages also stated that the harsh climate of the region and the natural environment provides excellent business opportunities in the renewable energy sector (ibid.).
The environment was also discussed on the webpages in terms of tourism, experiences of nature and wildlife, and nature education for visitors. Additionally, the educational aspect is also included in these terms on the webpage of SAINT, which stated that education on wild environments is a cornerstone to promoting slow adventure. It further described the project’s aim to encourage the enjoyment of the outdoor experience and engagement with more remote and wild and nature-rich areas by avoiding the more quick and convenient tourist experience and instead promoting slow tourism (“SAINT,” n.d.).

4.2.6. Theme 6: Policymaking

Policymaking was a part of the project objective for GREBE, and was mentioned in terms of identifying and understanding existing policies around renewable energy, with the aim to address challenges for remote and sparsely populated regions. The webpage further mentioned that the project worked with the establishment of an understanding of the existing policies in the renewable energy sector (grebe_admin, n.d.).

4.2.7. Theme 7: Transnational cooperation

Transnational cooperation was brought up in a majority of the webpages mainly when presenting partnering nations and regions. The webpages explained how the different partners could contribute to the outcome of the project in terms of knowledge sharing and skill exchange, which also is an educational aspect. Such exchange and sharing were identified as key elements of successful transnational cooperation, which would play a major role in the development of products and services, and the expertise of each partner would be incorporated in the actions of the project (grebe_admin, n.d.). Furthermore, the results of a transnational approach was mentioned to meet the goals in a more productive way than if each partner would work alone (“RemoAge,” n.d.).

The significance of transnational cooperation was also brought up in terms of similarities that the partners share, and the exchange that came from the partnerships, which was in line with what the respondents mentioned in the interviews. Additionally, communication platforms that enhanced the reach for the individual partners were mentioned as key for business and marketing development.
5. Discussion

As presented in the introduction, the aim of this study was to assess the perceived social impacts that EU-funded projects have on communities in the northern periphery and Arctic, according to actors in the EU-projects. Seven interviews were conducted and the level of enthusiasm and dedication by the respondents showed a great interest from the actors. Below are discussions about how the empirical data connects with the theory and how that answers the three research questions that were presented in the introduction.

5.1. Answering research questions.

5.1.1. Research question 1

“How do actors within EU-funded projects for remote northern communities reflect on social sustainability in their communities and in their EU-projects?”

In order to answer this question, the interviews with the project actors have been interpreted and connected to the background chapter.

Respondents in projects concerning improved health care technology talked about improvements in health and accessibility as a key component to regional sustainability. Several respondents mentioned the trend of out-migration and the problems concerning an increasingly solitary elderly population, which connects well with the studies by Nørtoft et al. (2018) and Wennberg (2017) that are presented in the background. The respondents argued that improving health care support affects not only the individual’s health, but also the work conditions for health care workers. As respondent B said during the interviews though, these improved technologies might have a negative effect on populations returning to the region due to the enhanced communication opportunities with relatives, which reduces their need to visit and possibly return. This reflection by the respondent was something not found in previous studies, and suggest that improvements in other technological fields might have further impacts on communities and population, which will be further explored in the chapter on trade-offs.

Some of the other projects talked about challenges that would possibly lead to an impact on the population, such as enhancing the attraction of a region by increasing work opportunities, which is what respondent A mentioned when talking about what an increase in the work sector might mean for the community. Reflections on this could be further extended – that improving employment opportunities might lead to higher educated individuals moving to such regions, which could contribute to further development of educational institutions.

Compared to urban areas, out-migration of young people because of education and work opportunities pose a threat to local sustainability in rural regions, with less people to provide formal and informal support to those who need it. When the communities decline there are less able family members or neighbours who can help and check on the sick and elderly, further limiting their freedom and ability to continue living at home. Another challenge for rural communities is access to public transportation in places where roads or railways might not exist, and how then to access for example health care or specialist care if you are unable to get transportation to other locations.

Respondent D argued that sustainability is a term to avoid due to being overused, a so-called buzzword. The term have indeed been criticised for this reason, as Missimer et al. (2017) argues, the term can be interpreted to suite the user and has indeed increased in popularity when promoting businesses. The fact that the respondent reflects upon this could indicate a willingness to incorporate actual sustainability in the project and not use the term as a buzzword for publicity. According to respondent D, the biggest challenge for the community in terms of reaching sustainability is the loss of youth in the region, transportation issues and cost issues related to that, and the problem of visitors only wanting to see the attractions rather than the rest of the country and experience the wildlife and
nature. The respondent discussed around the potential lengthening of the tourist season and what kind of implications this might have on the environment.

Transportation was the biggest challenge for the region according to respondent G. With poor roads in places of long distances, this poses a threat to other aspects of sustainability and society, if people are unable to access your community, there will be less visitors and less attraction for people to move there. This notion connect with what Wennberg (2017) discusses, that people with reduced mobility risk becoming isolated in their homes without sufficient infrastructure, and how that risk increases in remote communities. Respondent B also talked about distances, how far away communities can be from each other in the rural context, and the challenges that poses for already vulnerable elderly people, highlighting the importance of functional infrastructure. Improving roads was a reoccurring subject during the interviews, which highlights the accessibility of communities.

Respondent A talked about securing local work opportunities as a way to achieve local social sustainability. The respondent talked about the work opportunities that the renewable energy sector would bring to the region, and how renewable energy would be an alternative to the current imported fuels that the region currently relies on. The main perception of social sustainability that the respondents expressed was the strengthening of work security through the development of local businesses of various alignments. It was perceived that this strengthens the local material wellbeing as revenue in taxes by increased workforce and for example increased revenue from tourists. There seemed overall to be little reflection in the projects how the improvement of material wellbeing might impact the rest of society and sustainability.

Local sustainability for respondent C meant increasing the number of tourists in an area and thus expanding business in various different markets, such as shops and restaurants, creating revenue where previously there would be fewer visitors. They argued that by increasing marine tourism the overall tourism in the area would be helped as the two drive each other. Further reflections on what this might mean for the local environment was missing, and could be a necessary element when developing such financially focused projects. The respondent argued that the aim was to introduce tourists to communities by means of walking, meaning no added waste pollution to the local regions. The project further boasted on the webpage about the development of new marinas and pontoons, which also presents the dilemma of human development, in this case increased tourism, and potential environmental degradation.

Respondent G discussed the change of Icelandic farming towards a more tourist-based production, which they argued is one way of maintaining the cultural heritage that farming entails. The discussion is valid because adapting cultural production (not just in farming) to a more “tourist” perspective could mean the survival of otherwise disappearing traditions. It does however pose the question whether this is genuine heritage or a more Western adaptation that fails to bring the true purpose of culture forward.

The impacts on education were often not noticed by the actors from the projects, and were in a way understood by the author during the process. One such example is the fact that enabling tourists to take part of the local heritage and culture is a form of education and knowledge sharing, but was not included in the perception of education during the interviews. A pervading finding was that the educational theme often blended with other themes, such as cultural wellbeing or transnational cooperation, and that might have lead the respondents to overlook the impact projects had on education. Respondent D talked about how the project had led to further academic research on the subject, and this corresponds well with what Chatterton and Goddard (2000) said in their study regarding how academic institutes generates research in and about the region and contributing to regional development. This could arguably be highly important for the development of the northern communities that share specific traits and challenges, and that research on the area would bring further understanding to these specific needs.
The environment was added as a theme after many of the respondents talked about direct and indirect impacts on the environment, as well as how to implement projects in the specific natural environment that the region provides. Respondent D and G from the SAINT project talked about positive environmental impacts that slow tourism might lead to, by reducing the need to use motorised vehicles and instead travel by human powered transport. Slow tourism also has the possibility to increase awareness and knowledge about the specific regional nature to visitors who experience it up close rather than from a car or other motorised vehicles. In the background there is a section describing tourism in the northern context, and what kind of challenges the industry brings. According to a study by Kaján (2014) the tourism is defined by the nature and thus vulnerable to changes in weather and climate, with potential to impact the tourism businesses. Respondent D talked about trying to prolong the tourist season, and include new activities that could hold the potential of making the tourist season less vulnerable to these changes.

In general, the answers the respondents shared on local social sustainability matches the findings of the literature study, where access to health care, and adequate transportation were identified as important components for reaching social sustainability in a community.

5.1.2. Research question 2

“How do EU project actors in remote northern communities reflect on trade-offs with other aspects of sustainability within their projects?”

The environment came up on several occasions when talking about trade-offs within projects. Respondent D talked about the unavoidable consequence of tourism development and increase of visitors leading to environmental degradation through increase of flights and a higher number of visitors meaning more resources necessary to accommodate their needs. This corresponds with the notion Misserli et al. (2015) mentioned about the unavoidable issue of human development pressuring the planetary boundaries, which overall could be considered a concern when seeking to improve the social sustainability in a community. This means that holding the environment in consideration when implementing projects for development is key, especially in northern contexts where the environment already is vulnerable. Respondent A also mentioned the environment when talking about trade-offs, in terms of increased flying when meeting other partners within the project for in person meetings, and how this might contradict the project aim of developing renewable energy. Similar to these aspects one could argue that a project such as Cool Route, with the aim to develop marine tourism, might consider environmental degradation as a vital trade-off due to increased marine traffic, but it was not mentioned in the interview or on the project webpage. This illustrates the challenge of material wellbeing and development contra the environment that is constant when seeking to pursue development, and the importance for projects to be aware of these challenges in order to handle them accordingly.

Respondent B talked about how improved services in the home might lead to relatives of the sick or elderly person to have less need to come visit, thus being a trade-off in those terms. This is a new perspective that poses some dilemma when developing projects in the area. Overall one could argue that the positive outcome in the sense of individual freedom and increased access to health care outweighs the possibility of reduced visits, which might not have occurred anyway. Additionally, the development of health care technology could also lead to less development of physical local health care facilities etc. due to the care already being accessed via technology and thus being counterproductive in terms of community development. This kind of technological advancement puts a strong dependence on technology, which can be difficult for older people to learn and to an extend this also means relying on electricity in regions that could be vulnerable to power-outages due to weather and other outside forces.

Several respondents answered that they don’t see any trade-offs with other aspects of sustainability, which is perhaps an indication that more reflection and knowledge about the subject might be needed. As mentioned above, human development can be seen as inherently trading off on the environment
and for a region so exposed by the nature and weather, this can arguably be a major risk when implementing projects for monetary expansion.

5.1.3. Research question 3

“What role can transnational cooperation play for supporting social sustainability in remote northern communities?”

As the projects were part of a transnational oriented programme, the transnational cooperation was evidently highly important, as evident from both the interviews and the text analysis. The different partners shared knowledge and expertise, as well as providing assistance to each other through communication and promotion. According to the respondents, lasting relationships have been build through the partnerships, which in some cases has led to further project cooperation or academic cooperation. As the regions included in the study were all experiencing similar challenges, the cooperation between nations provided assistance in overcoming them and in sharing encouragement towards progress.

Some issues regarding the transnational cooperation that were lifted included the communication difficulty when not all partners spoke the same language, and how that implicates the outcome of communication and level of detail. The communication was also lifted as a barrier with Indigenous peoples who were approached to partake in a work package on one of the projects. This kind of reflection from the projects could arguably hold positives effects in the future. Future projects or collaborations could evolve the communication and language uses, maybe by hiring Indigenous people who are bilingual and familiar with Indigenous lifestyles and are better able to communicate. Transnational cooperation for countries that are not native English speakers also hold a potential of increasing the need for higher English level with their employees, and thus attract educated people to seek employment in remote regions. Overall involving a wider range of people on the projects, who hold both different nationalities and ethnicities, could solve the issue of communication.

What came up somewhat during the interviews and had previously not been included in the study was the importance of policymaking concerning borders and cross-nation collaborations. The interviews were conducted during a time when Brexit was at the height of uncertainty, which strongly impacted the work of projects with partners in and around the UK, as mentioned by several respondents from the region. Both respondent A and B (located in Ireland and Scotland) both brought up the potentially devastating consequences Brexit might have on the future of collaborations across the borders. Especially concerning was the prospect of a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, and the impact that would have on business collaborations between the countries. This kind of issues are of course outside of the project’s hands, but could be necessary to keep in mind when planning future projects.

In these ways, transnational cooperation arguably has played a large role in the success of different projects that were implemented, and in that manner impacted the social sustainability of the communities.

5.2. This study and future research

5.2.1. What is new with this study?

What can be found in this study is the focus on social sustainability in context to project implementation, rather than the monetary outcomes. The background chapter shows that the region holds a very complex socio-economic layout, and that these types of EU projects could help benefit the social sustainability, which is vital for the survival of northern communities. By mapping out perceptions from actors within projects that were conducted in this specific region, one could argue that this study contributed to enhancing the understanding of social sustainability and what it means in the northern context. By connecting existing studies from the background chapter with the perceptions
coming from the actors during the interviews, the study further strengthens the past research and connects the research with actual perceptions of actors who are or have been active in the region.

The following steps clarify how this study has contributed to the deeper understanding of social sustainability in the north. Identify challenges: the background focused on previous research that identified specific challenges in northern communities → confirm challenges: these challenges were confirmed by the project actors whose perceptions aligned with the background → how projects help remedy these: how different types of project help remedy these challenges according to the actors → perceptions of improvements: what have been the outcomes concerning social sustainability according to the actors.

5.2.2 Future research

This study is purely based on perceptions of the actors and excludes the actual impacts of the projects, which could be an important future research field to see if the perceptions and actual outcomes align with each other. This kind of research would further aid future projects in how to best achieve social sustainability. To further concretize the findings of this study, future research could combine other perceptions, for example local actors and local people who are impacted by the projects in different ways. To visit the locations and include the general population in the research could help bring new perspectives on what social sustainability needs, and how local people see future improvements. Another aspect that would be relevant in future studies would be to include the influence of the EU to a greater extent, and examine what kind of influence they have on projects that they help fund.
6. Conclusion

The problem of population decline in northern communities can be rectified, with the proper incentives and policies to clear the way for future investments that would make northern communities more attractive. The EU-funded projects investigated in this study show examples of social sustainability being affected on local level, and the perceptions that come from the actors show that the projects hold potential for positive outcomes on the communities. Reflections on social sustainability are in need of improvement in order to be utilised to its full potential within projects that are implemented in northern communities. Innovations and business development could improve the attraction of the area, changing the trend of out-migration. As the background chapter showed, the social sustainability in the northern context is vast and complex which means that projects implemented there are in need of a well-aimed approach that holds several goals.

More studies are needed on the subject of social sustainability in northern communities, connected to project implementation and outcomes. This study focused on reflections within EU-projects, and a suggested area for future research would be to investigate similar projects and the actual outcomes, in terms of impact on social sustainability rather than reflections. Several studies in the background pointed out that more research on social sustainability is needed, and a better definition is required for the term to hold more weight in scientific contexts. Arguably this study contributes to the further understanding of the term by connecting previous studies with the reflections of valid actors.

The study was limited by the lack of on-site research by the author, and future research on the subject could benefit from conducting interviews in person, and to visit the locations of implementation of the projects. Time limits also reduced the possibility of conducting more interviews, including interviews with subjects from opposing positions, such as local actors. That kind of study could research whether project actors’ reflections on social sustainability align with how the local population perceives it.

With the help of the empirical data, the three research questions have been answered and can be found more elaborately answered in the discussion section. The first question inquired how actors within EU-funded projects reflect on social sustainability, and the actors’ answers generally aligned with the background, talking about access to healthcare and infrastructure, with an overarching sustainability goal being the lowered out-migration of the younger population. The respondents further talked about their individual projects and how they contribute to remedying some of the challenges that exist in these communities, such as employing local people or increasing revenues from tourism.

The second question regarding how project actors perceive trade-offs with other aspects of sustainability within their projects was mainly nature-oriented answers, how development of businesses or tourism has an unavoidable impact on the local nature. Another environmental trade-off that was mentioned was how projects with renewable energy focus would use aviation as means of transport for partner meetings, thus being rather unsustainable in that manner. More reflections on what sort of trade-offs are presented by the projects could arguably be introduced, since some of the project actors said they did not perceive any trade-offs at all.

By investigating these five projects, the importance of transnational cooperation became apparent. By providing knowledge exchange, communication opportunities and promotional help to each other, the projects further increased their chances of improving social sustainability. Challenges that were lifted as part of the transnational cooperation included communicating within different languages and communities.
7. Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I’d like to give my warmest thanks to my supervisor Annika E. Nilsson for all the valuable feedback, support, and constant inspiration and motivation that she provided during this process, without which this thesis would not have been made.

Also a massive thank you to my subject reviewer Lize-Marié van der Watt, who provided valuable feedback and input that greatly helped bring the thesis forward.

In addition, I would like to offer a huge thanks to my supervisor at the internship with Tillväxtverket, Madelen Nilsson, whose inspiration and enthusiasm led me to writing on this topic in the first place.

Lots of love to my study group who went through this process with me, every day in the library, sharing support, laughter, and encouragement. I could not imagine going through this process without you all.

Finally, a massive thanks to all the participants in the study, whose participation blew me away with your enthusiasm and knowledge in what you do - to Pauline Leonard, Alison Dawson, John McAleer & Breda Kenny, Steve Taylor, José san Emeterio, Marja-Leena Komulainen, and Arndís Lára Kolbrúnardóttir – thank you!
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9. Sources


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Interview G (2019. Árndís Lára Kolbrunardóttir from SAINT, interviewed by Erika Raaby 2019-04-02
Appendixes

Appendix 1

Introduction and research focus

My name is Erika Raaby and I’m currently writing my thesis for my master’s degree in sustainable development at Uppsala University. This interview is my source material for the results part of my thesis. The broad aim is to investigate outcomes from a number of projects that have been participants in the EU Interreg program NPA. I am exploring the social impacts of projects that are funded in the northern and arctic regions with economic growth as main focus, and the impact of transnational cooperation. The results of these interviews will be compared to the indicators defined by the Arctic Social Indicators, and be assessed thence. This will be an open interview, so please feel free to speak freely

Terms of interview

This interview guide requires adjustment depending on who is being interviewed, what role they have in the project, what project they are attached to, if they live in the region that the project is active.

Practicalities before interview

- If at any time during the interview you feel unsure about a question, or have other inquiries please feel free to ask
- Do I have your permission to record this interview, and later transcribe it, as well as taking notes during the interview?
- Do you wish to be anonymous in the study?
- If you so wish, you can receive a copy of the transcribed interview and suggest corrections or changes, and/or a copy of the finished results part, although the analysis will be independent and not up for debate
- If you, before publishing, decide to opt out of participation, you are free to do so.
- The structure of the interview will be as open as possible, and I wish you to speak freely.

General questions:

- In your own words – can you please explain the project you have participated in, and your role and involvement in it?
  - What are the goals of this project? Have these been achieved?
  - What problems will this project solve?

- In what region(s) are you active within the project?
  Country, municipality, national, international?

Has the project impacted social sustainability?

- What social impacts have you seen from this project?
  - In the region or elsewhere?
  - Education
  - Health-care, population
  - Work security
  - Material wellbeing (economy)
  - Cultural wellbeing
  - Contact with nature
  - Fate control

- Do you believe the impacts of the project will last?
What happened after the project finished?
  o  Further in the future?

“What role does transnational cooperation play in social sustainability?”

- Have you cooperated with other countries during this project?
  o  What kind of communication and exchange?

- What impact has international cooperation had on the project?
  o  Administration

- What role has EU had in the practical part of your project?
  o  Financial?
  o  Administrative?

“How do local actors perceive social sustainability?”

- What does local sustainability mean to you and your community?
  o  Similarities and differences to other areas?

“How do local actors perceive trade-offs or synergies with other aspects of sustainability?”

- Do you see any trade-offs between different aspects of sustainability within the project?
  o  Are there any difficulties in achieving the goals?

“Final Questions”

- Are there any aspects that could have been done differently in the project?
  o  Hinders in or outside the project?

- Other people for interview?
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