

Submitted Abstract

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Abstract

In the Arctic region of the Westfjords of Iceland, multiple environments encounter one another: steep cliffs, high mountain plateaus, glaciers, fjords, river outlets and expansive open sea areas. At the nexus of these environmental forces live a few thousand people in small settlements that are dependent on fishing, fish farming and tourism. Their livelihoods are threatened by the overuse of the marine space and by increasing natural hazards such as storm floods, avalanches, glacier retreat and landslides. Arctic coasts such as this are, in many ways, facing similar challenges than mountainous and Alpine regions in a rapidly changing climate. This makes it intriguing to bring together mountain research and Arctic marine research to explore cross-disciplinary synergies for transformative governance approaches.

One crucial challenge for local governance lies in the planning of a safe, sustainable and resilient path ahead, especially in the vulnerable fjord and mountain ecosystems. Iceland has recently launched a coastal and marine planning processes in the remote Westfjords, attempting to map and zone the areas of this land-sea interaction and determining future use. In order to make such processes democratically legitimate, participation should be ensured not only by a wide variety of relevant stakeholders, scientists and governance representatives, but also by the local public.

This study investigates governance and participation in planning in the Westfjords of Iceland. In order to assess the scope and depth of public participation in the Westfjords coastal planning process, data was collected over 5 months of exploratory immersion as a participant observer in local communities through semi-structured interviews, unstructured conversations, observations, and analysis of documentation related to the planning process. The results show that only a limited group of stakeholders has been engaged in the information gathering, but not in any discussion or decision-making process. There is little evidence of a public participation strategy. The planning process in the Westfjords is therefore unfolding unbeknownst to many local people. This lack of public participation highlights the need for more transparency, communication and education about the planning process itself as well as about environmental issues in the Westfjords. There is urgent need for inclusion of the public into environmental governance. This case study illustrates the status quo of marine governance in Iceland and foregrounds that transformative approaches to governance are vital to secure resilient and sustainable futures for remote communities.