Elizabeth Tedsen, Researcher, attended the Visionary Arctic 2012 conference in Kirkenes (Norway), where she presented on the environmental and social risks and benefits attributed to Arctic offshore hydrocarbon development. The conference sought to explore intersecting themes of sustainability and territorial challenges and explore future scenarios in the High North. Speakers from a range of disciplines offered varied perspectives, contributing to a multifaceted and creative dialogue. Upon completion of the conference, the discussion highlights and speakers’ ideas were summarized and shared with a wider audience.

Elizabeth Tedsen provided an overview [pdf, 4.8 MB, English] of increased offshore hydrocarbon development in the Arctic, and the associated environmental and social impacts. Oil spills and releases are of primary concern and risks are enhanced by challenging Arctic conditions such as seasonal darkness, dynamic ice cover, extreme weather conditions, limited response capacities, and slowed weathering and bacterial degradation. Other environmental
impacts from drilling include operational waste and water discharges, air emissions, and disturbances to Arctic biodiversity and habitats. From a social standpoint, oil and gas development can offer local benefits in terms of jobs creation, and increased revenues and community services. However, these benefits are countered by risks to traditional livelihoods and customs, and must necessarily be measured in light of factors including ensuring sustained benefits, effective governance, and stakeholder participation. As a framework for analysis, Elizabeth Tedsen reviewed the goals, principles, and recommendations of the Arctic Council’s Offshore Oil and Gas Guidelines. To provide context, she discussed examples of developments and regulatory processes in Alaska (United States) and Greenland.

The Visionary Arctic conference was hosted by Pikene på Broen and the Barents Institute, a Research Centre at the University of Tromsø. Both the University of Tromsø and Ecologic Institute are partners in the University of the Arctic Thematic Network on Arctic Law.

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