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THE ARCTIC: ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED IN CIRCUMPOLAR COOPERATION

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The Arctic: Organizations Involved in Circumpolar Cooperation
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The peoples, ecosystems, lands and waters of the Arctic region face many of the same opportunities and challenges. As a result, international cooperation plays a key role in advancing knowledge of the region through the sharing of research, best practices and lessons learned on issues like the health and well-being of Arctic peoples, sustainable socio-economic development and infrastructure. This work is being led by the eight Arctic states (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States) – in collaboration with Arctic Indigenous organizations, non-governmental organizations and research bodies – through various regional and international forums.

THE ARCTIC: ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED IN CIRCUMPOLAR COOPERATION

1 INTRODUCTION

Until relatively recently, cooperation in the Arctic has not been a prominent goal of the international community, with some exceptions. Today, however, numerous official bodies – both governmental and non-governmental – exist to manage a wide range of issues pertaining to the Arctic region. Although organizations such as the Arctic Council and the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region have no formal legal basis (e.g., under an international treaty) they have nonetheless assumed an important role in advancing circumpolar cooperation. In addition, many Arctic Indigenous organizations participate in these types of forums as observers or permanent participants.

As noted by the Government of Canada in *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy* (2024), "[a] fundamental principle of Canadian foreign policy is that the Arctic should be governed by the Arctic states."[1]

The interconnected geography of the Arctic region can be seen in Figure 1, which depicts the eight Arctic states and the centres of population in the region with 1,000 inhabitants or more.

Figure 1 – Circumpolar Region



Sources: Map prepared by the Library of Parliament, 2025, using data obtained from Natural Earth, *1:50m Cultural Vectors* and *1:50m Physical Vectors*, version 5.1.1; Pikialasorsuaq Commission, *People of the Ice Bridge: The Future of the Pikialasorsuaq*, November 2017, pp. vi–vii; Statistics Canada, "Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population," Database, accessed 9 July 2025; Statbank Greenland, "Population in Localities January 1st 1977–2025," Database, accessed 10 July 2025; Statistics Finland, "Population by month and area, 1990M01–2024M12," Database, accessed 10 July 2025; Statistics Norway, "Population and land area in urban settlements," Database, accessed 10 July 2025; Statistics Norway, "Population of Svalbard," Database, accessed 10 July 2025; Federal State Statistics Service (Russia), *Table 5. Population of Russia, federal districts, subjects of the Russian Federation, urban districts, municipal districts, municipal districts, urban and rural settlements, urban populated areas, rural populated areas with a population of 3,000 people or more [Archived version]* [IN RUSSIAN], Archived version from 3 October 2022; United States Census Bureau, *City and Town Population Totals: 2020–2024*, May 2025; and Statistics Sweden, "Population per month by region, age and sex. Year 2025M01 – 2025M05," Database, accessed 10 July 2025. The World Terrain base map is the intellectual property of Esri and is used under licence, © 2025 Esri and its licensors. The following software was used: Esri, ArcGIS Pro, version 3.5.2. Contains information licensed under the *Statistics Canada Open Licence*.

Cooperation among Arctic states is essential to address environmental, social and economic challenges faced by the region. This HillStudy introduces the key organizations – intergovernmental and interparliamentary, non-governmental, Indigenous and research-based – at the heart of this cooperation and explains how they work to support sustainable social and economic development, regional stability and the well-being of the peoples of the Arctic. Non-Arctic states have also shown an

interest in cooperating with Arctic states and contributing to knowledge about the Arctic. This cooperation often takes the form of participating as an observer state within the various international forums.

2 INTERGOVERNMENTAL AND INTERPARLIAMENTARY ORGANIZATIONS

2.1 ARCTIC COUNCIL

The Arctic Council – the principal body for Arctic cooperation – was formally established in 1996 with the signing of the *Ottawa Declaration* by Canada, Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States. The *Ottawa Declaration* sets out the need to promote cooperation among Arctic states and to involve Indigenous Peoples. It also specifies that the Arctic Council does not deal with military security issues in the region.[2] In addition to the eight Arctic states, the Arctic Council includes six Arctic Indigenous organizations, which have the status of permanent participants, and 38 organizations with observer status.[3]

The Arctic Council serves as a high-level intergovernmental forum to promote cooperation and coordination among the Arctic states on common issues, particularly those concerning social and economic development, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and environmental protection. A founding principle of the Arctic Council is to make decisions by consensus at both the council and working group levels.

The chair of the Arctic Council rotates between the eight member states, and Arctic Council Ministerial Meetings – held every two years – are hosted and coordinated by the country that holds the chair. Each state also appoints a Senior Arctic Official (SOA), who is typically a government representative. SAOs meet twice a year.[4]

In 2021, in recognition of the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Arctic Council, the eight member states issued the *Reykjavik Declaration*, which reaffirmed the shared goal of maintaining "peace, stability and constructive cooperation in the Arctic."[5] The same year, member states adopted the *Arctic Council Strategic Plan*, which contains commitments to achieving seven key goals by 2030. These goals are as follows:

- monitoring, assessing and highlighting the impacts of climate change in the Arctic;
- promoting healthy and resilient ecosystems in the region;
- conserving and advancing a healthy marine environment in the Arctic;

- supporting the social development and well-being of the Arctic's inhabitants;
- encouraging sustainable economic development;
- increasing knowledge of the region, including by supporting scientific research; and
- strengthening the Arctic Council as the leading forum for circumpolar cooperation.[6]

The Arctic Council also provides for the active involvement of Indigenous communities and organizations as "permanent participants"[7] and ensures that they are fully consulted in connection with the council's work. Currently, six Arctic Indigenous organizations are designated as "permanent participants" (the first three represent Indigenous Peoples with traditional territories in Canada):

- Arctic Athabaskan Council;
- Gwich'in Council International;
- Inuit Circumpolar Council;
- Aleut International Association;
- Saami Council; and
- Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North.

Under Norway's term as chair from 2023 to 2025, experts from all member states resumed collaborating at the working group level following a pause in the Arctic Council's activities in 2022 after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At the time of writing, formal meetings at the SAO level between all member states have not resumed. The Kingdom of Denmark holds the chair of the Arctic Council for 2025 to 2027. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greenland – an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark – serves as the current chair.

Much of the work of the Arctic Council is undertaken by its six working groups, which are composed of experts focusing on cooperative research related to the following themes:

- **Arctic Contaminants Action Program**: Encourages national governments to take remedial and preventive action related to the release of contaminants and pollutants that present a risk to the Arctic environment.
- **Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme**: Monitors, assesses and documents the impacts of pollutants and climate change on Arctic peoples and ecosystems.

- **Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna**: Promotes scientific cooperation on species and habitat management, and facilitates the sharing of information on regulations, management practices and coordinated responses related to the protection and management of ecosystems.
- **Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response**: Contributes to preventing, preparing for and responding to environmental and related emergencies, including accidents and search and rescue.
- **Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment**: Develops marine policy measures that respond to environmental changes from land- and sea-based activities, such as shipping and resource development activities.
- **Sustainable Development Working Group**: Advances policies that promote sustainable economic and social development in the region to improve the lives of Arctic Indigenous Peoples and communities.[8]

2.2 CONFERENCE OF PARLIAMENTARIANS OF THE ARCTIC REGION AND STANDING COMMITTEE OF PARLIAMENTARIANS OF THE ARCTIC REGION

The Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region brings together representative lawmakers appointed by the national parliaments of the eight Arctic states. Representatives of Arctic Indigenous groups and the European Parliament also take part as observers. The Conference meets every two years.[9]

Between conferences, Arctic parliamentary cooperation is overseen by the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region, which began its activities in 1994. The conference and the standing committee both include six permanent participants representing Arctic Indigenous Peoples – the same six that are permanent participants in the Arctic Council – as well as observers.[10]

The conference and standing committee work together to address the region's challenges and opportunities, and to advance issues relevant to the work of the Arctic Council. In addition, the standing committee takes part in meetings of the Arctic Council as an observer.

2.3 THE NORTHERN FORUM

At the Third Northern Regions Conference held in Anchorage, Alaska, in 1990, participants called for the establishment of a Northern Forum whose objective would be to "improve the quality of local, national, and international decision-making regarding northern issues by providing a means through which northern voices can be heard at all stages of the process."[11] The International Organization of Northern Regions (the Northern Forum) was formally established the following year.

The Northern Forum is led by a board of governors, and membership currently consists of regional leaders from 12 member regions from the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation and the United States (Alaska), as well as 10 corporate partners from Iceland, Japan, Norway, the Russian Federation and the United States.[12] The organization's mission is to improve the quality of life of people living in northern regions and to support sustainable development. At the time of writing, Canada was not a member of The Northern Forum; however Canadian provinces and territories have been members in the past. The Northern Forum has observer status at the Arctic Council.

2.4 NORDIC COUNCIL AND NORDIC COUNCIL OF MINISTERS

Four European Arctic states – Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden – together with Iceland, which has strong historical ties to Europe, are members of what is termed the "Nordic Region."[13] Greenland and the Faroe Islands, which are autonomous territories of the Kingdom of Denmark, as well as Åland, a Swedish-speaking region of Finland, are also considered to be part of the Nordic Region and participate in the region's forums.

The principal forums for Nordic cooperation at the political level are the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers. The Nordic Council consists of members appointed by Nordic national parliaments and serves as the region's main forum for interparliamentary cooperation. The presidency rotates annually, and on 1 January 2026, Finland took over the presidency. The Nordic Council of Ministers provides the framework for official intergovernmental cooperation in the Nordic region, bringing together ministers and senior officials to coordinate policies and implement joint initiatives. Its presidency also changes every year, and on 1 January 2026, Denmark, joined by the Faroe Islands, officially assumed the role for the year.[14]

The states and autonomous territories of the Nordic Region work together to improve the lives of the people of the region and to cooperate on a number of shared issues of importance, particularly in the areas of regional security and social and environmental sustainability. For example, cooperation in the Barents region is a priority because the area contains legacy radioactive waste from the former Soviet fleet and is subject to oil exploration. It also forms part of Russia's Northern Sea Route. All of these issues could have consequences for the Nordic countries and the Arctic in general.

2.5 BARENTS EURO-ARCTIC COUNCIL

The Barents Euro-Arctic Council was established in 1993 by Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the European Commission to promote cooperation in the Barents region of northern Europe. The council's focus is on

sustainable economic and social development, and peaceful development and stability. Russia withdrew from the council in 2023. Canada has observer status at the council.[15]

2.6 COUNCIL OF THE BALTIC SEA STATES

The Council of the Baltic Sea States was established in 1992 as an intergovernmental forum for the 10 states of the Baltic Sea region[16] and the European Union. The forum promotes "peace, stability, and prosperity among its member states."[17] Its work is supported by a network of experts, officials and professionals who help advance the three long-term priorities of the council: regional security, sustainable economic development and matters related to the Baltic regional identity.[18]

3 NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

3.1 ARCTIC CIRCLE

The Arctic Circle is a non-profit, non-partisan organization created by Iceland in 2013. Its mission is to facilitate dialogue among political and business leaders, environmental experts, scientists, Indigenous representatives and other international stakeholders to issues facing the Arctic.[19]

The annual Arctic Circle Assembly is held in October in Reykjavik, Iceland, and Canadians are active participants. In addition, the Arctic Circle holds smaller forums all over the world on various Arctic-related subjects.[20]

3.2 ARCTIC ECONOMIC COUNCIL

The Arctic Economic Council (AEC) was established in 2014 by the Arctic Council during Canada's term as chair, and it held its first meeting in September of that year in Iqaluit, Nunavut. The AEC facilitates business-to-business activities and promotes responsible economic development in the Arctic.[21]

In May 2019, the AEC and the Arctic Council signed a memorandum of understanding in which they signalled their intention to work towards a "common goal of safeguarding the well-being, safety and prosperity of all Arctic inhabitants [and] of creating vibrant, sustainable regional economies in a changing Arctic environment."[22]

At the time of writing, Canada was a member of the executive committee, and four Canadian organizations – Makivvik, Agnico Eagle, ATCO Group and Northwestel – were members of the AEC.

3.3 ARCTIC MAYORS' FORUM

The Arctic Mayor's Forum began informally as a joint meeting of mayors and elected leaders in Fairbanks, Alaska, in 2017 and was formally established in 2019. Prior to its creation, no dedicated forum existed for elected representatives from local governments in the Arctic region to meet and exchange ideas.

The forum provides a platform for mayors and elected community leaders from Canada, Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the United States to participate in discussions about the future of the Arctic so that the values, goals and interests of the people they represent are heard and considered.[23] Yellowknife, Northwest Territories is currently the sole Canadian member of the forum.[24]

4 ARCTIC INDIGENOUS ORGANIZATIONS

4.1 ALEUT INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION

Established in 1998 by the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association and the Association of the Indigenous Peoples of the North of the Aleut District of the Kamchatka Region, the Aleut International Association cooperates on initiatives addressing environmental and cultural issues of importance to the Aleut peoples of Russia and the United States.[25] It has permanent participant status in the Arctic Council.

4.2 ARCTIC ATHABASKAN COUNCIL

The Arctic Athabaskan Council is an international Indigenous organization representing Athabaskan peoples in Alaska, Yukon and the Northwest Territories.[26] Founded in 2000, it represents about 45,000 people across 76 communities. Canada is represented by the Council of Yukon First Nations and the Dene Nation. Since its inception, the Arctic Athabaskan Council has been officially recognized as a permanent participant in the Arctic Council.[27]

The Arctic Athabaskan Council advocates for a greater understanding of the heritage of the Arctic Athabaskan peoples, and it works to defend their rights and interests. A key focus for the organization is maintaining a balance between sustainable economic development and environmental protection.

4.3 GWICH'IN COUNCIL INTERNATIONAL

The Gwich'in Council International was established in 1999 to represent 9,000 Gwich'in who live in Alaska, Yukon and the Northwest Territories. It consists of two national bodies, one based in Canada and the other in the United States.

In Canada, the Gwich'in Tribal Council represents the land claims beneficiaries in the Northwest Territories and the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, a self-governing First Nation located in Old Crow, Yukon. In the United States, the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments represents Gwich'in communities in Alaska.

The Gwich'in Council International is governed by a board of directors with equal representation from both countries. The organization is a permanent participant in the Arctic Council and participates in their working groups to address common priorities such as sustainable development and environmental conservation.[28]

4.4 INUIT CIRCUMPOLAR COUNCIL

Founded in 1977, the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) represents approximately 180,000 Inuit in Alaska, Canada, Chukotka (Russia) and Greenland.[29] The organization unites Inuit voices across Inuit Nunaat (homeland) on matters such as wildlife management, sustainable development, food security, Indigenous knowledge and language preservation.

The ICC has had long-standing special consultative status[30] with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, enabling it to engage regularly with the United Nations on matters important to Inuit communities. Moreover, the ICC was the first Indigenous organization to be granted provisional consultative status at the International Maritime Organization, and since 2025, it has been the only Indigenous organization to enjoy permanent consultative status with that organization. This status ensures Inuit participation in international maritime policy discussions.[31]

Each member country or territory of the ICC maintains a national office under the ICC umbrella. The ICC's principal goals are as follows:

- strengthening unity among Inuit of the circumpolar region;
- promoting Inuit rights and interests on an international level;
- developing and encouraging long-term policies that safeguard the Arctic environment; and
- seeking full and active partnership in the political, economic and social development of the circumpolar region.

The ICC holds a General Assembly every four years that is also attended by representatives from the Inuit Circumpolar Youth Council and the International Elders Council.[32]

4.5 SAAMI COUNCIL

The Saami Council was established in 1956 to represent nine Saami organizations in Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden.[33] The membership also includes reindeer herding associations in Norway and Sweden.

The council's primary goals are to promote and protect the economic, social, land and cultural rights and interests of the Saami people in the four countries in which they reside, and to promote and preserve the Saami cultural and national identity. These objectives are achieved through advocacy work, policy proposals and agreements between states and the bodies representing the Saami people, including the Saami parliaments.

A Saami Conference is held every four years, and the Saami Council meets twice annually.[34] The Saami Council has permanent participant status in the Arctic Council, enabling it to have a voice in Arctic governance alongside Arctic states.

4.6 INUIT TAPIRIIT KANATAMI

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami was founded in 1971 as the national organization representing and promoting the interests of Inuit in Canada on a variety of environmental, social, cultural and political issues.[35]

The organization's work is guided by four Inuit regional organizations that reflect the self-governing Inuit regions in the Arctic and sub-Arctic: Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., Inuvialuit Development Corporation, Nunatsiavut Government and Makivik Corporation (which represents the region of Nunavik in northern Quebec).

4.7 RUSSIAN ASSOCIATION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE NORTH

The Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) was established in 1990 at the First Congress of Indigenous Peoples of the North.[36] It is an umbrella organization that today brings together 41 Indigenous groups representing 257,895 people through by 33 regional and ethnic organizations.

RAIPON's goal is to protect the human rights and legal interests of the Indigenous Peoples living in the northern, Siberian and far eastern regions of the Russian Federation, and to promote solutions to environmental, social and economic challenges. It also works on issues related to cultural development, education and the preservation of traditional ways of life.

The association holds permanent participant status in the Arctic Council and special consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 2001. Its special consultative status with ECOSOC allows the association to participate in the sessions of the United Nations Human Rights Council as an observer, as well as the sessions of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

5 RESEARCH ORGANIZATIONS AND INITIATIVES

As noted in section 2.1 of this HillStudy, several of the Arctic Council's working groups play a key role in advancing cooperation on scientific research related to the Arctic. Their work is complemented by many other research bodies, institutions and legal instruments that support knowledge sharing on scientific and policy matters of importance to the region and its inhabitants.

5.1 *AGREEMENT ON ENHANCING INTERNATIONAL ARCTIC SCIENTIFIC COOPERATION*

In 2017, the *Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation* was signed by all eight Arctic States (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States). It was developed in consultation with the Arctic Council's six Indigenous permanent participant organizations. Canada ratified the agreement in April 2018, which came into force in May 2018.[37]

The agreement "seeks to enhance circumpolar cooperation in scientific activities to advance scientific knowledge of the Arctic."[38] Among its key objectives, the agreement aims to

- facilitate access to Arctic states and territories for research purposes;
- support open access to Arctic scientific data;
- encourage career development and training opportunities for students and early-career scientists; and
- support the inclusion of traditional and local knowledge holders in scientific research activities.[39]

5.2 POLAR KNOWLEDGE CANADA

In 2015, the Government of Canada established Polar Knowledge Canada (POLAR), a federal research organization that focuses on advancing polar science and technology.[40] Among other duties, POLAR operates the Canadian High Arctic Research Station (CHARS), located in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut.[41] CHARS supports innovation in Arctic science and technology by offering a modern research facility and accommodations to Canadian and international researchers conducting scientific research in the Arctic.

POLAR is also responsible for advancing knowledge of the Canadian Arctic, promoting the development and dissemination of knowledge of the circumpolar region, as well as of the Antarctic, and managing funding programs and projects in support of these goals. POLAR's 2020–2021 to 2025–2026 research priorities include the following:

- improving knowledge of northern ecosystems at a time of rapid change;
- increasing understanding of the relationship between environmental health and community wellness in the Arctic; and
- advancing sustainable energy, technology and infrastructure solutions adapted to the environmental, social and cultural conditions of the Arctic region.[42]

5.3 INTERNATIONAL ARCTIC SCIENCE COMMITTEE

The International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) was established in 1990 and began operations in 1991. It is made up of national science organizations covering all fields of Arctic research, and it currently includes 25 member states (both Arctic and non-Arctic).[43]

The IASC's mission is to facilitate and promote "leading-edge interdisciplinary research in order to foster a greater scientific understanding of the Arctic region and its role in the Earth system."[44] Canada has been a member of the IASC since 1990 and is represented within the organization by POLAR.

5.4 UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

Established in 2001, the University of the Arctic (UArctic) is a cooperative network of universities, colleges and other organizations committed to higher education and research in the Arctic.[45] UArctic is a decentralized organization: its offices, programs and other functions are hosted at member institutions in the Arctic region, although its international secretariat is located in Rovaniemi, Finland.

Through shared resources, facilities and expertise, UArctic supports the development of post-secondary educational programs that are relevant and accessible to Arctic and northern students. UArctic's mission is to develop

> knowledge to address local and global challenges of relevance to Arctic peoples and societies by providing unique educational, research, and innovation opportunities through collaboration within a powerful network of member institutions.[46]

At the time of writing, more than 45 Canadian universities, colleges, Indigenous organizations and research entities were listed as members of UArctic.

5.5 INTERNATIONAL UNION FOR CIRCUMPOLAR HEALTH

Formally established in 1981, the International Union for Circumpolar Health (IUCH) is a non-governmental organization with members, adhering bodies and affiliates from across the circumpolar region.[47] Canada is represented in the IUCH by the Canadian Society for Circumpolar Health.[48]

The IUCH's work focuses on sharing knowledge about the health challenges and needs of Arctic peoples. The organization contributes to medical and public health research about the circumpolar region, primarily through a series of working groups, each addressing a specific health concern of importance to Arctic populations.[49] Information is shared through the *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, the official journal of the IUCH.

5.6 INTERNATIONAL POLAR YEAR

The most recent International Polar Year (IPY) was observed in 2007–2008 and was the fourth such initiative. It was organized by the International Council for Science and the World Meteorological Organization. Previous IPYs were held in 1882–1883, 1932–1933 and 1957–1958.

IPY 2007–2008 took place from March 2007 to March 2009 and involved over 200 projects. It brought together thousands of scientists engaged in polar research from over 60 countries working in the physical, biological and social sciences. Canada was a lead participant in IPY, having committed $150 million in support of IPY-related research and activities.

An important aspect of all IPY activities is their emphasis on the long-term scientific legacy of polar research. One of the most significant IPY initiatives in this regard was the creation of the Sustained Arctic Observation Networks (SAON). SAON is a multinational Arctic environmental monitoring and observation system. It has three goals: ensuring that Arctic scientific observation is sustainable over time; promoting open access Arctic observational data; and creating a coordinated and integrated observation system.

In a joint statement issued in October 2023, the International Arctic Science Committee and the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research proposed 2032–2033 as the fifth IPY, which would mark 25 years since IPY 2007–2008 and 150 years since IPY 1882–1883.[50]

6 CONCLUSION

As noted in *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy* (2024), the "Arctic Council remains the leading forum for Arctic cooperation."[51] As this HillStudy has shown, however, many other international and regional organizations, as well as non-governmental and research-focused entities, are also involved in advancing knowledge of the Arctic region and its inhabitants.

Together, these organizations contribute to the development and maintenance of Arctic cooperation across a spectrum of issues, including the environment, health, sustainable development and well-being of the region's Indigenous Peoples.

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30. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC),

> [c]onsultative status provides NGOs [(non-governmental organizations)] with access to not only ECOSOC, but also to its many subsidiary bodies, to the various human rights mechanisms of the United Nations, ad-hoc processes on small arms, as well as special events organized by the President of the General Assembly.

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