

## Article

# Strengthening Collaboration of the Indigenous Peoples in the Russian Arctic: Adaptation in the COVID-19 Pandemic Times

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**Abstract:** The article presents the challenges of the Indigenous peoples' interplay with the key actors (Indigenous communities, Indigenous associations, regional governments, corporate businesses, and scientific institutions) in the Russian Arctic. Invoking actor–network theory offered knowledge to analyse how the effectiveness of this collaboration may lead to Indigenous peoples' social adaptation in the COVID-19 times. It revealed the main problems increasing their vulnerability and making barriers to meeting sustainable development goals (SDGs). The primary sources included the data collected from expert interviews in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, and the Murmansk region in 2020–2021. The main findings proved the gaps in the interplay of Indigenous peoples with key actors in the Russian Arctic due to insufficient interregional and international cooperation, indirect communication of governments with Indigenous peoples via Indigenous associations and communities focused mostly on supporting elites, and the lack of systematic feedback of all key actors. This collaboration must be focused on meeting SDGs and guaranteeing their economic, social, and cultural rights to maintain a traditional lifestyle and livelihoods, involving them in natural resource management, improving quality of life and well-being, increasing access to ethnocultural education, reducing inequality, and promoting Indigenous peoples' self-government.

**Keywords:** Indigenous small-numbered peoples; actor–networking theory; sustainable development; COVID-19 pandemic; Western Siberia; Nenets Autonomous Okrug; Kola Peninsula

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was an “unprecedented wake-up call” [1] and made Indigenous communities face challenges of decreased human security, destabilised global economies, and rising inequalities addressed in the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change [2]. The UN

secretary-general António Guterres signified the collaboration for achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [1] and mentioned that “We need to turn the recovery into a real opportunity to do things right for the future” [3]. The contribution of all key actors (civil society, governments, non-governmental organisations, businesses, and scientific society) to sustainable development is “vital for a recovery that leads to greener, more inclusive economies, and stronger, more resilient societies” [3]. It provides pre-conditions for the sustainability of Indigenous communities. However, in the COVID-19 times, this collaboration was jeopardised due to pandemic restrictions [4].

The transition to sustainable development started long before adopting the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015) in the Russian Federation. In 1996, the president approved the Concept of the National Transition to Sustainable Development [5]. Currently, the measures for achieving the SDGs of the Indigenous peoples’ sustainable development are integrated into Russia’s national strategic and programme documents (including doctrines, governmental programmes, and concepts) and regional laws (Appendix A Table A1).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges of sustainable development of the Indigenous communities in the Russian Arctic were especially sensitive due to harsh climatic conditions and insufficient logistics and social infrastructure [6], resulting in challenges for the human security of local communities which are strongly dependent on supplies from other, non-Arctic regions. In addition, the restrictions caused by the pandemic (primarily, limited travelling, group meetings, and internet connection) [7] made barriers for collaboration of the Indigenous peoples and Indigenous communities with the regional governments, corporate businesses, and scientific institutions who are key actors for ensuring Indigenous peoples’ sustainable development.

In 2020, “The Strategy for the Development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation and Ensuring National Security for the Period until 2035” [6] listed the risks jeopardising sustainable development of the Arctic communities located in remote areas: low access to high-quality social services and comfortable housing in the settlements, food insecurity due to the lack of a system of state support for the delivery of fuel, foodstuffs, and other vital goods, insufficient transport infrastructure, and the shortage of qualified staff in the industries and social services, etc. So, the government prioritised tasks to support the Indigenous peoples to maintain their traditional lifestyle and economic activities and to make solid pre-conditions for meeting the UN SDGs. However, achieving SDGs is impossible if the concerns of 370 million Indigenous peoples are left behind. Therefore, concrete steps in human developments require inclusiveness guided by the goals set by the UN SDGs. Moreover, the processes of human development must be rooted in a safe and human-secure environment. So, meeting SDGs for the Indigenous peoples needs increased access and quality of healthcare (also for nomads), enhanced social infrastructure facilities (medical, educational, cultural, and sports), protection of Indigenous cultural heritage, stimulation of the participation of state corporations and small businesses in social infrastructure projects, and promoted logistics of goods and services in the Arctic.

Human security issues are especially significant for the Arctic, Indigenous peoples since they are disproportionately vulnerable. This is because they, traditionally, rely on the pristine, Arctic, natural environment for their livelihoods, and their ethnic, cultural identity is linked to the unique Arctic ecosystems [8]. They become increasingly vulnerable as human activities on their lands escalate, impacting traditional livelihood activities while offering an imbalance in benefit sharing due to the engagement of multiple-interest groups. As a result, social, economic, and environmental conditions that define human security [9] and provide conditions for the enjoyment of human rights, contributing to the promotion of social justice and non-discrimination, are located at the centre of tensions. Therefore, accommodating these various groups of peoples in the Arctic in their partnership relationship, via Indigenous peoples’ organisations, with national governments and with international forums, such as the Arctic Council, allows the sharing of decision making while observing rights and duties, which may enable an inclusive and a broader

“democratisation” [10]. In other words, these groups of people are considered to be the object and the authors of their developments. They participate in managing the environment, biodiversity, and natural resources and improving the quality of life and well-being of local communities. Practices such as these offer a safeguard for an equal society in partnership with actors at multiple levels. Furthermore, human security provides a tool with which the right to self-determination can be exercised in this endeavour. The exercise of the right to self-determination eventually reinforces the meeting of the SDGs as it brings Indigenous peoples onboard with their implementation.

In the Russian Arctic, the cooperation among the Indigenous communities strengthens their collaborative efforts to set agendas that enhance their unitedness around solving human security issues and offer a more uniform approach to raising them. The unity of Indigenous communities is vital for sharing identical views and voices coherently while interacting with other actors—regional and federal governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs: Indigenous communities and Indigenous associations), corporations, scientific institutions, and others. Nowadays, Indigenous communities form transnational organisations across borders to promote broader collaboration. Their uniform voices are driven by the unique concerns that affect their socio-cultural, economic, and environmental integrity, regardless of territorial divides. Moreover, they participate in norm building at the international level, directly acting as participants in various global processes and through their national governments. The need for such collaboration is exceptionally high for the 19 Indigenous small-numbered peoples in the Russian Arctic (Nenets, Saami, Selkups, Khanty, etc.), who are some of the most vulnerable groups in the COVID-19 times [11], seeking the opportunities to maintain their cultural identity and social security to achieve sustainable development.

The research question for this study was “Does the collaboration of the Indigenous peoples with key actors make pre-conditions for their sustainable development in the Russian Arctic?” Invoking actor–network theory offered the knowledge to analyse how the effectiveness of this collaboration may lead to social adaptation in the COVID-19 times. The objective of our study was to evaluate the cooperation of the Indigenous peoples with key actors in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (YNAO), the Nenets Autonomous Okrug (NAO), and the Murmansk region to reveal the main problems which increase the vulnerability of the Indigenous peoples in the COVID-19 times and make barriers to meeting SDGs.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Research Settings: Geography, Population, and Ethnic Structure

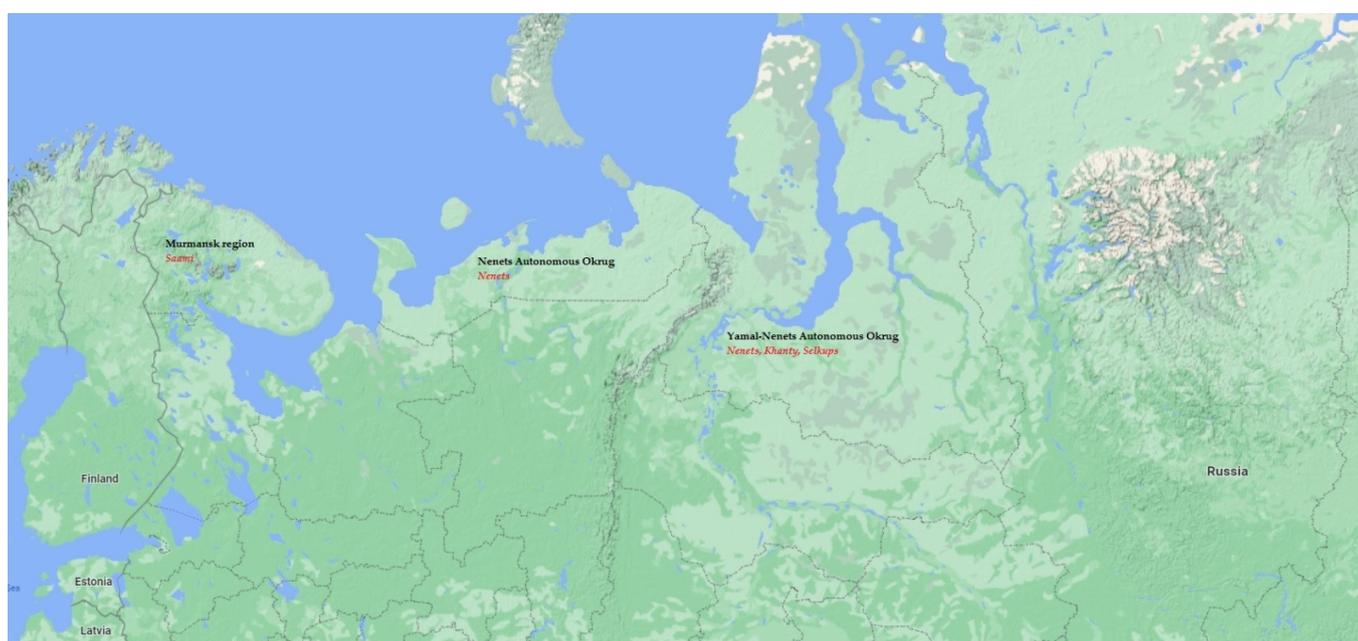
The Arctic zone of the Russian Federation is located along the coast of the Arctic Ocean seas. Its overland area is 18% of the territory of the Russian Federation (3.1 million km<sup>2</sup>). The continental part of the Russian Arctic territory is 4.9 million km<sup>2</sup> [12]. In 2009, the government of the Russian Federation approved the list of places of traditional residence and traditional economic activity of the Indigenous peoples in the Russian Federation [13]. Approximately 82,500 Indigenous small-numbered peoples live in the Russian Arctic (that is one-third of their total number in Russia): Nenets, Chukchi, Khanty, Evens, Evenks, Selkups, Saami, Eskimos, Dolgans, Chuvans, Kets, Nganasans, Yukagirs, Enets, Mansi, Vepsians, Koryaks, Itelmens, Kereks, etc. [14]. In addition, some Arctic, Indigenous peoples follow the nomadic (about 20,000) or semi-nomadic lifestyle associated with traditional types of nature management (reindeer herding, fishery, hunting, and gathering). However, the majority of the Indigenous peoples in the Russian Arctic are sedentary residents living in settlements and urban areas.

The location of all three regions—YNAO, NAO, and the Murmansk region (more than half of their territory is beyond the Arctic Circle) (Table 1, Figure 1)—significantly impacts traditional livelihoods, social well-being, and food security of the Indigenous peoples [7], which are essential for meeting Indigenous peoples’ vital needs and helping them to survive in the severe, Arctic conditions.

**Table 1.** YNAO, NAO, and the Murmansk region: geography and population \*.

	YNAO	NAO	The Murmansk Region
Area, km <sup>2</sup>	544,008	176,700	144,900
Total population, <i>n</i>	769,250	44,389	732,864
Population density, <i>n</i> per km <sup>2</sup>	0.71	0.25	5.06
Total Indigenous peoples population, <i>n</i> (yield, %)	48,606 (6.3%)	7504 (16.9%)	1825 (0.3%)
Dominating small-numbered Indigenous peoples ethnicities	Nenets, Khanty, and Selkups	Nenets	Saami

\* [15–20].

**Figure 1.** The ethnic structure of YNAO, NAO, and the Murmansk region.

The majority of the Indigenous small-numbered population is concentrated in the Arctic zone of western Siberia and the European north. Approximately 60% of Russia's nomadic population is in YNAO, one of the geographic focuses of our research, located in the circumpolar northwest of West Siberia. Almost 112 ethnic groups are settled in the YNAO, and only about 10% belong to Indigenous minorities [17]. It is a unique territory because nearly half of the Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the Russian Arctic reside there, including the Nenets, the Khanty, the Selkups, and others. A total of 9657 Indigenous peoples living in the tundra areas are a part of the nomadic culture and community [18]. In NAO, the dominant Indigenous ethnicity is Nenets. In comparison, the Murmansk region is primarily the Kola Saami residence.

## 2.2. Actor–Network Theory in Governance

In our study, the theoretical approach for analysis was based on “actor–network theory” [21] (p. 43) in governance, which demonstrates that everything in the social and natural worlds, human or non-human, interacts in shifting networks of relationships without any other elements outside of the networks [22] (p. 181).

Osborne [23] offered to implement this theory in public and state administration. At the same time, Klijn and Koppenjan [24] mentioned that the governance network approach had already evolved into a full-fledged theoretical approach both theoretically and

in practice. It developed as a response to new public management. However, applying the actor–network theory emerged in management in hybrid forms. Passoth and Rowland [25] noted that many scholars accept an “actor model” of the state but few develop “network models” of the state to achieve balanced (sustainable) development of territories.

Following this approach, we presented the interaction of Indigenous peoples and the groups of actors as networking activities to maintain the sustainable development of the Indigenous peoples. Finally, we asked experts representing five key groups of actors to evaluate the role and the effectiveness of collaboration with the Indigenous peoples: Indigenous communities, Indigenous associations, regional governments, corporations, and scientific institutions.

In Russia, the pre-conditions for the interplay and collaboration of all these key actors are regulated by federal and regional laws. The federal law “On Guarantees of the Rights of Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the Russian Federation” establishes the legal basis for the guarantees of the Indigenous peoples’ original socio-economic and cultural development in Russia and the protection of their traditional livelihoods, lifestyle, and economy [26]. It protects Indigenous rights to participate in decision making in collaboration with federal and regional governments and receive support from NGOs, governments, corporate businesses, and others; to be involved in ecological and ethnological expertise; and to develop national and regional state programmes for environmental protection in the places of Indigenous peoples’ traditional residence (Article 8) [26].

“The Conceptual Programme of Sustainable Development of the Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation” highlights the significance of the collaboration of state authorities and regional governments with civil society institutions, including the associations of the Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the north, to address the issues of their sustainable development. It implies strengthening their socio-economic potential by maintaining their original habitat, traditional lifestyle, and cultural values [27]. Furthermore, “The Programme of State Support for the Traditional Economic Activities of the Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Federation in the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation” [28] (approved by the government on 15 April 2021) accentuates the need for the participation of Indigenous peoples in decision making in collaboration with federal and regional governments.

The federal law “On the General Principles for Organising Communities of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation” establishes general principles for the organisation and activities of Indigenous communities aimed to protect their rights and legitimate the community form of self-government and guarantee its implementation [29]. Furthermore, it legalises the status of interregional, regional, and local unions (associations) of Indigenous communities as NGOs [29,30]. This federal law also regulates the interplay of the regional governments and the Indigenous peoples in conclusion contracts with Indigenous communities and their associations, consulting assistance on Indigenous, traditional, economic activities and co-production while developing and implementing regional programmes of socio-economic support for Indigenous communities [29].

The Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation, and the Association of Reindeer Herders of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation lobby for the rights of Indigenous peoples and provide collaboration with governmental authorities at the federal level. However, the primary measures for the social and economic support of the Indigenous peoples in Russia are regulated at the regional level. Therefore, in different Arctic regions of Russia, the regional governments introduce regional laws and develop state programmes that guarantee social support measures additional to those provided for all demographic groups of the population of Russia.

The regional governments support the collaboration with the Indigenous peoples and initiated the introduction of special boards of Indigenous peoples’ representatives at the regional governments: in YNAO—Council of Representatives of Indigenous Small-

Numbered Peoples of the North in YNAO under the government of YNAO [31], in NAO—Council of Elders of the Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North under the administration of NAO [32], and in the Murmansk region—Council of Representatives of Indigenous Peoples of the North under the government of the Murmansk region [33]. They aim to participate in decision making on developing and implementing state policy in collaboration with regional authorities to protect Indigenous peoples' rights and maintain their traditional culture, lifestyle, and livelihoods. Moreover, in YNAO and NAO, there are additional advisory boards: the Coordinating Council for the Sustainable Development of the Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North of YNAO [34] and the Coordinating Council for Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North in NAO [35]. They include the regional government representatives, the legislative assembly, and the Indigenous peoples' NGOs.

The pre-conditions for the interplay of the Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the north and corporate businesses are made with the Indigenous peoples' right to participate in environmental management and ecological expertise [35–38]. The corporations are keen on partnership with Indigenous peoples, NGOs, and regional governments while implementing their social responsibility programmes in the territories of traditional nature management [39].

So, the basic principles of interplay and collaboration of the Indigenous peoples with key actors in the Russian Arctic are grounded in the federal and regional laws and make pre-conditions for their involvement in cooperation, decision making, and co-production.

### 2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Having received the information from local authorities, public statistical data, and official government reports, we implemented quantitative analysis methods to collect data on the number of Indigenous peoples, ethnicities, associations, communities, and the state support of the Indigenous peoples' livelihoods.

Primary sources included the data collected from the expert interviews of the key actors (the representatives of the Indigenous peoples, Indigenous communities, Indigenous associations, regional governments, and scientific institutions) in the case study area in 2020–2021. Secondary sources used in the study consisted of official information requested from local authorities, public statistical data, and official government reports.

The fieldwork was conducted by the researchers of the YNAO Arctic Scientific Research Centre, Association of Reindeer Herders in YNAO, Naryan-Mar Agriculture Research Station, N. Laverov Federal Center for Integrated Arctic Research of the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Federal Research Centre “Kola Science Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences”, and Northern Arctic Federal University; two of the researchers were Indigenous.

A total of 36 experts (12 per region; 20 males and 16 females, with ages ranging from 25 to 72 years) (Table 2) participated in interviews for a total of 1285 min (average length of an interview was 35.7 min). There were 12 representatives of Indigenous peoples, six leaders of Indigenous communities, six representatives of Indigenous associations, and six from the regional governments, six researchers of the scientific institutions; in total, 24 experts were Indigenous. The inclusion criteria for the Indigenous participants were as follows: be over 18 years of age and be of Indigenous origin. Their status as Indigenous was determined by the enrolment interviewers based on their primary Indigenous language, self-identification, and traditional lifestyle.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted at participants' homes, offices, or places, such as an open space near a community centre, that foster trust and a sense of security during the interview. The audio data were then transcribed, coded, and summarised. All of the audio and transcribed data of participants were archived according to research ethics guidelines to ensure the confidentiality of participants' personal information; participants' personal data and their answers were anonymised, numbered, and entered into de-identified databases. Code names consisted of two parts: uppercase letters (IP denoting

Indigenous peoples; IC denoting Indigenous community; IA denoting Indigenous association; RG denoting regional government; SI denoting scientific institution) and two-digit numbers (e.g., 01 denoting the first participant). For example, “RG01” refers to the first participant representing the regional government.

**Table 2.** The data on the experts in YNAO, NAO, and the Murmansk region.

	YNAO	NAO	The Murmansk Region
Total, <i>n</i>	12	12	12
Males, <i>n</i>	7	6	5
Females, <i>n</i>	5	6	7
Average age, years	41.25 ± 8.05	43 ± 11.96	47 ± 12.02
Indigenous peoples, <i>n</i>	8	8	8
Number of representatives:			
Indigenous peoples (individuals), <i>n</i>	4	4	4
Indigenous communities, <i>n</i>	2	2	2
Indigenous associations, <i>n</i>	2	2	2
Regional governments, <i>n</i>	2	2	2
Scientific institutions, <i>n</i>	2	2	2

The interviews were based on the interview guide developed in Russian and approved by the Northern Arctic Federal University. The experts were asked the following questions: “What is the role of the Indigenous communities (Indigenous associations, regional governments, corporate businesses, and scientific institutions) and their impact on the Indigenous peoples’ life?”, “What are the critical problems of the interplay of the Indigenous peoples with Indigenous communities (Indigenous associations, regional governments, corporate businesses, and scientific institutions) in the COVID-19 pandemic times?”, “What are the opportunities to solve these issues and promote the Indigenous peoples’ cooperation with Indigenous communities (Indigenous associations, regional governments, corporate businesses, and scientific institutions)?”

The participants received information about the programme verbally and in writing and provided written, informed consent. The consent form stated that participation was voluntary and assured their confidentiality. Data collection was undertaken by the researchers in Russian.

The data received from the expert interviews showed the key challenges (as well as the issues raised by the COVID-19 pandemic) for the Indigenous peoples’ collaboration with key actors which make barriers to meeting SDGs.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Thirty-six expert interviews were conducted based on the interview guide developed and approved by the Northern Arctic Federal University, YNAO Arctic Scientific Research Centre, Kola Science Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and N. Laverov Federal Research Center for Integrated Arctic Research of the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Naryan-Mar.

The Indigenous peoples of the north are one of the most vulnerable groups in the Arctic [40]. However, they have “extensive knowledge and experience adapting to rapidly changing ecosystems, which allows them to take advantage of biophysical and social changes” [41]. The UN highlighted the critical problems increasing the vulnerability of the Indigenous societies: insufficient involvement of Indigenous peoples in the development and implementation of public policy; the “import” of workers, which leads to the risk of

virus transmission in the local communities; and the increasing digital divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies [42].

The survival and sustainable development of the Indigenous peoples of the north is rooted in collaboration based on interplay and networking with the key actors: Indigenous communities, Indigenous associations, corporations, governments, scientific institutions, and international partners. Moreover, Meteleva [43] (p. 5) offered the “network concept of public management in the macroregion” as the basis for studying the issues of interplay with the Indigenous peoples. Smirnov [44] (p. 89) applied an even broader approach and signified the “networking diplomacy” in the Arctic with a particular focus on the interests of the Indigenous small-numbered peoples.

The networks of key actors involved in this cooperation in the case study area are presented in Table 3.

Based on expert interviews, we analysed the critical problems of the interplay of the Indigenous peoples with some key actors (Indigenous communities, Indigenous associations, regional governments, corporations, and scientific institutions), which decrease the effectiveness of this collaboration and make barriers to the sustainable development of this vulnerable group in the COVID-19 times.

Even before the pandemic, the collaboration of the Indigenous peoples with governments, corporate businesses, and NGOs experienced some difficulties due to the issues of their collective rights [45] and limited access to decision making [46], i.e., in the environmental management of the territories of their traditional habitat [47–52] and conflict interplay with corporate businesses (primarily, mining, oil, and gas enterprises) [53–55].

The COVID-19 pandemic jeopardised the human security of the Indigenous peoples, one of the vulnerable population groups in the Arctic [4,56–58], and changed collaboration practices aimed to provide sustainable development of these Arctic, local communities [59,60].

**Table 3.** The key actors collaborating with the Indigenous peoples in YNAO, NAO, and the Murmansk region.

Key Actors	Region		
	YNAO	NAO	The Murmansk Region
Indigenous Communities, <i>n</i>	56	19	42
Indigenous Associations	Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North “Yamal for descendants!”; Yamal regional public movement of the Indigenous peoples of the north “Yamal”; Union of Reindeer Herders of Yamal; Union of Reindeer Herders of the World; YNAO Union of the Indigenous Communities; National-cultural autonomy of the Khanty “Pulngavat”; ROD “Izvatas”; Association of Reindeer Herders in YNAO.	Association of the Nenets people “Yasavey”; Union of Reindeer Herders of NAO; Regional public movement of “Izvatas” (natives of the village of Izhma).	Murmansk Regional Center for the Indigenous Peoples of the North and Interethnic Cooperation; Monchegorsk national-cultural autonomy of the Indigenous Saami people; Association of the Kola Saami; Public organisation for the promotion of legal education and the maintaining the cultural heritage of the Saami in the Murmansk region; Murmansk Saami Regional Youth Public Organisation of “Sam Nurash”; Murmansk Regional Public Organization of Saami Masters and Artists “Cheses Sam”; Saami Heritage and Development Foundation.
Corporations	Gazprom-Oil; Novatek; Lukoil; Tatneft; Nenets Oil Company; Sibneftegaz; Novy Urengoy drilling company.	Lukoil; Gazprom; Tatneft-NAO; Bashneft-Polus; Rusvietpetro; Zarubezhneft.	Nornickel; Gazprom.

Table 3. Cont.

Key Actors	Region		
	YNAO	NAO	The Murmansk Region
Key Regional Governmental Institutions	Department for Indigenous Peoples of the North of YNAO; Department of Agro-Industrial Complex of YNAO; Department of Internal Policy of YNAO; Department for Science and Innovations of YNAO; Expert Council of the Folklore of the Indigenous Peoples of the North of YNAO; Council of Representatives of Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North in YNAO under the government of YNAO; Coordinating Council for the Sustainable Development of the Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North of YNAO.	Deputy governor of NAO for the affairs of Nenets and other Indigenous peoples of the North; Department of Regional Policy of NAO; Department of Internal Policy of NAO; Department of the Indigenous Peoples of the North and Traditional Activities of NAO; Council of Elders of the Indigenous Peoples of the North; Coordinating Council for Indigenous Small-Numbered of the North in NAO.	Ministry of Internal Policy of the Murmansk region; Tourism Committee of the Murmansk Region; Council of representatives of the Indigenous peoples under the government of the Murmansk region.
Scientific Institutions	YNAO Arctic Scientific Research Centre; Yamal experimental station.	Naryan-Mar Agriculture Research Station, N. Laverov Federal Center for Integrated Arctic Research of the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences; Northern Arctic Federal University.	Federal Research Centre “Kola Science Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences”.
Russian Key Actors at the Federal Level	The Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON); Ministry for Development of the Russian Far East and the Arctic.		
Key International Institutions	United Nations; Arctic Council; The Saami Council; Inuit Circumpolar Council; Association “Reindeer Herders of the World”.		

### 3.1. The Collaboration of the Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous Communities

One of the critical forms of self-organisation of the Indigenous peoples of the north is an Indigenous community that is an NGO [30] represented by two types: family (clan) communities and territorial-neighbourly communities, aiming to lobby for the interests of the Indigenous peoples, protect their original habitat, and maintain and develop traditional lifestyles, economic activities, crafts, and culture [29]. There are 56 Indigenous communities in YNAO, 42 in the Murmansk region, and 19 in NAO. According to the federal and regional laws in Russia [20,61,62], these communities have the right to:

- (1) Represent and protect the rights and legitimate interests of a community and its members in state authorities, regional governments, courts, and other state and non-state organisations, institutions, and corporations;
- (2) Disseminate information about the activities of a community;
- (3) Organise the upbringing and education of community members’ children based on the traditions and customs of these Indigenous peoples;
- (4) Maintain and protect the places of their traditional residence;
- (5) Create their cultural centres and other public associations;
- (6) Maintain their national language, culture, traditions, customs, etc.

Twenty years ago, up to 80–90% of the total number of the Indigenous nationalities were not covered by this form of self-government [63]. However, in the 21st century, the situation has partly changed. Most Indigenous peoples are encouraged to be a part

of Indigenous communities to share benefits and preferences approved by authorities. Furthermore, an Indigenous community is perceived as “the mechanism of self-organisation of the legal personality of the ethnos” [64], making it a critical institution for maintaining the northern, Indigenous ethnicities’ traditional cultures and lifestyle. Along with it, the previous research in YNAO [65] confirmed that Indigenous peoples are still critical of joining Indigenous communities since they do not trust them and prefer to rely on themselves, their families, and friends.

The experts who are the representatives of the NGOs (mostly Indigenous associations) confirmed the significant impact of the communities on the sustainable development of the Indigenous peoples:

*Indigenous communities play a huge role in preserving territories, traditions, worldviews and maintaining natural ecological balance. Over the centuries, the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic have developed a reference system without detrimental nature management (IA3).*

Indigenous communities are perceived as a part of life-support system for Indigenous peoples, an environmental management form to substantiate the processes governing the interplay of the Indigenous peoples with the Arctic ecosystem:

*Communities were always in the form of nomadic camps, tribal territories, etc. The entire survival system was based on joint activities and the common use of natural resources. Social associations in Indigenous communities helped them to survive and interact with natural and climatic conditions. They played a huge role in bringing up children and supporting elderly people. If this lifestyle is maintained, there is no need for orphanages and nursing homes (SI07).*

The experts also considered it an effective form of self-governance and a legal unit to struggle for collective, Indigenous rights:

*Communities mostly rely only on themselves, and they are independent economic units. The solution of various issues and the protection of our rights are almost always associated with the laws imposed and not developed by us. Naturally, in contrast, we have to protect our right to life and traditional activities (IC18).*

So, the Indigenous communities provide opportunities for the Indigenous peoples to jointly solve the issues with regional and local authorities. It strengthens the actor networking of the key actors aimed at achieving sustainable development.

Some reindeer herders considered Indigenous communities to be an alternative to former collective farms (‘kolkhozes’):

*In NAO, the Nenets, with the collapse of collective farms, were forced to unite in communities, in particular, on the former territory of the collapsed SPK (agricultural production cooperative—E.B.) named after Vyucheisky, at various times after the collapse, eight communities were formed that are engaged in maintaining the traditional lifestyle and reindeer herding (IP02),*

or, to liquidated reindeer brigades:

*Communities are needed to maintain a traditional lifestyle. Previously, these lands were pastured by a brigade of an agricultural production cooperative, which my relative led. However, we wanted to keep reindeer and graze them on the lands of our ancestors. Therefore, with the support of the Department of Agriculture and the Union of Reindeer Herders of the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, we created a self-regulatory organisation (IP35).*

Most experts considered participating in Indigenous communities to be beneficial and “profitable” for Indigenous peoples since it is associated with:

- (1) More convenient self-management as “it is easier to solve issues among themselves. And the management system is simpler than in an agricultural production cooperative” (IC22);
- (2) An effective form of distributing collective financial resources;

- (3) Collective decision making and lobbying for their interests (“We can join our efforts to achieve specific goals” (IC19));
- (4) Maintaining and developing traditional, Indigenous culture and lifestyle;
- (5) “Preservation of national identity” (IA36);
- (6) Supporting collaboration and promoting traditional livelihoods in the COVID-19 times “to get benefits from the sale of agricultural products, support, and cooperation that is urgent during the coronavirus pandemic” (RG31).

However, some Indigenous peoples were critical of the community’s activities and perceived them as formal units of the Indigenous peoples to get access to state support (subsidies and compensations):

*Communities are organised to receive subsidies. They buy boats and snowmobiles, but they do not produce anything. Most communities are formed for the development of tourism (SI05).*

This can be partly proved by the fact that, in some Arctic regions, only a minor part of Indigenous communities is participating in traditional economic activities (reindeer herding and fishing). For example, in the Murmansk region, of the 42 registered Indigenous communities, only six have leased forest plots for reindeer grazing. On the lands of the forest fund, Indigenous communities were given nine forest plots for use; two of them were provided to Saami for reindeer husbandry, and two Saami communities received fishing grounds on the White Sea [39]. In NAO, out of 19 registered communities, only 11 are engaged in reindeer herding on leased land [38].

Anyway, most experts proved that an Indigenous community is a convenient legal form of self-governance, cooperation, and negotiation with regional governments, police, NGOs (i.e., associations of the Indigenous peoples), and other actors aimed to support the maintenance and sustainable development of the Indigenous peoples in the Arctic. This signifies the role of Indigenous communities as the key actors networking with governments and corporations [66], as well as developing the economic cooperation between Indigenous communities (organising production cooperatives and agricultural artels) [67].

The experts also confirmed that the interplay between the Indigenous peoples and the Indigenous communities did not change during the pandemic. Only nomadic reindeer herders experienced difficulties due to limited access to the settlements and poor communication with community leaders. However, the most urgent issues were solved by mobile conversations. Other research also confirmed that the isolation of the Indigenous communities during the “hot time” of the COVID-19 pandemic jeopardised the social and food security of the Indigenous peoples and limited access of the nomadic reindeer herders to vital resources [68].

### 3.2. The Collaboration of the Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous Associations

The associations of the Indigenous peoples of the north, as the unions of Indigenous communities, are NGOs [30] aimed to promote and lobby for Indigenous peoples’ rights. They are key “players” in the actor–network interplay between the Indigenous peoples, Indigenous communities, and regional governments. These associations also negotiate with corporate businesses to secure their traditional livelihoods.

In Russia, the RAIPON is the leading association representing the Indigenous peoples of the north, Siberia, and the Far East. Its president Grigory Ledkov listed the urgent issues to be solved by the association: determining the ethnicity of Indigenous peoples and introducing ethnological expertise, increasing access to natural resources, modernising Indigenous communities, extending the list of types of traditional economic activity, introducing a special protection regime for the Indigenous peoples’ territories, implementing federal law on the territories of traditional nature management, and promoting adaptation of the Indigenous peoples to the changing Arctic [69]. In addition, there are regional associations of the Indigenous peoples working in collaboration with it (Table 2). The critical issues of modernising Indigenous communities and the expansion of the list of traditional

economic activities are closely related to the maintenance of the environment, ensuring the social security of Indigenous peoples' livelihoods and veterinary animal safety and requiring the acquisition of new knowledge to support the sustainable development of Indigenous communities in the conditions of changing, traditional lifestyles.

All experts who participated in our study confirmed the high importance of the Indigenous peoples' associations:

*The role of associations is vital in the life of the Indigenous peoples and the support of Indigenous communities. That is a clarification of regulatory documents, reporting problems to the Governor, taking part in decision-making, organising meetings with specialists in reindeer herding, exchange of experience with other NGOs (RG10);*

*The Association of Indigenous small-numbered peoples and the Union of Reindeer Herders should control the issues of protecting Indigenous peoples' rights (IP01).*

The experts representing Indigenous peoples assigned associations the ambitious role of being the "keepers" of national culture and ethnicity in general:

*It is challenging to live according to someone else's Charter while understanding that this Charter leads to destroying territories, faith, traditional nature management, Indigenous folklore, and, as a result, the population itself (IP28).*

However, experts perceived the main focus of the associations' activities differently. The representative of a scientific institution thought that the NGOs should mainly "provide assistance, advice, support, and socialisation of the Indigenous peoples" (SI13). The experts from the regional governments considered the leading roles of the associations as "bringing people together, sharing information, helping and supporting, preserving traditions, identity, and assistance" (RG15). The experts representing Indigenous communities relied on NGOs and saw their primary tasks as protecting and lobbying for the Indigenous peoples' rights and interests, consulting on legal and economic issues, defending their claims in the courts, informing federal and regional governments about vital problems "as a channel of two-way communication between the authorities and the Indigenous peoples of the North" (IC04), participating in decision making, applying for funding, distributing financial support among Indigenous communities and individually, and promoting traditional lifestyle and traditional livelihoods. They are sure that the associations

*can help the authorities to solve urgent problems and better understand the traditions and customs of the Indigenous peoples. Thereby they can choose the appropriate way to solve problems for the further development of Indigenous peoples and their painless adaptation to circumstances and exploration of the Arctic territories in Russia (IC04).*

*Protection and preservation of traditional knowledge and crafts are the main tasks of the associations (IC06).*

The representatives of the associations insisted on the high importance of their activities since they really help "an illiterate population to communicate with the authorities" (IA08) and settle their issues, i.e., those concerning employment, social insurance, and social support of the elderly.

All the experts confirmed that Indigenous NGOs impact sustainable development of the Indigenous peoples and local communities:

- (1) Improving the living standards and well-being of Indigenous peoples;
- (2) Promoting their healthy lifestyle;
- (3) Decreasing gender inequality in the Indigenous communities and empowering women;
- (4) Increasing access to natural resources and promoting traditional economic activities (hunting, fishing, and reindeer herding);
- (5) Promoting employment of Indigenous peoples;
- (6) Providing social, food, and economic security of the Indigenous peoples;
- (7) Developing cooperation with corporate businesses;
- (8) Impacting on the communication of Indigenous peoples with associations in Russia and other countries.

Despite confirming the significant role of the associations of the Indigenous peoples, one-third of the interviewed experts did not trust them. One of the Indigenous peoples' experts even shared that he does "not trust associations totally" (IP09) and has to "rely only on himself in solving his issues" (IP34). Half of the experts thought that this attitude towards the activities of the Indigenous associations is rooted in their low effectiveness and the lack of feedback and direct communication with Indigenous peoples. In contrast, the associations interact only with the elites (the heads of the Indigenous communities). Over 60% of experts recognised the problems of interplay with the associations. Some interviewed Indigenous experts even complained that:

*The Association of Indigenous peoples of the North does not want to communicate with us (IP29);*

*Maybe we don't know something, but they don't inform us of anything (IP11);*

*Associations hide the real problems of the Indigenous peoples (IP14).*

Ineffective feedback is the barrier to communication between different actors willing to develop collaboration with Indigenous peoples: between NGOs and individual Indigenous peoples and between NGOs and regional governments. Some experts mentioned that, in the COVID-19 times, the cooperation of NGOs and governments decreased: "The regional authorities do not hear or understand them (associations—E.B.)" (IP12). However, one of the experts noticed that the associations of the Indigenous peoples are lobbying for the authorities' interests but not Indigenous communities' ones: "The interests of the associations coincide with any statements of the local authorities—this is bad" (SI16). This ambivalent position and the impact of NGOs as key actors of the interplay with Indigenous peoples can also be explained within the institutional theory. The researchers Panikarova and Kulpin [70] considered that "ethnically marked institutions and practices can either act as a kind of support for the economy, forming a deep network structure, or hinder economic activity that does not fit into the established boundaries prescribed by ethnic norms by specific parameters" [70] (p. 164).

What are the key opportunities to solve these issues and promote the practical cooperation of NGOs and Indigenous peoples? First, the experts perceived this problem as fundamental and global:

*We see the solution to the issues of the lack of interaction between associations in changing the views of their leaders (SI33).*

Another offered higher integration of Indigenous peoples into governments; the representatives of the Indigenous ethnicities

*living in these territories for centuries should work in the authorities. Then there will be no communication problems (IP17).*

However, some interviewed experts thought that associations cannot help Indigenous peoples since they do not have special equipment, vehicles, and technology and are limited with funding. Therefore, the experts representing governments offered to plan financing in the municipal state programmes for the support of the associations and organise workshops on the Indigenous peoples' problems with the participation of all key actors.

In the COVID-19 times, the adaptation of the Indigenous peoples in the Russian Arctic was promoted due to extended collaboration with the associations of the Indigenous peoples in other Arctic states (i.e., The Saami Council, Inuit Circumpolar Council). The experts confirmed that "Interaction with Indigenous peoples of foreign states is significant for protecting Indigenous rights" (IA20). Some of them mentioned that, before the pandemic, this cooperation was more fruitful (meetings, mobility programmes, participating in the events). However, in pandemic times, this collaboration almost stopped due to ineffective Internet connection in remote places, making it impossible to participate in online workshops, and the lack of face-to-face communication of Indigenous peoples living in neighbouring countries (i.e., Finland, Norway, and Sweden). Moreover, the Indigenous NGOs preferred to limit contact with the representatives of other countries because they

were afraid of being called “an inoagent” (one who receives foreign funding and engages in political activities within Russia) [21]. Therefore, this collaboration also seems, to the experts, non-systematical and primarily based on personal communication.

The issue of the limited collaboration and networking of the Indigenous associations with foreign Indigenous NGOs due to the pandemic restrictions was widely discussed [71,72]. For example, Semina [73] considered that it can result in either “social solidarity” or “confrontation”.

### 3.3. The Collaboration of the Indigenous Peoples and Regional Governments

Governmental institutions are one of the key actors in “networking diplomacy” [44] and collaboration with the Indigenous peoples in the Arctic. However, the interplay of the Indigenous peoples and the government during the pandemic changed [74].

All the experts agreed that the role of regional governments is prioritised for the sustainable development of Indigenous peoples. They thought that the main tasks of the governmental institutions are:

- (1) “Protection of the Indigenous peoples’ rights to maintain their national languages and culture” (RG32);
- (2) “Adaptation of special educational programs for Indigenous peoples at secondary schools, Universities” (SI23), “introducing training courses for adults and children to preserve and disseminate ethnic knowledge” (IA30);
- (3) “Providing special benefits and social insurance for Indigenous peoples” (RG24) to improve their quality of life;
- (4) “Construction of housing for nomadic people” (IP27) to increase their living standards and provide Indigenous peoples’ social security for the elderly;
- (5) “Maintaining welfare and preventing poverty among Indigenous peoples” (RG24);
- (6) “Ensuring guaranteed access to natural resources” (RG10) (hunting licenses, quotas for fishing, and priority right to land use);
- (7) “Granting subsidies to support traditional livelihoods” (IC04) (reindeer herding and fishing);
- (8) “Development of special programs for improving medical facilities for Indigenous peoples living in remote areas” (RG32);
- (9) “Managing process of socialisation of tundra residents” (SI13).

Most experts were satisfied with the collaboration of Indigenous peoples with regional governments. They saw honest feedback and real help that meets vital needs of Indigenous peoples, i.e., free chum (traditional Indigenous, nomadic peoples’ house), equipment, snow-mobles, firewood, fuel, products, economic, and legal advice, etc. Some Indigenous experts had personal experience of getting social payments (12): “chum capital” [75] (1), subsidies for education (1) and reindeer herding (2), and used special sanitary aviation (1). Governments contributed to “increasing prices for slaughtered meat” (RG21) and introduced a “regional standard of security” [75].

However, even those experts satisfied with the interplay of Indigenous peoples and regional governments mentioned some “gaps” that make barriers to effective communication and sustainable development of local communities. Some interviewed experts noticed that, sometimes, the representatives of the regional governments ignore their needs and are inactive:

*Local governments do not respond to requests (IP02);*

*We see the lack of understanding towards us. We know that the Union of Reindeer Herders faces the same issues (IC18);*

*We see the insufficient understanding of the importance of maintaining traditional reindeer herding and fishing as the basis for preserving northern ethnic groups. The regional authorities are primarily focused on developing mining to increase funding of the regional budget and distribute it not to support the traditional economy (SI33).*

However, the Indigenous peoples' mistrust of the governments is a common problem well discussed in previous research [76].

The Indigenous peoples want to be better informed about climate change impacts:

*There are problems with regional authorities due to their inactive work. For example, we don't know what to pay attention to in terms of climate change, where changes occur. We know that ice phenomena have become a widespread disaster in reindeer herding (IP35).*

Indigenous peoples are concerned about the decreased access to socio-cultural and household goods due to pandemic restrictions: "If earlier we could get materials, consultations, get certificates at any time, now only by appointment" (IP27). The experts believed that Indigenous peoples should also be decision-makers in managing and distributing the regional budget. Indigenous experts even complained that "it is easier to apply to international organisations to support national reindeer herding and traditional Saami culture in the Murmansk region" (IP29).

This issue of limited access to social services, state support, and co-production and decision making in collaboration with regional governments during the "peak" of the pandemic was common for many Arctic regions. However, the impact of these limitations was especially significant for the Arctic, Indigenous communities, which strongly depend on governmental support and assistance [7,68].

What are the solutions for improving the interplay of Indigenous peoples and regional governments? The experts offered to extend the impact of Indigenous peoples on decision making: "Indigenous peoples living in these territories should work in local government bodies" (IC06). They also thought that "it is necessary to increase control over implementing and distributing support funded by the federal government" (IA36). The experts saw the possible solution in developing collaboration with Indigenous associations of other foreign countries. The Arctic researcher Astakhova [77] considered that, in the COVID-19 times, a mechanism for the interaction of the Indigenous peoples of the north with state authorities should be based not only on the Internet and the media but also on "personal factor" [77] (p. 92).

When addressing industrial development issues of territories following the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the interaction of authorities with Indigenous peoples should be developed on the principle of free, prior, and informed consent, which is based on the recognition of these peoples' rights to choose their priorities. However, Novikova [78] noted the lack of procedure for determining who can represent the Indigenous peoples' interests at the legislative level while interplaying with state authorities and industrial enterprises. In general, the Indigenous peoples' interests are represented by NGOs, which often causes their dissatisfaction and distrust of "formal" leaders. Moreover, the general, democratic principles of the majority are not always practical concerning Indigenous peoples living in remote territories with inefficient means of communication and logistics due to their small representation in government.

### 3.4. The Collaboration of the Indigenous Peoples and Corporations

Currently, industrial companies are intensifying exploring Arctic resources (oil, gas, and mineral) that require collaboration and improved negotiation with Indigenous peoples. The Federal Council of Russia signifies the need for a prior agreement with Indigenous peoples, who "often experience stress from "neighbourhood" with representatives of mining companies before deciding on possible industrial activities" [79] (p. 76). The actor-networking interplay of Indigenous peoples and corporations is constantly discussed by state authorities, which declare the need to create a comprehensive system of legislative protection of the Indigenous peoples' rights.

All the interviewed experts confirmed that corporations support Indigenous peoples participating in collaboration with regional governments by investing in the programmes aimed at constructing social infrastructure facilities (houses, hospitals, schools, kindergartens, educational centres, sports facilities, etc.); developing educational programs;

contributing to the employment of Indigenous peoples; and promoting cultural events as sponsors.

The expert interviews showed that the effectiveness of collaboration of corporate businesses with Indigenous peoples differs in three regions. In YNAO, the experts complained about the lack of direct communication between corporations and Indigenous peoples. Financial assistance and compensations go through the regional budget. Regional governments take on the role of an “arbiter”. At the same time, Indigenous communities claim a larger share of this compensation:

*Corporations are open to cooperation. There are no problems with interaction. But there are problems with the distribution of compensation—all interactions go through the regional government and municipal authorities. There are no direct agreements between Indigenous communities and corporations. Corporations solve the issues through local self-government and regional authorities, not through Indigenous NGOs (IC19).*

However, currently, the participation of the Indigenous peoples in decision making on land use in the tundra is an urgent issue. In NAO, the experts mentioned decreasing support of the corporate businesses. They explained it with the low development of big oil and gas companies in the region:

*We do not have mining companies on our land, so we are experiencing difficulties in machinery and equipment, which is very expensive today. These are snowstorms, electric generators, and spray generators for sanitation of reindeer in the summer from gadflies and midges (IP02).*

The corporations mainly sponsored cultural events (i.e., the Reindeer Day), schools’ sports activities, and invested in construction projects (sports facilities, houses, and secondary schools). In the Murmansk region, the experts complained of the lack of the industrial companies’ feedback. As a result, Indigenous communities have to apply to the court for the protection of their rights. For example, Indigenous NGOs failed in their negotiations with the mining company Nor Nickel and even sent a letter addressed to the company Tesla encouraging Elon Musk to refuse to buy nickel from this corporation until the company recognises the Indigenous peoples’ rights and fulfils its obligations on environmental protection [80].

The researcher Tulaeva [81], based on the interviews with reindeer-herding communities, stated that the main reason for ineffective “dialogue” between corporate businesses and Indigenous peoples is rooted in the “difficulty of taking part in public discussions, orientation to different legislative documents, lack trust to external institutions” [81] (p. 155).

The interviewed experts signified the critical role of corporate social responsibility of the enterprises:

*Industrial companies should be obliged to carry out a preliminary assessment of the impact of their activities on the development of the Arctic territories in the places of Indigenous peoples’ residence and traditional economic activities (IA30).*

Furthermore, Mikhalev [82] insisted on Indigenous peoples being initiators and actors of ecological expertise and environmental protection management to make industrial companies respect the Indigenous peoples’ rights and interests.

The problem of the Indigenous peoples participating in decision making on the issues of the environmental management in the territories of their traditional habitat and traditional livelihoods is signified by many researchers [83–91]. Moreover, the pandemic decreased the effectiveness of the negotiations between the Indigenous peoples, their NGOs, and corporate businesses in the Arctic territories [92]. However, in 2020, the government prioritised support of the Arctic, Indigenous communities and obliged mining companies to conclude a special agreement with the Indigenous NGOs and compensate damages to Indigenous peoples [93]. Furthermore, to strengthen their position and make corporations recognise their rights, the Indigenous peoples were even encouraged to appeal to the international corporations [94].

The researchers Semenov and Chistyakov [95] studied the experience of interaction with the Indigenous peoples of the north based on the norms of legislation and international standards in YNAO and argued that a scientific approach to interplay with the Indigenous peoples is needed. Scientific research is already necessary at the initial stage of any industrial project: “This stage will include primary data collection, assessment of ecosystem services, ethno-social risks concerning the Indigenous population, and in the long term monitoring of all parameters. It is noted that all interaction should be based on openness, which implies the provision of all reliable information and feedback to the Indigenous peoples. An important point is a formation in the structure of companies responsible for contact with the Indigenous population, consideration of complaints, and proposals, control and monitoring of actions affecting the Indigenous peoples’ interests” [95] (p. 45).

The regional governments mediate the interplay between corporations, Indigenous peoples, and Indigenous associations and manage their negotiations (i.e., land-use issues). It significantly reduces the risk of industrial paternalism since the “voices” of all key actors are heard and recognised.

### 3.5. The Collaboration of the Indigenous Peoples and Scientific Institutions

Scientists are some of the key actors of the actor–network collaboration model with the Indigenous peoples. All the interviewed experts signified the effectiveness of this cooperation since it is an appropriate way to exchange knowledge about different co-existence, enriching experience and promoting scientific diplomacy that should be the “priority task in the Arctic” [96] (p. 64).

The experts confirmed that scientific research could impact policy making and disseminate the urgent issues Indigenous peoples face. The scientific studies on culture, traditional lifestyle and economy, health, and self-governance of the Indigenous peoples of the north and environmental research on changing Arctic ecosystems contribute to disseminating the Indigenous knowledge and improving their quality of life. All the experts had the experience of interplay with researchers while “nomaded in tundra together with scientific expeditions” (IP17) or “participated in surveys” (IP27). The Indigenous experts believed that:

*They (scientists—E.B.) help to solve problems, talk about life in the tundra, culture, living standard, and the Indigenous peoples’ issues, climate and weather phenomena. Yes, everyone will know about us (IP28).*

One of the experts complained that “there were a lot of studies until the 2000s. Everyone actively participated. However, there was no feedback” (IP34). Some experts were even more satisfied with interplay with corporate businesses than with scientific institutions:

*We often have meetings with lawyers, doctors, scientists on climate change issues. They take blood from us, but we do not know the results. Now, if a gas pipeline passes on our land, these issues will be agreed upon with us, and they will keep in touch to the end and invite us to discuss the project. This is the correct approach. In Soviet times, when we were on a collective farm, agricultural specialists, scientists, and doctors often came to us according to a plan developed in advance, discussed and solved our problems (IP14).*

It signifies the responsibility and ethics of scientific research.

During the pandemic, the researchers became some of the Indigenous peoples’ key partners for disseminating the information of urgent issues, non-respect for Indigenous peoples’ rights, and limitations [97]. In addition, the representatives of the scientific institutions informed the governments and corporations about the problems of Indigenous peoples and encouraged them to help local communities.

The experts insisted that the mandatory pre-conditions of this cooperation are:

- (1) Benefits for Indigenous peoples (“the results of the work should be beneficial to the Indigenous communities” (IC06), i.e., “preserve the food base for reindeer” (IP01), “improve health” (IP17));

- (2) Intention of scientists to publish the results of their research (both in Russia and abroad) because Indigenous peoples want to be heard and “make (their—E.B.) problems visible for all the world” (IA03). That is why they expect that “research reports should be published” (IP09). This can attract “increasing attention to maintaining Indigenous culture” (IP09) and inform the authorities. Therefore, many experts mentioned the previous fruitful experience of the collaboration with researchers while participating in joint projects with the YNAO Arctic Scientific Research Centre, Association of Reindeer Herders in YNAO, Naryan-Mar Agriculture Research Station, N. Laverov Federal Center for Integrated Arctic Research of the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Federal Research Centre “Kola Science Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences”, and Northern Arctic Federal University. For example, those that resulted in jointly developed strategies for the Lovozero district and Loparskaya, different districts of YNAO and NAO [98], such as recommendations for reindeer herders and producers of reindeer meat [99,100] and developed programmes on promoting healthcare facilities for the Indigenous communities [101], etc. It signifies scientific research has a role in “providing authorities with methodologies and data for quick response to changes in the living standards and life strategies of the Indigenous population” [102] (p. 2888). One of the examples of successful collaboration of the researchers with the Indigenous peoples, their NGOs, regional governments, and corporations was a face-to-face meeting focused on the issues of reindeer herders caused by climate change in Nadym, YNAO, in March 2019 (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** International seminar “Human well-being in the Arctic in a changing climate”, 3 March 2019 (photo by E.B.).

The pandemic changed the “rules” of the scientific collaboration with the Indigenous peoples and made them adapt to new circumstances to keep connected. For example, during COVID-19 isolation, the UArctic network of Indigenous colleges from Kola, Taimyr, Yamal, Nenets, Komi, and Sakha used their partnership to create online learning solutions that shared knowledge on reindeer husbandry, Indigenous businesses, fishing, and tourism. A new Arctic Indigenous Virtual Arts Network (AIVAN) connected Indigenous artists. The International Sámi Film Institute developed 15 short films to document the impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledge-based responses in northern Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Russia. The films are a part of the Arctic Indigenous Film Academy and Film Witness. Building on western science and Indigenous knowledge together to address the COVID-19 pandemic will be important in the coming months and years [103].

The role of the “science diplomacy in the Arctic has already proven its global relevance, as evidenced by the Agreement to Strengthening International Arctic Science Cooperation signed by the foreign ministers of the eight Arctic countries and the governments of Greenland, and the Faroe Islands on 11 May 2017, at the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in Fairbanks, Alaska” [104]. This cooperation is also supported by the UArctic Thematic Network, which promotes “research, education and leadership at the intersection of sciences (natural, social and traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples) and diplomacy” [104]. It involves all stakeholders—from diplomats and experts to students—in international and interdisciplinary work.

The high need for actor-networking collaboration to make solid pre-conditions for sustainable development of the Indigenous peoples in the Arctic is explained by the increased vulnerability of this population group and high requirements of adaptation to socio-economic changes in the Arctic caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. To guarantee meeting SDGs, governments offer preferential rights and guarantees of additional social support of the Indigenous peoples. They aim to provide urgent life-support measures and maintain their sustainable development, decreasing poverty (SDG 1), enhancing social and food security and gender equality, improving living standards (SDGs 2–7, 10), promoting traditional economic activities, and addressing the needs of economic growth of Indigenous communities (SDGs 8, 11) based on resilience to changing Arctic ecosystems (SDGs 13–15) and responsible collaboration with corporations and strong institutions (SDGs 9, 12, 16–17).

The main strength of our study was using the unique data of qualitative research collected from the expert interviews with the key actors involved in interplay and collaboration with the Indigenous peoples in three Arctic regions (YNAO, NAO, and the Murmansk region) during the expeditions that took place in 2021. Most similar studies remained fragmentary and were often hard to access. However, our study had several limitations. Participation was voluntary, and it was not expected to include representatives of all NGOs, governmental institutions, and corporations, which may limit the generalisability of findings. Future research could also benefit from exploring the issues of collaboration of the Indigenous peoples in Russia with the international actors and their impact on policy making and promoting the sustainable development of the Indigenous communities in the Russian Arctic.

#### 4. Conclusions

Invoking actor–network theory in governance revealed a lot of gaps in the interplay of Indigenous peoples with key actors in the Russian Arctic, which make the model of this collaboration ineffective and do not support the sustainable development of Indigenous peoples; insufficient interregional and international cooperation, indirect communication of regional governments with Indigenous peoples via Indigenous communities and associations focused mostly on supporting elites, and the lack of systematic feedback of all key actors decrease the effectiveness of the networking of all actors aiming to maintain sustainable development of the Indigenous peoples in the Arctic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the cooperation of Indigenous peoples with different actors and the development of networking aims to secure the Arctic, local communities and help them to meet SDGs, guarantee their economic, social, and cultural rights to maintain traditional lifestyle and livelihoods, involve them in natural resource management, improve quality of life and well-being, increase access to ethnocultural education, reduce inequality, and promote the development of Indigenous communities and other forms of self-government.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1.** The federal and regional laws meeting SDGs of the Indigenous peoples' sustainable development in the Russian Arctic.

SDG	The Russian Federation	YNAO	NAO	The Murmansk Region
(1) No Poverty	[105–108]	[75,109–112]	[113–120]	[121–123]
(2) Zero Hunger	[6,124–126]	[75,109–111,127–131]	[113–116]	[121]
(3) Good Health and Well-being	[19,105,132]	[109–111,129]	[113–116,120,133,134]	[121,122,135]
(4) Quality Education	[17,19,105,108]	[109–112,127,136–138]	[113–116,120,133,134]	[121,139]
(5) Gender Equality	[105]	[105]	[105]	[105]
(6) Clean Water and Sanitation	[105,140]	[109,110]	[113,115,116]	[105,140]
(7) Affordable and Clean Energy	[105,108]	[75,109,110,129]	[113,115,116]	[123]
(8) Decent Work and Economic Growth	[17,19,105,107,124,132]	[75,109–111,128]	[113–117,120,133,134]	[121,122,139,141,142]
(9) Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	[105,108]	[75,109,110,127,128]	[113–117]	[121]
(10) Reduced Inequality	[17,18,105]	[75,110–112,127]	[114,116,143]	[139,142]
(11) Sustainable Cities and Communities	[105,108]	[110,127]	[113–116]	[121–123,139]
(12) Responsible Consumption and Production	[17,124,125,140,144]	[75,109,110,127–130]	[113,115,116]	[122]

Table A1. Cont.

SDG	The Russian Federation	YNAO	NAO	The Murmansk Region
(13) Climate Action	[108]	[127]	[113,115,116]	[121]
(14) Life Below Water	[105,107,124,140,141]	[109,110,127,128,145,146]	[113,115,116]	[121,122]
(15) Life on Land	[17,19,106,107,125,126,144]	[109,110,127,128,145,146]	[113,115,116]	[111,122,123,147]
(16) Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions	[17–19,105,108,126,147]	[109–111,127]	[62,113–127]	[121,122]
(17) Partnerships for the Goals	[17–20,108,147]	[109–111,128]	[62,113,115,117,148]	[121,122]

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