

10. The development of settlements and the history of Longyearbyen

A group of houses and buildings for a number of persons may appear to be a town or settlement, but does not necessarily constitute a community. It takes a certain permanency, a level of physical and social infrastructure and at least some degree of demographic variety before we can use the term (local) community.

There are many short-lived settlements on Svalbard, with a varying degree of community features, such as Advent City (1905–08), Hiorthhamn (1917–26) or Tunheim on Bjørnøya (1915–25). These are examples of mining camps that hardly had the potential or ambition to become permanent communities. The American Arctic Coal Co. probably never intended to develop their “camp” Longyear City (1906–15) into a full-fledged local society, and little changed when Store Norske took over in 1916. The same seems to be true for the first phases of mining settlements like the Dutch Barentsburg (1920-26), the Swedish Sveagruvan (1917–25) and Norwegian Ny-Ålesund (1917–29).

Ny-Ålesund closed mining in 1929, but functioned as a fishery station in the 1930s. Coalmining was reopened in 1945 and continued until 1963. In this period there were families living in the town too. Thereafter, Ny-Ålesund has become a research station.

The Soviet Trust Arktikugol started coal mining in Grumant and Barentsburg in 1931–32, expanding rapidly. There were a few women and small children, but nothing like a family community. From 1949 Pyramiden was built up. Grumant closed in 1962, Pyramiden in 1998. From the 1960s the Russian settlements had a well-developed welfare infrastructure, including cultural centres, schools and kindergartens – on par with or better than Longyearbyen at that time. All the same, none of these towns were comparable to ordinary local communities. For example, there was a large majority of males, there was only one employer in each settlement, and the company organized housing, catering and welfare. There was even a local monetary system, both in the Russian and Norwegian towns.

Longyearbyen was such a “company town” for a very long time, existing and functioning for the sole purpose of producing coal for Store Norske. Changes started in the mid-1970s, when Store Norske was nationalized and the Norwegian state started modernizing the community – or “normalizing” Longyearbyen, as it was expressed. Family housing was provided, welfare improved. The opening of the airport in 1975 broke the isolation, as did the improvement of telecommunications. The number of state employees rose, creating a more varied demographic and social structure. In the 1980s this development sped up, and the first private enterprises appeared. In 1989 Store Norske was reorganized, and the community-oriented services were taken over by a separate, state-owned company.

The really modern phase starts in the early 1990s. The Government supported the development of new, private and (hopefully) profitable businesses in Longyearbyen as an alternative to the troubled coal company. Tourism, service industries and scientific activity expanded greatly. Almost against all odds even Store Norske revived, opening profitable mining in Svea Nord. Longyearbyen has doubled its number of inhabitants since 1990 and has become an advanced, varied and high-quality family community with a functional local democracy (since 2002). However, the demography is still unusual compared to mainland Norway, with a male surplus, a very young population and a high international component.

Food for thought

- What characterized the so-called “company towns” of Svalbard?
- What is meant by the “normalization” of Longyearbyen? Do you think the local community is “normal” today?