

Svalbard Science Forum Annual Report 2023

Approved SSF 1-24 18 April 2024

Introduction

The Svalbard Science Forum (SSF) was established in 1998 with a mandate from the Ministry of Education and Research. The mandate, revised most recently in 2019, states that the overall objective of the SSF is to contribute to increased scientific quality in the research conducted in Svalbard. The Forum shall contribute to good coordination of, and offer accessible information about all research in Svalbard, and contribute to making Svalbard attractive to Norwegian and international researchers. The Forum members are the major stakeholders in Svalbard research, i.e., the main institutions, locations, and bodies that facilitate research. In 2023 there were eight members and one observer in the Forum.

The members of the SSF are:

- The Research Council of Norway - RCN (chair)
- Kings Bay AS
- The Norwegian Polar Institute
- The University Centre in Longyearbyen - UNIS
- Ny-Ålesund Science Managers Committee - NySMAC
- The Polish Polar Station in Hornsund
- Svalbard Integrated Arctic Earth Observing System - SIOS
- The Norwegian Meteorological Institute (MET)
- The Governor of Svalbard (observer)

The Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute (AARI) Barentsburg, has been suspended temporarily as a member of the Forum (since February 2022).

The mandate gives RCN the responsibility for the SSF and the day-to-day operation of the secretariat, development of the Research in Svalbard (RiS) portal, management of the two funding schemes Arctic Field Grant (AFG) and Svalbard Strategic Grant (SSG), and tasks associated with information sharing and strengthening collaboration between both individual researchers and research institutions in Svalbard.

The SSF secretariat is manned with personnel in Longyearbyen and resources from the RCN main office in Oslo. The responsibilities of the Forum are executed by holding Forum meetings twice annually and preparing the background documents for the items on the agenda. Typically, these are about RiS, the funding schemes, and the framework for research in Svalbard such as regulations. Information exchange, to enable coordination between the members of the Forum is always on the agenda.

Deliverables to the mandate

In 2023, the SSF secretariat and Forum members have worked towards the ambitions set out in the mandate and have also arranged the fourth Svalbard Science Conference. The following can be highlighted regarding achieving the different objectives in the mandate:

-Contribute to increased scientific quality in research in Svalbard

It is difficult to assess how SSF contributes to increasing the scientific quality of the research conducted in Svalbard. However, research cooperation, and the sharing of data based on the FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable) do increase scientific quality.

-Contribute to good coordination of research activities in Svalbard and develop and strengthen collaboration between both individual researchers and research institutions in Svalbard

Coordination and collaboration are enabled through the RiS portal, the two funding schemes (AFG and SSG), the Svalbard Science Conference and the Forum meetings.

-Offer integrated and accessible information about all research in Svalbard

The RiS portal offers open information about most research projects in Svalbard, with keywords, location of fieldworks etc. The portal provides access to anyone who would like to search among registered projects without creating an account. It is mandatory to register all research projects that require permission from the Governor, all projects executed in Ny-Ålesund and Hornsund, and all projects funded by the RCN and the Svalbard Environmental Protection Fund in the RiS portal. This implies that information about a substantial proportion of research activities on-going in Svalbard are made openly available in the RiS portal.

-Contribute to place Svalbard in a larger pan-Arctic and global perspective

In the Svalbard Strategic Grant 2023 (see below) seven priorities were listed and one of these was that priority will be given to activities that contribute to putting Svalbard research in a larger pan-Arctic and global perspective. Six of the ten funded projects have collaboration across the Arctic (or even more broadly) as an explicit objective. The same priority will be listed in the SSG 2024 call. Additionally, priority will be given to projects that increase mobility and cooperation between research localities in Svalbard and Greenland.

-Contribute to SIOS becoming an effective tool for the utilization of infrastructure in and around Svalbard

Collaboration between SSF and SIOS resulted in SIOS offering additional funding to projects for support with data management in the SSG 2023 call (see below). However, this opportunity was not used by any of the projects that were funded by the call. Discussions on how data may be shared between the SIOS Observation Facility Catalogue and RiS were also started in 2023. All members of SSF (except RCN and Kings Bay) are also members of SIOS.

-Contribute to arranging the Svalbard Science Conference as the central international meeting place for dialogue on research in Svalbard

The 4th Svalbard Science Conference was held in Oslo 31 October-1 November. The organizing committee consisted of personnel from RCN, The Norwegian Polar Institute, NILU, and The Norwegian Meteorological Institute. During 2023 the Forum discussed experiences from the Svalbard Science Conference in 2021 and gave valuable input to the preparations including suggestions for topics and members of the scientific committee.

More than 300 researchers, research managers and stakeholders were present at the Svalbard Science Conference. In addition to a broad thematic range of presentations the conference maintained its tradition of offering substantial space for posters on ongoing research activities. The

latter created an opportunity for young scientists to present their research activities. The conference is a very important meeting place for scientists at varying career stages to network and share experiences and expertise.

-Support to the Governor of Svalbard

The SSF has a role as an advisory body on all issues regarding research in Svalbard. This is implemented by SFF being a discussion arena and a proponent for research interests in all cases that concern scientific activity in the archipelago such as plans and regulations that affect researchers and research activities. Replies to public consultations are, if time permits, discussed, and agreed upon in a Forum meeting, and submitted as a Forum reply. The SSF secretariat also supports the Governor with assessments of proposals to Svalbard's Environmental Protection Fund twice a year.

The Governor is obliged to consider the accumulated footprint of research (and other activities) on Svalbard's nature. In 2023, the Governor introduced four set deadlines for applications for fieldwork so that they can keep an eye on the accumulated load in given areas at given periods. This was communicated in RiS and in all information provided by the SSF to the research community.

-Research in Svalbard portal (RiS)

After a troublesome 2022, RiS was stable in 2023 and had no downtime. The secretariat has worked closely with the other owners, The Norwegian Polar Institute, The Governor of Svalbard, and Kings Bay AS on the performance and development of RiS. The four partners constitute the RiS Steering Group and meet 3-6 times a year. The Steering Group is responsible for decisions on RiS development projects. In 2023 development of new functionality was implemented regarding the case handling system of the Governor and the booking services in Ny-Ålesund. There were no specific meetings in the RiS Partner Group in 2023.

By the end of 2023 there were approximately 600 active projects; 13,500 publications; and more than 3,400 datasets registered in RiS.

-Forum meetings

There were two meetings in the Forum in 2023, both held in digital format. SSF 1/23 was held 18 April, and SSF 2/23 on 5 October.

The RiS portal, the two funding schemes, and the Svalbard Science Conference 2023 were discussed at both meetings.

During 2023 a public consultation was opened on the proposed nature reserve in Lower Adventdalen with deadline for replies in October. The potential impacts of the proposal on research activities were large. For the 2/23 meeting the secretariat had prepared a draft reply that was discussed before it was sent to the appropriate public bodies.

Overview of personnel and finances

-RCN secretariat in Svalbard

The secretariat staff in Longyearbyen consisted of 2-3 research advisers. Salaries and operational costs for the SSF-secretariat and the Forum are part of the ordinary budget of the RCN. The government's state budget for 2023 included a major cut in the operational expenses for the Research Council of Norway. The reduced budget has consequences from 2023 and onwards.

-Grants from Svalbard Science Forum

The grants from Svalbard Science Forum (AFG and SSG) are funded by allocations from the Ministry of Education and Research (7 million NOK), the Ministry of Climate and Environment (1,5 million NOK to AFG). The Ministry of Climate and Environment also channelled 546 000 NOK to AFG via the Norwegian Polar Institute. There was also a small sum transferred from SSG 2022 to AFG 2023. Further details about the funding activities are given below.

- Research in Svalbard (RiS)

The total costs of operation maintenance and further development of Research in Svalbard (RiS) were 3 719 150, of which Operation and maintenance constituted 1 800 000 NOK plus VAT¹ and further development constituted 1 919 150 NOK plus VAT.

The expenses are covered by the project partners as follows: The Research Council of Norway (60%); The Norwegian Polar Institute (15%); Kings Bay AS (15%); and The Governor of Svalbard (10%).

-Arranging the Svalbard Science Conference

The total cost of arranging the Svalbard Science Conference was 1,05 million NOK of which 0,65 million was covered by participation fees and 0,4 million NOK was covered by the RCN. In addition, substantial staffing hours were provided by the RCN, The Norwegian Polar Institute, Stiftelsen NILU, and The Norwegian Meteorological Institute.

Funding activities (AFG and SSG)

The two funding schemes Arctic Field Grant (AFG) and Svalbard Strategic Grant (SSG) are announced annually. SSG has a deadline for applications in the spring, and AFG in the autumn. In this annual report the SSG 2023 and the AFG 2024 are reported because both had deadlines for proposals in 2023.

Svalbard Strategic Grant (SSG)

The Svalbard Strategic Grant 2023 was announced early in 2023 for support for activities taking place between June 2023 and October 2025. The deadline for proposals was 15 March 2023.

Svalbard Strategic Grant funds workshops, networks, and collaboration projects with relevance to Svalbard, to enhance coordination, collaboration, and open sharing of data. Pilot studies and the planning of larger applications and/or projects can also be funded. It is well suited for development of the Ny-Ålesund flagship programs and workshops before and after the Svalbard Science

¹ The Governor and Kings Bay AS are exempt from VAT, but NPI and RCN (with headquarters in mainland Norway) pay ordinary VAT.

Conference. The SSG call for 2023 received 11 applications, a smaller number than the previous year. Ten projects were approved for funding and 3,54 million NOK were allocated.

	Amount announced (NOK)	Amount requested (NOK)	Applications total	Applications funded	Success rate
SSG 2022	5,5 mill.	7,68 mill.	19	14	74%
SSG 2023	4 mill.	4,17 mill.	11	10	90%

Arctic Field Grant (AFG)

The Arctic Field Grant call 2024 supports fieldwork taking place between March 2024 and February 2025. The deadline for proposals was 15 November 2023. The Arctic Field Grant supports fieldwork for students and researchers collecting data in Svalbard and Jan Mayen. The grant only covers partial costs for fieldwork in Svalbard and is not intended to provide full financing of projects. The grant is intended for students in master's and PhD programmes and for researchers who are studying at, employed at, or are collaborating with a Norwegian institution.

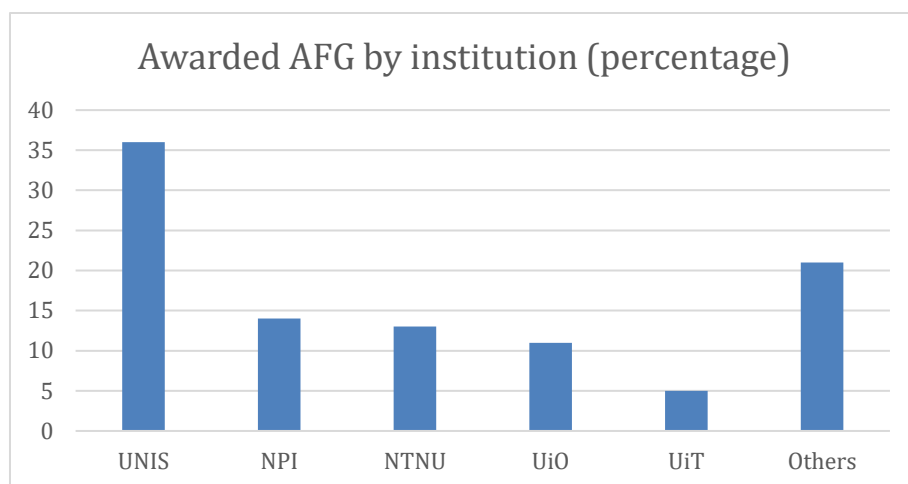
The AFG 2024 call differed slightly from previous AFG calls in that there was an additional earmarked sum (1,5 million NOK) to strengthen Norwegian research in Ny-Ålesund. Thirteen proposals for fieldwork in Ny-Ålesund were funded by the earmarked sum. Overall, 47% of the projects will take place in Ny-Ålesund/Kongsfjorden, 44% in Isfjorden/Nordenskiold Land, and 9% elsewhere.

The call received 113 applications, a number similar to that of the previous year. Sixty-four projects were approved for funding and 5.65 million NOK were allocated.

	Amount announced (NOK)	Amount requested (NOK)	Applications total	Applications funded	Success rate
AFG 2023	4,0 mill.	8,68 mill.	109	55	54%
AFG 2024*	6,0 mill.	10,16 mill.	113	64	57%

* 2024 refers to the year when the activity starts. The call was launched in 2023 and the projects were granted in 2023.

All the funded applicants collaborate with Norwegian institutions, and the Norwegian institution is the Project Owner, but 44% have their primary affiliation with non-Norwegian institution. UNIS was the institution with most awarded Arctic Field Grants for 2024 and was awarded 36% of the grants.



Results and challenges

Results	Challenges and opportunities
The Forum is a tool for collaboration and shall contribute to good coordination of research in Svalbard, and to make Svalbard attractive to Norwegian and international researchers.	The mandate should be assessed for potential adjustments based upon the forthcoming White paper on Svalbard.
The Forum met twice in 2023, both meetings were in a digital format.	The Forum should be maintained to further improve coordination, collaboration and data sharing between researchers and other stakeholders involved in research in Svalbard. One of the annual meetings should be in-person.
Svalbard Science Conference 2023 was a success.	The conference is a very important international meeting place for researchers working in Svalbard. Secure resources (funding and organization) for Svalbard Science Conference 2025.
AFG and SSG provided tailored support to Svalbard research. The AFG and the SSG funds were allocated to 64 fieldworks and 10 workshops/projects.	AFG and SSG should be maintained and developed as tools for the SSF mandate.
RiS is a tool for collaboration where researchers can find each other's projects based on thematic keywords, discipline, location, and period of fieldwork etc.	Need for further coordination when it comes to fieldwork and data as there are scientific and economic benefits to be gained by sharing plans for fieldwork, conducting parallel or

	complementary observations, calibration of instruments, logistics, reuse of data etc.
RiS was stable for most of 2023 and had no downtime.	Secure resources (funding and organization) for further maintenance and development of RiS.
RiS ownership structure is administered through the RiS Steering Group and the RiS Partner Group where all owners are represented. The steering group normally meets 3-6 times a year.	The RiS ownership structure will be maintained, and each owner should further strengthen the ownership and development of the portal.
The Svalbard Environment Act and other regulations restrict research activities. RiS is developed to reflect the restrictions and inform researchers about these when they register projects in RiS.	Further development of RiS to meet future needs, so that restrictions and guidelines for research are reflected in RiS.
Support to Governor of Svalbard <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The RiS portal was improved to better serve the needs of the Governor - The Forum gave advice regarding research activities and provided data on research projects in Svalbard - The Forum gave response to the public consultation on the proposed conservation plan for Lower Adventdalen after invitation from the Governor - Svalbard Environmental Protection Fund: The secretariat provided advice and assistance to the Governor in connection with research-related applications. 	The Forum should actively improve the dialog with the Governor of Svalbard to ensure effective advice, assistance, and consultation on research related matters.
Collaboration with SIOS on creating a registry of research infrastructure was initiated.	Increase the collaboration with SIOS and enable harvesting of data from RiS to SIOS and vice versa. Ensure that researchers do not need to enter the same information in more than one place.
The SSF secretariat participated in and gave presentations at several conferences and workshops, such as SSG workshops, NERC Arctic Research Station Open Day, and the Interdisciplinary Polar Studies Modular Meeting (IPS-2023) in Longyearbyen.	Future outreach activities as well as representing the SSF in relevant fora is vital to deliver on the SSF mandate.
RCN/SSF attended the NySMAC meetings in February and November, the latter hosted by RCN in Oslo.	Continue SSF contact with, and participation in the NySMAC meetings.

<p>The RCN staff at the office in Longyearbyen was reduced by one man-year.</p>	<p>Maintain cooperation and collaboration in Longyearbyen.</p> <p>Maintain RiS competence in Longyearbyen.</p>
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