

Near term strategies for pursuing our common interests in the Arctic

- By Special Adviser Sven-Roald Nystø, Árran Lulesami Centre, Norway

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Mr Chair!

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen!

First of all, thanks to the organizers for inviting me to this important conference, and being given the honour to address this distinguished audience.

The indigenous peoples of the Arctic are very diverse regarding vulnerability and sustainability in facing future challenges in their societies, as the cumulative impacts of climate change, the new geopolitical situation, increased industry and transportation, globalization and the indigenous peoples’ position regarding rights and protection within their respective nation-state, which is very diverse.

With the expected increase in the industrialization and transport in the Arctic due to easier access to natural resources, it is necessary to develop and implement common standards concerning indigenous peoples with respect to rights and participation in decision making to apply to all economic activity in the High North. On the other hand, it is important to prepare for a development that allows the indigenous peoples themselves, in a proactive way, on their own require, meet and take advantage of the options future industrial utilization of natural resources can provide, when simultaneously traditional industries, cultures, languages and community life of indigenous peoples are safeguarded and developed in a sustainable manner. This in order to secure the viability of these communities when non-renewable resources one day run out.

Regarding the collaboration between the European Union, Iceland, Norway and Russia on the Northern Dimension (ND), there is a need to adjust the ND to the new challenges of the Arctic and the Indigenous Peoples. Therefore we recommend the establishing of a Working Group on Indigenous Peoples within the framework of the ND¹. As a step further, there are a number of issues that in partnership with Canada, Greenland and USA, with advantage could be addressed within the ND in a transpolar perspective. To be specific with a concrete example:

- The change in the overall economic structure and the influence of globalization are affecting the household structures as well as the settlement pattern in the High North. We

¹ First Vice-President Pavel Sulyandziga, Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) launched the idea on the Nordic Council of Ministers’ Conference “Common Concerns for the Arctic” 9-10 September 2008, Ilullisat Greenland. Cf. The Conference Report ANP 2008:750, Nordic Council of Ministers, Copenhagen 2008.

are facing a substantial out-migration of indigenous peoples from their traditional areas to urban places. This process applies to northern communities in general, so we need to address this looming challenge in a common circumpolar perspective.

Regarding future search and rescue challenges in the Arctic, we have to take in to account the geographic position of Svalbard, which also have some infrastructure in place as an airport, hospital, an active international science community and facilities for downloading satellites. Regardless of future governance systems, it should be possible to use Svalbard more efficient in an international perspective than at present. A future challenge in the whole Arctic is the prospect of possible use of military vessels in search and rescue operations, but I don't elaborate on this further.

Regarding the future governance of the Arctic, we can approach that issue in an idealistic or a realistic way. The Arctic includes a huge bulk of dimensions which has to be taken into consideration. The Ilullisat Declaration of May 2008 is one of them and the experiences on the work with the UN Declaration on the Right of Indigenous Peoples² as another. I'm not sure we will gain impetus on the issue by proposing fixed solutions, jump into conclusions and argue for those. We can risk to rapidly finding ourselves in a stalemate of opposing parties, with the indigenous peoples squeezed in the middle. As a venue for departure, I would prefer to assess the shortcomings of the existing system – as we do now – in terms of risks and benefits for the states, permanent participant and other stakeholders in the Arctic.

Mr Chair!

Let me in closing take the Arctic Council as an example with regards to the indigenous peoples. Initiatives to alter the council in terms of broadening its mandate rapidly, could benefit the indigenous peoples, but could also turn into a risky business for us. We are not too popular in the eye of the arctic states, which we respectively resides as citizens as well. The indigenous peoples are not guaranteed enhanced position in a possible renewed Arctic Council. It depends also on the measurement. Seen in an internal and external perspective of the indigenous dimension³ in the Arctic, we may consider a bottom-up approach which could to a broader extent bring on the table the variety and complexity of these issues. In addition to the Saami Council, which is the Sami NGO Permanent Participant to the Arctic Council, among the Sami stakeholders we find popularly elected Sami parliamentarians who wants to have more than one hand on the steering wheel as well.

Finally, when assessing the efficiency of the Arctic Council, we should take into consideration to change the system of biennial Ministerial meetings into annual meetings. This will incite the Arctic Council machinery to swifter preparation for ministerial endorsement and strengthen the feasibility for political implementation.

² The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 13th September 2007, by a vote of 143 in favor, 4 against (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and United States) and 11 abstentions.

³ The internal and external perspective of the indigenous dimension in the Arctic encompasses the collaboration between indigenous peoples themselves (internal) and between indigenous peoples and other peoples (external).