

Fifth Conference of Parliamentarians of The Arctic Region, Tromsø, Norway, 11-13 August 2002

Opening address by Sven-Roald Nystø, President of the Saami Parliament, Norway

Mm. Chair, distinguished parliamentarians, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen!

On behalf of the Saami Parliament in Norway, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address the Fifth Conference of Parliamentarians of The Arctic Region. It is important that the indigenous peoples' interests be actively taken care of in the Arctic cooperation. The system whereby the indigenous peoples are permanent participants in the Arctic Council and members of the Standing Committee is an attempt to make this a reality. Our challenge today is to ensure that the indigenous peoples are given the capacity to participate in the Arctic cooperation as equal partners. The cooperating states have a clear responsibility to provide the necessary resources to accomplish this.

I have noted the topics that are to be discussed at this conference with great interest. They are also important from the indigenous peoples' perspective. Questions related to Arctic governance, IT-related issues, oil and gas, and sustainable development in the north are all going to be discussed at this conference. These matters are of great importance for the future development of the Arctic Region. I want to take the opportunity to emphasize the following point. From the indigenous peoples' perspective, it is necessary to express concern about the focus given to the Arctic in various contexts as an area for the exploitation of natural resources. I refer here to both the indigenous peoples' rights and to environmental considerations. A common problem, which we experience to varying degrees, is that the freer access to natural resources puts increased strain on renewable and non-renewable natural resources. This is a threat to indigenous peoples' traditional occupations, culture and society. On the other hand, we need future economic development, especially among the indigenous peoples in the Russian part of the Arctic, because the change to a market economy has created serious problems for the standard of living, welfare and rights of the indigenous peoples in Russia.

As regards the question of Arctic governance, the study by Oran R. Young refers to the need for improving the supply of governance in the Arctic Region. Three challenges are listed as a basis for strengthening the governance of the Arctic Region: managing shared natural resources and ecosystems, strengthening and extending the voice of the Arctic peoples beyond the confines of the region, and achieving sustainable development within the Arctic Region. To address these challenges, it is recommended that an Arctic Governance Action Plan be drawn up. I support this initiative.

A future Governance Action Plan must also deal with the situation of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic Region. Here it is natural to consider, among other issues, the following topics:

- the political, economic, social, linguistic and cultural rights of the indigenous peoples,
- the indigenous peoples' rights to natural resources as a material basis for their culture,
- modernisation processes and the possibilities and conflicts they create between modern and traditional industries,
- the level of exploitation of non-renewable natural resources and its relation to nature and the environment.

Another important objective related to governance is that indigenous women in the Arctic Region must be represented equally with men in political bodies that have decision-making authority. Women must also attain an equal right to an independent economic basis on a level with the male part of the population in the indigenous peoples' areas.

It is important to remember the need for developing infrastructure in indigenous communities when we are dealing with IT-related issues in the Arctic Region. We face several challenges in this area. As Lennart Daleus points out in his paper for this conference, providing public services in education, health and other areas of society within the vast and sparsely populated areas of the Arctic Region is an enormous challenge. In addition, the ability of IT systems to handle the multitude of languages, especially among indigenous peoples, is a task that the Saami Parliament regards as a prerequisite for success in this work. The Saami community has come quite far in this respect, and we look forward to contributing and collaborating with our Arctic partners in this quest.

The main challenge for Arctic co-operation lies in promoting sustainable development in the north. Achieving this will require an approach that is comprehensive, integrated, open and accountable. Our common challenge for the future will also be to establish a long-term vision for the Arctic Region, and I believe that this can be done in connection with the governance initiative. In addition to working on matters pertaining to the Arctic and northern regions within the framework of the Arctic cooperation, it may be necessary for some of the individual Arctic states to strengthen their northern regional policy. The Saami Parliament in Norway has taken the initiative to promote this objective with the Government in Norway. The state ought to develop a separate northern regional strategy in a transnational perspective, in which the interests of the indigenous peoples are integrated in a fundamental way. The dimensions that the Saami Parliament has recommended be given special transnational attention include:

- Environmental and resource monitoring
- Management of marine resources, especially fisheries
- The indigenous peoples' rights and community
- The work on the Northern Sea Route and the Northern Maritime Corridor
- Matters pertaining to oil and natural gas

Mm. Chair!

In addition to the topics I have mentioned in my introduction, there are a number of other matters that are important for both indigenous peoples and others in the Arctic Region, but these will have to wait for some other occasion. In closing, I would like to remind you of the potential of the indigenous peoples for participation in development processes in the Arctic Region, and I wish us all luck and progress in our common endeavours in the Arctic Region.

Thank you for your attention!