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Round Table Discussion on Future Perspectives

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Government of Finland for their generous hospitality and the excellent arrangements made for this meeting. I would also like to congratulate the Government of Finland for the outstanding work it has done during its chairmanship of the Arctic Council. You can truly look over the past two years with pride and satisfaction. Being here in the beautiful region of Inari has given me great pleasure and I feel that these surroundings create a very suitable background for the work of the Arctic Council.

The objective of our work within the Council is to promote sustainable development in the Arctic region. With this collaboration we have to look to the opportunities the region has to offer. The key to the solution of various problems is successful social and economic development and a positive adjustment to the Arctic region's natural environment. We feel that in order to achieve our goals within the Arctic Council, we must address all three pillars of sustainable development, the environmental, the social and the economic.

It is the view of Iceland that the environment pillar of the Arctic Council is fundamental for its work. The work within this pillar has been intensely developed in the six years that have passed since the Council was established and before the establishment of the Council, under the auspices of the Arctic Environment Protection Strategy. Yesterday we were informed about numerous important projects within the environment field. The robust work of all the environmental working groups of the Arctic Council should be continued.

In this context I should also like to mention the ACIA project, which will come to an end during the Icelandic chairmanship. Iceland places particular emphasis on reaching that goal and attaches high importance to developing a policy document on the basis of the scientific study. Priority will also be given to strengthening circumpolar and cross-disciplinary monitoring in order to determine and analyse environmental changes in the Arctic and to assess their impact.

I have here mentioned only two examples of the work of the Arctic Council that concerns the environment. Other collaborative projects undertaken by the Council, that is, on the social and economic aspects of sustainable development, have a shorter history. During our chairmanship we wish to emphasise development of the role of the Arctic Council in relation to these concerns, first and foremost the well-being of the people in the Arctic region. Therefore, we have put these issues at the core of our chairmanship program.

Arctic Human Development Report

In our effort to strengthen the work of the Arctic Council concerning the social and economic factors we shall offer to take the lead extensive report on human

development, the Arctic Human Development Report. The Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic region has already paved the way for this effort and we aim to have the Arctic Council carry on with the implementation. The goal is to provide an overview of sustainable development in the Arctic region and to identify the factors that affect the well-being of the people. The report will call attention to the many and varied factors involved in human development and prosperity in the north, both among indigenous people and other inhabitants of the area. The social, economic and cultural conditions of the inhabitants of the Arctic, their connection with sustainable development and the utilisation of natural resources, will thereby become a focal concern.

Information Technology

In our priorities program, we have identified information technology as an important tool for advancing the human dimension in the Arctic. The use of information technology, for example for education, health services, creation of economic opportunities and social services, is a worthwhile endeavour in the north. The inhabitants of the area all need access to efficient communication systems with sufficient power so that information technology can be utilised to help provide better living conditions, not least for our children and youth. In order to obtain results in building up such a system, it is important to reach the local authorities and educational institutions of the member nations in the Arctic Council and to get them to participate in work that will benefit the inhabitants of the Arctic region. In this connection, increased collaboration between the Arctic Council and the Northern Forum should be considered.

During its chairmanship of the Arctic Council Iceland will organise an international conference on Information Technology in the Arctic.

Research Co-operation

In this forum, we are well aware of the meaning of research for the benefit of sustainable development. Knowledge is decisive for raising the standard of living in the Arctic. Scientific knowledge and technology can help people gain control of the conditions and natural resources of their homelands. In this endeavour, indigenous knowledge can be combined with scientific analysis to create a comprehensive overview and deepen our understanding of the issues at hand. The adaptation of smaller communities to societal and environmental changes is vital for their future. Therefore, knowledge about global changes and their effects on the viability of local communities and indigenous groups needs to be available.

We feel that it is a worthwhile project to strengthen the relations and co-operation of those parties who handle research in the Arctic. We want to mobilise international organisations and scientific projects in fields such as communication, sustainable agriculture, tourism, construction industry and utilisation of natural resources. We would like to see increased participation of the general public and the educational institutions in effecting sustainable development. Ways should also be sought to strengthen collaboration between the research funds of the member nations of the Arctic Council.

During its chairmanship, Iceland offers to host the annual meeting of organisations and institutions involved in international research co-operation in the Arctic, a so called Arctic Science Summit Week.

Together with the new initiatives I have outlined, the Inari declaration will guide our work. Iceland will ensure the successful continuation of the Arctic Council Working Groups and support projects that have already been initiated by them. Our aim is also to ensure the continuation of the initiatives introduced by the current chair. Here I should in particular like to mention the emphasis Finland has placed on gender equality in the Arctic and the integration of gender perspectives into the work of the Arctic Council. I would also like to commend the Finnish chairmanship for the work they have done in drawing the attention of the global community to the to the role of the Arctic Council. We will seek opportunities to continue these efforts. Iceland will also keep in mind the need to further integrate capacity-building in the work of the Arctic Council and support initiatives in this regard presented by Canada and others.

At the Ministerial meeting in Barrow, close co-operation between the Arctic Council and other international organisations was highlighted. We agree that collaboration with the European Union and regional organisations, such as the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region needs to be strengthened. We also have to look at our commitments in the broader international arena and take into consideration, the outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

Mr. Chairman,

I have briefly outlined the main issues that we have identified in our chairmanship program. I am very eager to hear the thoughts and comments of other members about the development of the Arctic Council in the coming years. We will, of course, make every effort to adjust our program as much as we can to take account of them.