Program for the Icelandic Chair of the Arctic Council 2002 - 2004
The natural environment of the Arctic is unique. Its biodiversity is an important part of the earth’s ecosystem providing living resources that form the basis for human settlement of the region. For thousands of years, indigenous peoples and other inhabitants of the Arctic have subsisted on the bounty of nature and their lifestyles constitute an invaluable part of the world’s cultural diversity. Continued human habitation of the Arctic is possible only if its fragile ecosystem is used in a sustainable way.

The Arctic region is rich in both natural and human resources. Knowledge of the regions natural environment and adaptation to its harsh realities and limitations has, over the ages, enabled humans to use it wisely and richly benefit. The Arctic Council is the forum for the Arctic States to safeguard Arctic resources and to support sustainable development in the region. As Iceland assumes the chairmanship of the Council I am reminded of the positive spirit of Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, the famous explorer, who spoke of “the friendly Arctic”.

Sustainable development requires, among other things, adaptation of international education and science to regional conditions through local research and development projects. It also requires local human resources to implement these projects. Technological progress and globalisation lead to new undertakings and opportunities that may stimulate sustainable development and well-being in the Arctic. Iceland has experience in utilising such opportunities and will use this experience to support the active participation of Arctic inhabitants in shaping a viable and prosperous future in a world of globalization.

This brochure gives a presentation of the objectives and priorities of Iceland in our chairmanship of the Arctic Council 2002-2004.

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Program for the Icelandic Chair of the Arctic Council 2002 - 2004

The Arctic Council is one of the few regional intergovernmental bodies that has its roots in environmental cooperation. The Council’s environmental work has evolved continually and currently a number of important projects are being undertaken under the auspices of the Council’s environmental working groups. Iceland, during the term of its chairmanship, intends to emphasise successful continuation of the environmental cooperation of the Council. Co-operation on the social, economic and cultural aspects of sustainable development, on the other hand, has a shorter history within the Council. Therefore, Iceland intends to emphasise this part, especially as concerns well-being and quality of life of the inhabitants of the region. The intention is to strengthen sustainable development in the Arctic region, consistent with the Barrow Declaration of the Arctic Council.

Assessment of Human Development

Progressive co-operation of the Arctic Council on economic, social and cultural issues is essential. Iceland will promote collaboration on sustainable development by focusing attention on the quality of life and living conditions of the people who live in the Arctic region. In this way it is possible to identify joint challenges and opportunities for the residents and as a result, to promote projects that are aimed at creating economic opportunities to strengthen local communities.

During Iceland’s chairmanship, a broad-based assessment will be undertaken with respect to human development in the region. The intent is to provide an overview of sustainable development in the Arctic region and to identify the factors that affect the well-being of the inhabitants. To accomplish this, information will be gathered from Arctic Council projects and others. The focus will be on the social, cultural and economic well-being of the people and how this relates to sustainable development and the use of natural resources in the region. Special attention will be paid to gender when selecting and analysing information and data. The project can result in increased regional and global understanding of human development in the Arctic region. The report may also be used as the basis for further research and development. It will also facilitate the analysis of mutual challenges and opportunities to improve the living conditions, general well-being, and alternative choices for the people of the region.

The Information Society, Human Resources and New Opportunities

Information technology can be particularly valuable for remote communities in the Arctic region. The use of information technology must therefore be strengthened. The Internet is increasingly being used in elementary and secondary schools and by the same token the residents in remote communities may now take university courses through distance learning. Various opportunities are at hand for the use of information technology to create employment opportunities and to support healthcare services in sparsely populated areas. The technology is equally useful for dissemination of information about Arctic issues.

In order to make use of information technology and improve community viability, residents of the Arctic region need access to a cost-effective telecommunications system with sufficient carrying capacity. There is also need for stronger co-operation between the governments and stakeholders at all levels. The interest of the general public, especially the youth, in information technology, should
facilitate this development and lead to an increased understanding of the special condition and issues of the Arctic region. This may enable the residents to become “doers” rather than passive “receivers” with respect to subject matters that directly impinge on their quality of life.

Iceland intends, during its chairmanship, to continue its support to the University of the Arctic. A great deal is expected of this university and of the international and interdisciplinary Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies, which were initiated in the spring of 2002. Information dissemination, exchange of students and instructors, and further utilisation of information technology and distance learning are essential parts of the University of the Arctic.

Iceland will host an international conference on the use, access, opportunities and obstacles of information technology in the Arctic region. Collaboration will be sought with the Northern Forum, the University of the Arctic and others.

Research on Sustainable Development in the Arctic Region

Knowledge is the prerequisite for successful sustainable development in the Arctic. Scientific knowledge and technology should be used by and for the residents to enable them to better adapt to local circumstances and manage their resources in a sustainable way. Research on sustainable development of the Arctic region must therefore be based both on international science and on the experience of local communities. Research results also need to be presented in a way that can be used by policy makers in formulating policies and solving practical matters.

Increased participation of the general public and educational institutions in matters concerning the environment and sustainable development is important. Iceland aims at strengthening the Arctic Council’s ties with various projects and organizations that seek to bridge the gap between students and the general public on the one hand and the scientific community on the other. Examples include the Northern Research Forum and the Circumpolar Agricultural Association, as well as international research programmes focusing on the Arctic region. The aim is to inspire discussion and consultations between scientists and stakeholders as regards social, economic and environmental changes, globalisation of the economy, and other public concerns.

Iceland intends to strengthen scientific and technological co-operation for sustainable development through increased networking between scientists and research institutions. The aim is to build on existing international organizations and programmes working with issues such as sustainable agriculture, communications, tourism, construction, and use of natural resources. The International Arctic Science Committee should be mentioned in this respect. Iceland will also promote collaboration between funding agencies and research councils of the Member States in order to facilitate joint financing of research programmes and projects in the Arctic region. Emphasis will be placed on developing the existing co-operation between the European Community and North America in order to link educational and research institutions dealing with Arctic research.

During its term of chairmanship, Iceland offers to host the Arctic Science Summit Week, the annual meeting of programs and institutions active in Arctic research, in spring of 2004.

Ongoing Projects
Together with new initiatives, Iceland will ensure successful continuation of all the Arctic Council Working Groups and support projects that have already been initiated by them.

- During its chairmanship, Iceland will make a special effort to facilitate the completion of the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA), including presentation of the final reports. ACIA’s goal is to assess the impacts of climate change across ecosystems, communities and socio-economic activities of the Arctic region. Policy options will be formulated on the basis of the assessment with goal-oriented recommendations for government measures to meet the challenges of climate change in the Arctic. The intention is to present the results and proposals in an accessible manner for laymen and experts alike.

- High priority will 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. The aim is to increasingly integrate biodiversity monitoring and assessments of pollution, climate change, and other environmental and socio-economic factors. Iceland will further emphasise synergies between monitoring, strategic planning and implementation of projects that aim to prevent pollution of the sea and negative impact on its biota.

- Issues of indigenous peoples will continue to be an important focus. Icelanders, as a small independent nation reliant on the use of natural resources, understand the conditions and expectations of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic. Languages of small nations have to fight an uphill battle to survive and societal and environmental changes are rapid. The adaptation of smaller societies to these changes is vital to their future and general wellbeing. Therefore, knowledge about global changes and their effects on the viability of local communities and indigenous groups needs to be available. The Arctic Council can encourage co-operation among local communities, policy-makers and scientists with respect to appropriate coping measures and responses to such changes. There is a need to investigate the economic ties of the Arctic region with the global economy and analyse possibilities and obstacles to increased collaboration in this regard.

- Iceland will continue to emphasise gender equality in the Arctic region and explore possibilities for integrating gender perspectives in the work of the Arctic Council. Special emphasis is required on the issue of women’s rights to ensure their equal opportunities to participate actively in all aspects of society. Acknowledgement of the contribution of women, their experience, knowledge and views, needs to be properly reflected in all discussions and projects of the Arctic Council.

- Projects concerning children and youth in the Arctic region will be emphasised. It is important to ensure synergies with other related projects such as the Arctic human development report.

- At the Barrow Ministerial Meeting emphasis was laid on the necessity for close co-operation between the Arctic Council and other international organizations. The Senior Arctic Officials are responsible for coordinating the work of the Arctic Council with other organizations in the region. The goal is to strengthen synergies and to reduce duplication of work. Increased dialogue, especially with Observers of the Council, can support this effort. Collaboration and consultation with the Northern Forum is increasing and is important. Collaboration with the European Union and regional organizations, such as the...
Barents Euro-Arctic Council, Council of Baltic Sea States, and Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region, should also be strengthened.

- Iceland will continue to draw the attention of the global community to the role of the Arctic Council, especially in relation to issues of relevance to other parts of the world.

- Limited time and financial resources can restrain direct participation in the work of the Arctic Council, especially by the indigenous peoples organizations. It is important to strengthen the use of information technology in the work of the Arctic Council in order to facilitate communications and consultations. Teleconferencing equipment and the Internet could be used for this purpose. The institutional memory of the Arctic Council can be built up through appropriate data bases on the Council’s website. The Member State that holds the chairmanship plays a key role in updating and renewing information on this site.
The Arctic Council

The Arctic states began their co-operation in the field of the environment with the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy that was adopted in Rovaniemi, Finland, in 1991. In 1996, the Arctic Council was established with the joint declaration of the eight Member States, i.e., Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States. With the establishment of the Council, the extent of co-operation in the Arctic region was expanded to cover all aspects of human development in addition to environmental concerns.

The Arctic Council is a forum for the Member States and Permanent Participants (organizations of Arctic indigenous peoples, with special status on the Council) to collaborate on issues related to the environment and sustainable development. In addition, various non-arctic states, international organizations and non-governmental organizations have Observer status on the Council. The Arctic Council is first and foremost a forum for policy formulation and coordination. The Council does not have independent funding and the projects that are carried out under the aegis of the Council are financed by participating States and through external sources.

Decisions are made at meetings of ministers of foreign affairs of the Member States and leaders of the Permanent Participants. Such ministerial meetings are held every other year. The chairmanship of the Council and the accompanying secretariat rotates among Member States. Between the ministerial meetings, the operation of the Council is administered by the Committee of Senior Arctic Officials, which is composed of representatives of foreign ministries of the Member States, and representatives of the Permanent Participants.

Five expert Working Groups, composed of representatives from Member States, Permanent Participants and Observers, operate under the Arctic Council and work on joint projects decided by the Council. These groups are and their main tasks are as follows:

- **Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP)** assesses and monitors pollution in the Arctic region.
- **Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME)** works on measures to protect the ocean from pollution.
- **Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF)** works on issues related to biodiversity conservation and sustainable use.
- **Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG)** works on issues involving living conditions and standard of living of Arctic residents.
- **Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR)** works on formulating policy concerning responses to environmental disasters.

Furthermore, two Working Groups have been established on temporary basis:

- **Arctic Council Action Plan to Eliminate Pollution of the Arctic (ACAP)** manages several pollution prevention projects.
- **Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA)**, which is engaged in assessing the possible impact of climate change on the Arctic region and the conceivable reactions to such changes.