

Presentation

Rovaniemi, 7. maí 2019

Presentation of the Icelandic Chairmanship Program

Mr. Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson,

Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland

Thank you, Chairman,

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to take the floor again in this esteemed gathering, and this time to present Iceland's Chairmanship program in the Arctic Council.

Arctic affairs are a top priority in Iceland's foreign policy and chairing the Arctic Council brings a unique and much welcomed opportunity for Iceland to lead the collaboration between the Member States, the Permanent Participants and the Observers within the Council.

Rotating the Chairmanship of the Arctic Council is an excellent way of regularly engaging Member States in the Arctic Council's affairs. It provides an opportunity for the Chairmanship to further engage in Arctic issues at the international arena as well as domestically. We look forward to the task and will do our utmost to live up to your expectations.

We will build our Chairmanship on the ongoing work of the Arctic Council. Most of its ambitious projects will continue and our approach as Chair is to highlight certain aspects of the Council's already ambitious agenda as well as to introduce new fields of co-operation through specific projects.

In the spirit of the Ottawa declaration that founded the Arctic Council twenty-two years ago, sustainable development will be the guiding light in our Chairmanship program, which we present under the heading *Together Towards a Sustainable Arctic*. Sustainable development is built on three pillars - the environment, the economy and the people and, as we see it, the Arctic Council should continue to address all those pillars in a balanced manner.

In our Chairmanship program we have highlighted four main priority areas.

First, the Arctic marine environment. It should hardly come as a surprise that Iceland will keep the oceans at heart during our Chairmanship. I even dare to say that few nations have a deeper appreciation of the importance of a healthy marine environment than Iceland.

The largest part of the Arctic region is covered by ocean, and the welfare of a large part of the population in the Arctic is based on the sustainable utilization of marine resources. The Arctic Council Working Groups have carried out many important ocean-related

projects and Iceland will focus on continuation and further development of projects in that field.

Iceland is particularly interested in strengthening Arctic Council co-operation on mitigating plastic pollution of the oceans and is planning an international scientific conference on the topic in Reykjavík Iceland in April 2020.

Iceland also wants to introduce a new project focusing on innovation and efficient utilization of marine biological resources, or the so-called Blue Bio-Economy. Experience has shown that through innovation and biotechnological solutions it is possible to increase significantly the utilization level of the biomass taken out of the ocean. When done right this is good for the environment, strengthens the economy and has positive effect in the communities.

Our second priority concerns climate and green energy solutions. We will be continuing Finland's emphasis on improved weather forecasts in the Arctic. I would in particular like to mention a project on mapping glaciers and providing more accurate information on the dramatic glacial reduction being witnessed in our part of the world.

The impending shift in energy sources from fossil fuels to renewable energy will be important, both for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and for improving air quality in Arctic communities. Iceland aims for further work to be carried out based on the ARENA project and continuing to seek practical green energy solutions for small communities in the Arctic.

Our third main priority will be on the people of the Arctic and their desire to build prosperous and sustainable communities. The Arctic Council has a strong history of promoting sustainable development and growth in communities in the region and we wish to continue co-operation on matters like gender equality, connectivity and adaptation and resilience. In the coming decades, adapting to continuous warming of the Arctic will be a major challenge for many of the small Arctic communities, not least the indigenous people.

Last but not least, Iceland will continue to work for a better and stronger Arctic Council. The Arctic Economic Council will celebrate its five years anniversary during Iceland's Chairmanship and we plan to seize the opportunity to enhance the collaboration between the two Councils.

We will also give due attention to the inner workings of the Arctic Council by maintaining the close consultations between Member States and the Permanent Participants and continue to use innovative ways to engage with Observers in an enhanced manner. It remains important for prosperity and security in the Arctic region to work also closely with partners outside the region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are dependent on a close and peaceful co-operation that stretches across borders and boundaries. The Arctic region is governed in a co-operative manner - not least on the basis of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Peaceful co-operation in the Arctic

should continue to be at the forefront as we better realize the extent of the ever-growing changes in the region.

The fact that the eight Arctic Council Member States, along with the six Permanent Participants and close to 40 observers, have been able to insulate our co-operation from negative fallout of various differences that have influenced most other international fora is very important.

In this way, the Arctic Council has been an important venue for political dialogue and peaceful co-operation in the Arctic region. The Council's clear mandate, with its regional focus on sustainable development in the Arctic, has allowed it to continue its work, irrespective of global political tensions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Interesting and challenging tasks lie ahead of us and I remain optimistic for our continued good co-operation within the Arctic Council – the most important and representative body on Arctic affairs.

Iceland is privileged to take over the Chairmanship from Finland and I want to thank you, Timo, for your personal engagement and commitment.

We look forward to working with all of you – together towards a sustainable Arctic.

Thank you.