Statement by Ms Áile Javo, President of the Saami Council, on the occasion of the Ninth Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council

Iqaluit 24. April 2015

Madam Chair, Ministers, Indigenous leaders, Observers, friends of the Arctic.

Saami Council would like to thank the Inuit of Inuit Nuunat, stretching from Chukotka in the Russian Federation, through US and Canada to Greenland for hosting the Ministerial meeting here in Iqaluit with Canada.

Madam Chair, I think we should take a moment to remind ourselves that we live in the Arctic in a time of peace and stability that enables us to gather here today to discuss the future development of the Arctic, our joint homeland. The representatives around this table represent the generation that has seen the cold war come to an end. The Saami Council has seen the relationship with our brothers and sisters in all countries flourish again after decades of separation. Since 1992, the Saami Council has worked in all the four countries the Saami people reside, Finland, Norway, Sweden and northwest Russia. Also the Arctic Council was developed during that time, as a cooperation that we feel is crucial for us.

Most of the Permanent Participant organisations represent an indigenous people that reside in more than one country. In times of geopolitical instability, and changing economies, the indigenous peoples’ communities will be the first to be negatively affected. Our pledge to you all is that we need to safeguard the unique work of the Arctic Council. We need to continue to cooperate as one Arctic family learning from each other and respecting each other. That is our responsibility and is important for sustainable development and well-being of all.

Saami Council welcomes the continuous efforts in the Arctic Council to promote mental wellbeing and resilience in Arctic communities. Mental well-being and suicide represent serious challenges in some Saami communities and is a concern especially raised by our youth. Saami people hold different world views and approaches to mental health issues. These needs to be recognized by the public health care systems. We expect that the countries where Saami people reside provide adequate and culturally appropriate health care. The Saami national centre for mental health in Norway, SANKS, represents a good model here. Saami Council cooperates with them aiming to expand their service across the borders to cover the
whole Saami area. Furthermore, we now build on their experiences to develop a plan for suicide prevention that recognises the Saami perspectives and we welcome cooperation with the Governments in this regard. Madam Chair, promotion of mental well-being and suicide prevention initiatives is about repairing damage already caused.

The recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples’, our traditional knowledge, as well as consultations are essential for the protection of our cultures, livelihoods and natural resources. By safeguarding the basis for our lives we will be better able to further develop to transfer a vital culture to future generations. The Saami culture depends on healthy and productive ecosystems, and the Saami Council is therefore deeply concerned about the plans in Norway to dispose tailings and chemical wastes from mining in a Saami fjord, a vulnerable Arctic environment.

A prosperous future for our youth, control of our own destinies, a healthy environment and recognition and practice of our human rights will in itself promote our well-being. It is then, and only then, that an opportunity can be an opportunity for all.

In conclusion, Madame Chair, the Saami Council underlines that knowledge and the respect for various ways of knowing is the foundation for policy development and decision making. We believe that neither science nor traditional knowledge alone can provide the answers needed to face the impacts of Arctic change. The Arctic Council as a consensus-based model is instrumental in addressing these changes. A true strength of the model is that it requires that we really work to understand each other’s positions, perspectives and histories. Such understanding is decisive in order to maintain stability and cooperation in the Arctic.

In the opposite case, Saami Council is worried that indigenous peoples will have to bear an uneven share of the burden, given the fact that we reside in more than one country. Our recollection of the time before the establishment of the Arctic Council points to this.

The Saami Council congratulates the Canadian Chairmanship on its second turn of leadership of the Arctic Council and welcome the efforts in strengthening the Permanent Participants in the Council. We face a steadily increasing workload in the Arctic Council and in particular the Permanent Participants capacity to keep up with our priorities is challenged. We will remind all parties that it remains the responsibility of the member states to ensure adequate
funding for its Permanent Participants. We need well-functioning and operative organisations at home in order to contribute meaningfully in the role as Permanent Participants.

Saami Council looks forward to the US chairmanship and holds great expectations for its program and priorities and we stand ready to further work and cooperation in the Arctic Council the coming years.

Thank you for the attention, Madam Chair