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Round Table Discussion 2 New Focus on Arctic Human Development

Minister Tuomioja, Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to thank the speakers for their excellent reports. Enhancing the human dimension within the work of the Arctic Council is an issue that I strongly believe warrants great attention.

Climate change

Measurements have already shown significant warming of many parts of the Arctic region during the past three decades. Scientists predict more warming and more rain and snowfall during this century. Obviously, climate change of such magnitude could affect the region and its people in many different ways. The impact could be felt through both the physical environment, the biota and living conditions in general.

Is it a major threat?

Do such changes pose a major threat to the way we live or are they just another challenge for our culture to adapt to? Before we attempt to answer this question, we need to be aware that the entire history of the Arctic region and its people has been subject to changes in climate as well as in resource patterns and availability. The Arctic is by nature highly variable. Many resources are cyclical and highly unpredictable and the weather is changeable and inconsistent. In Iceland, for example, the warm climate eleven hundred years ago enabled the early settlers to grow barley. This practice was then impossible for many centuries because of cold climate. With the overall warming in the last century, we have been able to resume barley cultivation.

Adapting to changes

The ultimate causes of such changes - man induced or natural - is obviously important when designing global strategies. In addition to our actions to halt climate change, we the inhabitants of the Arctic must be able to respond and adapt to climatic and other changes, while continuing to prosper in our natural surroundings. I believe this is possible. Arctic people today have more options than in the past. We have access to the combined intellectual and technological resources of the globe. The information technology enables us to more easily learn from one another and from far away cultures. Available and potential technologies will facilitate our struggle with the elements of nature.

Actions to be taken

We can not afford to be passive and wait and see what happens. We need to improve our ability to learn from past experiences and be more proactive in designing response strategies. We need to assess our strengths and weaknesses and monitor the changes as they happen. We need to be both flexible and resilient.

Overall, I believe that the Arctic Council is on the right track. In this context I would like to mention, in particular, the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, a project that will provide the baseline information necessary for us to decide on further actions. Monitoring the impact of climate changes by AMAP and CAFF will provide us with ongoing information needed for effective decision making. We have a unique opportunity to integrate traditional knowledge into our scientific work and in so doing complete the picture and deepen our understanding of changes in the natural environment. I am pleased to mention also the Arctic Human Development Report, which will after its anticipated adoption become the main project of the Icelandic chairmanship of the Council. This will be the most comprehensive

assessment to date on human conditions in the Arctic. Furthermore, I would mention the University of the Arctic bringing together the indispensable circumpolar academic community. These are only a few of the markers that will point us in the right direction and should make the region as a whole better prepared to respond and adapt to the changing demands that are made on us.