Twelfth Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council - Reykjavík, Iceland, May 20, 2021

Statement by Ms Christina Henriksen, President of the Saami Council.

Thank you, Mr Chair.

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

Let me first congratulate you, Mr Chair on Iceland’s very able leadership of the Arctic Council, it is a pleasure to finally be back here in Iceland. Who could imagine that the spectacular Icelandic scenery would be replaced by views from our home offices around the Arctic and in state capitals during this past year? It leaves me wonder if the reality of the pandemic can be traced in the documents adopted here today: are they inspired by what we can see from our windows in Nuuk, in Salekhard, in Anchorage or in Sápmi, or can a frustration of tedious online negotiations be traced in them. On the other hand, if all our declarations were negotiated while sitting in our home offices over the past 25 years, we could have witnessed the climate and environmental changes with the naked eye.

The Saami Council welcomes the very first Arctic Council Strategic Plan developed during these unique circumstances, as an effort to get to grips with the Arctic challenges. We easily adhere to just “Imagine all the Arctic peoples Livin’ life in peace”.

Mr Chair, visions to keep peace and stability are made in times of unease - otherwise there was no need to envision/imagine the concept. Unease comes in many forms, and for many reasons, and it impact peoples differently.
The Arctic climate and environment are changing – the last 50 years we know the changes have taken place three times faster than the global average. These changes dramatically challenge the foundation for Sámi culture – our traditional livelihoods, the foundation for our life and our existence.

The Arctic as we knew it 50 years ago, will look different by 2030 – and maybe even not recognizable 50 years from now. “Imagine there is no Arctic”!

We all look for solutions to address these changes. We are onboard for solutions, but we urge you, as powerful Arctic leaders around this table, to not make the Arctic Indigenous Peoples carry a disproportionate burden of the impacts when seeking for alternative and low carbon energy solutions. Such projects seem to be sought on Indigenous Peoples land. There are limits to what we can carry. “Imagine there are no Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic”.

With the warming of the Arctic, we see a steady increase in economic development and interest in investments in the Arctic region - oftentimes at the cost of existing economies – our traditional livelihoods, adding even more burden on our cultures. In steps with this development, the Arctic Council needs to ensure stronger attention to Indigenous Peoples Rights and protection of our cultures, to ensure the development is truly sustainable and that no one is left behind. "It's easy if you/we try”.

The Saami Council welcomes the continued focus on health and mental well-being of people in the Arctic. The constantly increasing pressure on Indigenous Peoples’ land and territories is doing serious harm to our peoples’ health and well being. We need collectively to prioritise finding the causes of mental unhealth, not only trying to fix it afterwards.

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“Imagine all the people - Livin' life in peace - You may say I am dreamer. But I'm not the only one.” We should let John Lennon’s 50 years old lyrics be of inspiration for a prosperous Arctic also for its Indigenous Peoples.

Finally, Mr Chair, the Saami Council looks forward to the Russian Chairmanship and to contribute to the very rich program presented. We hope to be able to enjoy full and effective participation with our Permanent Participant colleagues, through our own means and in our prioritized areas of the Arctic Council’s work. Let us hope we can work on the important issues face to face more than screen by screen.

Thank you, Mr Chair.