

***The Helge Ingstad Memorial Symposium
on Arctic Change***

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**A Change in Environment and Governance in the Arctic
The Sami Embrace their Future**

Speech by Magne Ove Varsi

It is a pleasure to be here today to address the Helge Ingstad Memorial Symposium on Arctic Change. As we all know, Helge Ingstad was an explorer, trapper, scientist and a great storyteller. He was also a friend of the Sami people as he strongly supported the Sami rights movement in the late 70s and early 80s. His love of the arctic environment was well known throughout the world, and led to his close association and many years in the polar regions with the Northern peoples. Today, we give tribute to this man, but we also come here with the knowledge and understanding, a knowledge and understanding that he also possessed, that the arctic environment is not only a place of beauty but its' ecosystem, flora, wildlife, marine life and people make a significant contribution to the diversity of this planet.

Like Helge Ingstad I come from Norway. Unlike Helge Ingstad, I live in the far northern part of Norway. The Sami have inhabited this part of Norway for thousands of years. I myself was born in a small Sami community where our intimate knowledge of the land, waters, and climate provided us not only with sustenance but also shaped our way of life, culture, and society. The Sami for generations have learned many important

lessons of living within their traditional lands, and engaging in activities like reindeer herding, fishing and harvesting.

The Arctic climate we discuss today has indeed changed from the time I grew up upon the land. There have been innovations in the way the Sami herd their reindeer, the use of the snowmobile has enabled the reindeer herders to cover greater areas. This is necessary, as the changing conditions of the Arctic and competing development activities have sometimes made the essential elements for reindeer herding more sparsely located throughout our lands. Laws within the States the Sami live have changed the ability of the Sami to move their herds to traditional grazing sites, and even restrict their ability to pass on rights to those who wish to continue their traditions of raising reindeer. Reindeer are not only a food staple, but they are also an integral part of our culture and cosmology. International borders have sprung up, bringing with them fences and restrictions. Laws and policies are passed in parliaments to the south of the Sami traditional lands, without any consideration or consultation as to the effects it will have on our culture, activities and society.

This has led to a modern reality that only 10% of the Sami are able to participate in the traditional activity of reindeer herding. There have also been other influences both within and external to Sami society which have impacted the Sami way of life. Increased motor traffic in the North of Norway has led to changes in the landscape, and brought with greater opportunities for growth in non-traditional industries and economic development. Although the Sami may have embraced other forms of

employment and development opportunities, the culture and values of the society are still strong.

The development of an economy in the North has led not only to a change in landscapes. The emergence of innovations like Sami Radio have led to a more connected and sophisticated communications network for the Sami people. Daily news broadcasts are done in the Sami language across channels in Scandinavia. And, Sami journalists are covering Indigenous news and issues from around the world, and bringing it to the Sami people in radio, print and television. There has also been a location of government offices and services located in Sami communities, this has led to Sami participation in administrative and technical careers.

There have been several studies on the challenges and problems concerning climate change on our planet. These studies and initiatives are designed to help the world community better understand the state of our environment, predict the implications of actions or in some cases inaction, and to make recommendations on how together we can work towards solutions to address the negative impacts of climatic change. One such study, the *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment* of 2004, talks about how a combination of human activities such as clearing the land, and the burning of fossil fuels has led to the accumulation of greater concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere causing temperatures to rise, unpredictability of weather, an increase in the sea-level rise, and changes in the ocean and air patterns.

The Sami and other northern Indigenous peoples have noticed the changes in their environment. As a part of the traditional knowledge they pass on to future generations, their intimate knowledge of their environment also meant the ability to predict the weather, and the length of seasons. The ability to be in sync with your environment is important to northern Indigenous peoples, as it is linked with our ability to harvest, gather and hunt our traditional foods. For traditional Sami hunters and herders, their food is dependent on the ecosystem of the North, and changes in temperature, and variances in seasons have a directly proportional link to the availability of flora that reindeer, and other food sources in the northern regions need to survive. The *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment* also discusses other impacts on the Arctic environment such as water and air contamination, overfishing, pollution due to resource extraction activities, changes in ultraviolet radiation levels on plants, animals and people, and growing pressure for northern environment due to human population growth in the region. While this will have a more serious impact on those Northern peoples with a lifestyle more dependent on the environment, it still has implications for the larger Indigenous society as many will still eat traditional foods, and prefer to have breaks on the land during cultural or social gathering times.

One thing is true about Indigenous peoples, in the face of such pressures and impacts, we have the great ability to rise to meet, and if necessary adapt to our changing environment. The idea that Indigenous cultures and societies are frozen in the past has long been discarded. Indigenous peoples' value their traditions, language, land, and ability to engage in cultural activities greatly. However, they also see the need and benefit in participating more in the decision making processes at local,

regional, national, and international levels on issues that impact their well-being, and the future of their peoples and the environment.

The Sami began a transformation in their internal political structure in the late 1980s. The Sami reorganized their representative organizations into Sami Parliaments in Norway, Sweden and Finland. The Sami Parliaments as representative bodies of the people debate issues of importance to the Sami culture, language, and way of life. They often work collaboratively with the other Sami Parliaments on issues but are not officially linked. Each Sami Parliament will look at specific legislation within their respective countries as a part of their mandate when representing the Sami interests and rights.

The Sami parties that formed to create the groupings of the representatives in the Sami Parliament of Norway, also followed the name and platforms of national parties. This type of association with national parties has led to greater support on issues and closer working relations between the Sami Parliament and the Norwegian Government.

The Sami with the establishment of a Sami Rights Committee in 1980 began a process of negotiations and consultations with the Storting (Norwegian National Assembly) over greater participation in the decision making process over their traditional lands, Sapmi, in Northern Norway. The *Finnmark Act* was passed in 2005 to clarify the state's relationship with the Sami people, as well as, to recognize to their right to use and exploit natural resources consistent with their culture. Thus, the *Finnmark Act* in Section 1 states the primary purpose is to facilitate the management of land and natural resources in Finnmark County in a balanced and ecologically sustainable manner. The Act furthermore will be consistent with the International Labor

Organization Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. Norway was the first country to ratify this international document recognizing and promoting the rights of Indigenous peoples to their lands, natural resources, participation in political decision making affecting them, education, culture, beliefs, and other fundamental human rights.

Further, in the Act, the land would be transferred to the Finnmarkkuopmodat (Finnmark Estate) which would be overseen by a Board of Directors comprised of three Sami representatives, appointed by Sami Parliament, and three representatives from the Finnmark County Council. In Section 5 of the Act, there is recognition that the Sami have collectively and individually acquired rights to lands in Finnmark on the basis of their prolonged use and association with the land and water. This recognition was a significant step to ensure Sami participation in future initiatives and development impacting their traditional environment. The creation of a structure to manage the use of lands and resources in Finnmark, with guaranteed Sami participation is significant in many ways for the Sami people.

While the *Finnmark Act* is not seen as the ideal agreement in terms of Sami rights and interests in their traditional lands, it does represent a beginning. There are provisions that support the Sami to help preserve and protect those aspects of their culture, language and heritage of integral importance to Sami society. The Act also opens up an opportunity for the Sami to participate in creating a sustainable economy in the North to meet the growing needs of its' people. Arctic change, along with state policies and laws, has perhaps created diminished capacity of the land, water and

environment to sustain a growing Sami population on traditional hunting, herding, fishing and gathering activities alone. There is a realization that resources located in the Sami traditional territories have great potential for present and future generations of Sami. Resource development in northern climates has become more realistic with the innovations of technology and transportation. The basic idea is to create a strong participatory sustainable economy in Sapmi territory. Sustainable development means that the exploitation of resources and lands to meet the needs of current generations would not be done at the expense of the ability of future generations to meet their needs from the land. A reality is that the loss of ice in the northern seas because of climatic change has created increased access to oil and gas reserves not otherwise explored to date. The Sami people want a hand on the steering wheel of resource exploitation and sustainable development in their lands.

In the past, the Sami have used both national and international judicial or human rights proceedings to protect traditional economies like reindeer herding from competing development activities. These have been met with mixed results as courts and tribunals do not often know where to draw the line as to what constitutes interference with traditional activities. However, participation in development activities can give northern Indigenous peoples the opportunity to communicate cultural concerns when deciding on locations for development operations in their traditional territories. As a participant in the development, Indigenous peoples can help influence design and location of projects and activities, as well as contribute an understanding of how certain activities will impact Sami interests or activities in a particular area. As a member of the board or group who is

planning the activity, the Sami can help factor in economic or social concerns when discussing the longevity of a proposed project.

As the Director of the GALDU Resource Centre for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Guovdageaidnu-Kautokeino, I not only gather and disseminate documentation and information on the rights and interests of Indigenous peoples but also engage in work on the opportunities the Sami might have in terms of participation in resource development. For example, off the coast of our traditional territories in the Barents Sea, there is a large gas project under construction. The next step would be oil exploitation by a cooperative of many nations and international organizations. It is likely that an operation of this nature will require a land base facility, which means possible employment and economic opportunities also for Sami participation in any land based operations. It also means Sami input on the location, and design can factor in cultural or traditional uses of the land, as well as principles of building a sustainable economy for the northern peoples to participate in.

With the signing of the Finnmark Act, the Sami have begun a new era of co-management, and participation in the decision making processes in our region/lands. We have the opportunity to be active players in the economy developing in our traditional lands, and to better adjust our peoples for the changes that are occurring in our environment. Most recently an expert committee has proposed a *Nordic Sami Convention* to the governments of Finland, Sweden and Norway to allow the Sami to work together more closely on opportunities and realities in the North. The proposed Convention states its' objective is to affirm and strengthen rights of the Sami people

necessary to secure and develop its language, culture, livelihoods and society with minimal interference of national borders. The Sami people have the right to their own economic, social and cultural development, and to dispose of their own natural resources for their benefit. The Sami parliaments shall be given mandates to help bring realization to the Sami people's rights of self-determination.

We as Indigenous peoples recognize the interconnectedness of all things on this planet. The *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment*, the *Arctic Human Development Report*, the *Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change of the United Nations Environmental Program*, and many other studies, identify that the land use and traditional activities of Indigenous peoples are impacted by the effects of climate change on their environment. Indigenous peoples are not in charge of the solution to climate change, as 80% of the energy derived in the world is generated by fossil fuels which contribute to gases creating greenhouse effects. The reality is a global effort is needed to protect and preserve the biodiversity that exists in the northern environment, as well as other regions of the world. Indigenous peoples of the Arctic in response to the impacts to their environments are looking towards greater participation in the decision making processes of development in the North. By creating sustainable economic activity, it can assure opportunities to meet the needs of current and future generations, while having a voice in processes which will hopefully effectively mesh invaluable traditional knowledge on the management of the environment with current or future development on their traditional lands. I thank you for opportunity to participate in this symposium on Arctic Change.