

**Building Indigenous Knowledge into Climate Change Assessment and  
Adaptation**

**A side-event at the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples**

**Keynote address by Premier of Greenland, Ms. Aleqa Hammond**

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My culture is that of the Inuit people of North America, a living culture, which I share with some 160,000 Inuit living from Chukotka in Eastern Siberia across Arctic Alaska and Arctic Canada to the East coast of Greenland.

In Greenland we are only 56,000 people. But current developments in Greenland, I think are important and relevant for looking at how we ensure that indigenous knowledge is built into climate change assessment and adaptation, and also how we tackle wider issues of empowering indigenous peoples in a globalised world.

In recent years Greenland has been marked by two sets of very fundamental changes affecting the lives of Greenlanders. Firstly, at the political level, Greenland has achieved significantly more autonomy with the introduction of

Self-Government status, and secondly at the level of our natural environment, where climate change is in the process of remapping our country.

Greenland achieved Self-Government status within the Kingdom of Denmark in 2009. A status which now recognises many of the core rights proclaimed in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007.

The Self-Government Act amongst other things recognises that the Greenlandic people is a people pursuant to international law with a right to self-determination. At the same time, the Self-Government Act contains a provision regarding Greenland's access to independence. Greenland is therefore in the unique position today of being the only indigenous people in the Arctic, which has its own Government with a recognised and agreed path to independence.

With the Self-Government Act, Greenland is able to take over almost all areas of competence from the Danish State.

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Climate change is having a more significant and faster impact in the Arctic region than it is in other regions of the world. In the Arctic, climate change is transforming geography, wildlife conditions and plant growth. The extent to

which climate change is shaping developments in the Arctic these years should not be underestimated.

Currently boundaries between climate zones are being pushed almost 2 kilometres to the North every year. Greenland now has three climate zones. In less than a decade, we will only have two climate zones left.

The consequence of this is that traditional lifestyles, hunting and fishing are being fundamentally affected.

Climate change means that now an area equivalent to Germany is ice-free, and this area is increasing every year.

While climate change is having major adverse impacts on traditional lifestyles, it is also my clear political priority to ensure that the people living in Greenland will benefit from the new economic opportunities which climate change also makes possible; in tourism, in agriculture, in mineral and oil extraction and in industrial development based on hydropower.

Greenland will not be a passive victim of climate change.

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A likely scenario for the future of Greenland is an economic growth supported by new large scale industries and oil and mineral extraction. This will profoundly affect our society and the environment.

The Arctic environment has – contrary to the image that many outside the Arctic have - already been profoundly affected by industrial activity. And I am not only referring here to climate change.

The impact of industrial activity far from the Arctic means that Arctic marine and land-based mammals are bearers of large amounts of industrial substances.

This is a reality faced by Arctic populations already today.

The prospects for increased shipping and off-shore oil activities in the Arctic region also brings new risks of their own to fragile environments. An accident with environmental impacts in one Arctic state could easily impact one or more neighbouring states.

For all new activities in Greenland it is important, besides from thorough environmental impact assessments, that we consult and incorporate traditional knowledge.

Developments have to be sensitive to local circumstances, and have to take a holistic approach that incorporates socio-economic, cultural as well as ecological perspectives.

Environmental assessments constitute an important element in identifying and introducing measures to protect the environment and ecosystems that we rely on in our daily lives.

Conventionally, scientific environmental assessments focus on single issues. But, we are working to ensure the full integration of traditional local knowledge in scientific assessments. It is not a straightforward task, but I will give you a few examples today on the experiences we have gained so far:

Within the Arctic Council, Greenland is working actively to put special emphasis on incorporating local and traditional knowledge into the scientific assessments that are produced by its various working groups.

In 2013 the Arctic Council released the Arctic Biodiversity Assessment carried out by the biodiversity working group of the Arctic Council. The purpose of the Arctic Biodiversity Assessment was to synthesize and assess the status and trends of biological diversity in the Arctic.

The Arctic Biodiversity Assessment was a key example of how the Arctic Council tried to include indigenous knowledge into its work.

Building of resilience to cope with the impacts of climate change requires an integrated approach. Adaptation actions build resilience and must draw on different sources of knowledge and experiences; scientific assessments as well as traditional knowledge and experiences.

Within the Arctic Council, Greenland is also working in collaboration with other Arctic countries that experience comparable changes, to identify adaptation actions through an integrated approach.

A prominent example, is the on-going project “Adaptation Actions for a Changing Arctic”, which is an assessment that focuses on climate and integrated environmental frameworks and models, that can improve predictions of climate change and other relevant drivers of Arctic change to support climate change actions.

The “Adaptation Actions for a Changing Arctic” project has a regional approach in which national, regional and local authorities and other stakeholders, which are the main end-users, will define key sectors of interest

in terms of needs for integrated assessments of impacts and adaptation actions.

An initial activity in the recent start-up of the project was a round of stakeholder meetings with local communities aimed at collecting information and experiences. On this occasion local hunters shared their experiences with dealing with changes driven by a warmer climate. Changes that are now very evident.

The warmer climate has changed the behaviour of animals that local hunters depend on in their daily lives. For example, walrus move further into the fjords. This makes seals move further away from traditional seal hunting places in the fjord. Furthermore the sea ice is not as thick as before, which makes transportation on ice more challenging, as hunters depend on the ice to travel on.

One way of adapting, in the North of Greenland, has been to start up small scale commercial ice-fishing (fishing from the ice), which has allowed hunters to diversify their source of income.

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To those of you who know Greenland, you will realise that Greenland is characterised by its unique natural environment and the extreme conditions the population has always lived under. Centuries of life as sealers and hunters in small isolated communities is, still today, reflected profoundly - not only in our subsistence hunting practices, which continue to be the mainstay of the economy of most families - but also in our language, in our music, in our myths, clothing, food, and homes.

Greenland is not only a country of icebergs and our famous massive inland ice sheet. Greenland today has green mountains with beautiful wild flowers, long fjords and hot springs, animal husbandry and new vegetable crops in its South.

It is a country, which has always belonged to the animals who thrive there - at sea and on land - and its people.

Our traditions have been developed from the materials available in an Arctic environment. The seal, the whale, the reindeer, the musk ox and the polar bear are all bearers of cultural meaning and tradition – also for me personally.



For the past 4500 years, Greenland has been the land of the Greenlanders. My people understand and belong to this land. We treasure the preciousness of nature's wealth, because it feeds us, clothes us and sustains us every day.

The Arctic environment is incredibly sensitive. Protecting nature and its living natural resources, has throughout our history always been a priority for my people.

Protecting the Greenlandic environment is also the top priority of the Greenlandic Government, as it will always be for any Greenlandic Government. This is why my Government has put in place and will apply the highest standards when it comes to environment and human health for all new activities within our jurisdiction.

In recent years countries and NGOs from outside the Arctic have taken an interest in developments in the Arctic. This should be welcomed, but we cannot forget that in the recent past, such interest has also lead to decisions which have severely harmed Arctic people and the environmental balance in the Arctic region, such as sealskin bans. International efforts to ban trade in sealskins has removed the livelihood for 1000's of people in Greenland, and has destroyed the ecological balance of a sustainable resource. Arctic peoples are under continuous pressure, not only from a natural environment that is

changing faster than man can adapt, but also from irrational and non-sustainable regulations imposed by countries outside the Arctic.

Developments must be driven by the needs and aspirations of the peoples of the Arctic. Anything other than this would be wrong.

The Arctic peoples have for too long been only at the receiving end of developments elsewhere in the world. This applies to climate change, to the spread of industrial pollutants contaminating marine mammals, and to the disastrous near-eradication of our large marine mammals caused by European commercial whalers.

At the heart of Inuit culture, is the preservation and long-term protection of the living resources, on which life in the Arctic has always depended. These living resources are key to my identity and to that of my people.

I look forward to having productive discussions today.