

Lots of good ideas – but how do we implement them?

First of all, I would like to thank the hosts for the opportunity to speak at this international forum, the Arctic Circle. Thank you!

Even though the theme of this workshop - generally speaking - is how we can foster economic development in the Arctic, I am going to focus on how we can get the many good ideas implemented. In my opinion, this is where we face our greatest challenge.

Naalakkersuisut, The Government of Greenland, is about to launch a large-scale plan to boost economic growth in our community – one which ensure long-term financial sustainability. We call it The Sustainability and Growth Plan. In short, it is aimed at improving the framework conditions for industry stakeholders, so that we can promote growth in our local economy, and thus create more jobs. It also aims to promote a strong economy, which ensures plenty of financial latitude for our children and grandchildren to develop new political projects under favorable conditions.

This is not the first time that Naalakkersuisut has presented a plan with several initiatives to increase growth and remove barriers that prevent growth. Quite the contrary. If we were to line up all of the economic reports made since the introduction of Home Rule in 1979, they would supposedly stretch from Nanortalik in the south to Qaanaaq in the north. This poses a problem because none of the initiatives have been implemented to the desired extent. Others never got off the ground. And it is both a problem and a pity. These failures are ours alone but we have every intention of making sure that we get it right this time. Because every time we miss our mark, we pay a price in lost opportunity. We cannot afford that. We are a small community living in a land with impassable terrain far to the north.

From time to time a string of unique opportunities to develop our society present themselves. But we often lack the means and resources to realize

Against this background, this is not a general question against the content of the reports. It is excellent that our challenges are described, as well as the how and in which way we can move forward, in the form of a large number of proposed initiatives.

In its simplicity, the essential problem is that it is often difficult to get such plans realized. A wise man once said: "Everybody wants development - no one wants change." Unfortunately, this statement contains a great deal of accuracy when it comes to Greenland.

Because development implies a change of the existing system. And this usually means that certain groups must surrender privileges or benefits before the ENTIRE community can achieve an improvement.

Naturally, it is not the case that all major reform packages by definition are good – nor is it the case that all privileges should be removed. Indeed, there may be good reasons for maintaining them. My point is that if we want to further develop our society we need to continuously adjust our society in order to get the most out of our resources.

What is interesting is that everyone agrees on the need for reform. Parliamentary discussions and newspaper editorials prove it time and again. Yet initiatives taken by the Government of Greenland often face a hail of fire resulting in either rejection or postponement.

Why is this? In my opinion there are many reasons. I'll present you with three of them:

- 1) The first has to do with stake when a reform proposition first hits the parliamentary deck. When the government comes up with a proposal that will benefit society as a whole, it usually involves a minority group being deprived of certain economic privileges. These groups are often successful at advocating the unjust sacrifices that they are unwillingly subjected to. Meanwhile the majority group stays silent. They experience only a marginal improvement from a single initiative to redistribute resources. Their incentive to oppose critique of the initiative is thus a reduced appetite to pick a fight with the minority group. Ultimately this results in a media fuss appearing to be a national revolt when reality is quite the opposite.
- 2) In a country like Greenland, which is large and extensive with a small population size - and where there are no roads between the numerous towns and settlements, it is very easy to see who wins and loses every time a proposal is put forward. This makes it very difficult to make the necessary reforms, because there are no groups in a society that - in principle - will accept a reduction of the benefits they feel they are entitled to receive.
- 3) Each time a reform is passed we have seen destined to replay the same sad story. The media bring case stories about the group of people that are affected - not on the gains that will accrue to the entire society. Then organizations and the politicians from the opposition follow up with criticism of the reform because it will impair the circumstances for a minor group. Overall, an apparently large public opinion is orchestrated and it impedes the ability to get the reform proposals implemented - or they get watered down so much that it's hard to call it a reform. Curiously, no interest group responsible for ALL public interest exists. Too bad, at least as seen from my chair as Naalakkersuisoq for Finance and Resources ☺.

These examples are not criticism of either the media, interest groups nor opposition politicians. They just do their job. They are however examples that point out the challenges we face in implementing major reforms of our society - reforms that aim to strengthen our society in the near future. If these obstructive practices continue we will end up in the situation that everyone warns against: Status quo is not an option.

Greenland is at a crossroads where in the coming years comprehensive and importance decisions will need to be taken, if we want to maintain and raise our level of prosperity. Part of the reason is that developments around us are happening so rapidly that we have to continually adjust our society if we want a share in the future growth.

In other words: There is a need for a public debate on how we together create a method, so we are better able to promote a reform agenda rather than the opposite. The population deserves it.

That is what I wish to say, and I look forward to developing my ideas in the ensuing discussion. Thank you.

Randi Vestergaard Evaldsen
Naalakkersuisoq for Finance and Resources