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Indigenous Perspectives on Climate Change in the Arctic-Position Paper

Oral Presentation given by Elaine Alexie, Panel Participant, Gwichin Council
International

Mussi Cho-Thank You. Drin Tlat Gwiinzii Shilakat. Elaine Alexie vaazhih. Tetlit Zheh Gwatsat Diinchuh. Good Afternoon to you all. First, I would like to thank the ACIA organizers for allowing me to attend and participate on short notice. I feel very honored to be here today with you all. I want to thank all of the people who are here participating in this exciting event and I acknowledge all the good work you are all doing.

My name is Elaine Alexie and I am a member of the Tetlit Gwichin First Nation from the Western Arctic of northern Canada. I come from the People of the Headwaters tribe within the Gwichin Nation. I was fortunate to be raised in a traditional lifestyle by my parents Robert and Dorothy have raised me out on the land. As I can recollect the stories of my grandparents, and memories of my family practicing our subsistence way of life, it is very much clear and evident that the land; our mother earth, is changing. I witness it everyday in my community and culture. It is warmer than ever.

Local testimonies of the elders in my region have noted that they have seen and felt changes to the land in their lifetime. A big factor, they have seen that the climate is not as cold as it used to be, like as what it was 50 to 60 years prior to today. There is a great change in the snow conditions, making travel difficult when needed to subsist off the land. Major river systems are running low, the lakes are drying up, the vegetation and forest bed is dry, mountain landslides are becoming more visible and the animals are migrating not where they used to. This past spring, we witnessed different species of birds in the northern North American flyway zone, and our summer has seen great dryness over the land and a lack of rain had resulted in major forest fires. These are merely just a few examples of what is already occurring where I live. It is projected from scientific analysis that the temperature in the Western Arctic region has risen 2-3 C in the past 50 years.

There are claims that climate change has occurred naturally in the past and that levels of methane and carbon dioxide are emitted naturally in the Arctic. However, it does come close to relating to the fact that today the current climate change projected is human induced. It is scientifically noted internationally that human activity is the most causing and to this it is the burning of fossil fuels.

Currently, more than eight percent of the global energy source is fossil fuels and since the industrial revolution, the global output of carbon emissions increased by 35%. More greenhouse gas emissions are projected to rise in the near future, unless strong force is in place to curb emissions worldwide. We need to act on the issue of reducing emissions now before it is too late. It is essential that a collective agreement from Arctic States be in place to deal with Climate Change and to support International Agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol and the ILO Convention 169.

For Indigenous Peoples of the Arctic: our livelihood, our food source, our health, our spirituality, our very means of existence is embedded within our environments, which we call home. So, when the land and its natural resources are changed, we are affected first. The issue of Climate Change is very much cultural to us. But beneath everything else, it is a human rights issue, for it means the life and survival of our culture.

The ACIA assessment is a building block that provides opportunity for Governments and Indigenous Peoples within the circumpolar world to come together and to work collectively to implement strategies that will deal with Climate Change that is happening now. It also serves as a tool to look at preventative strategies and measures to deal with the effects of Climate Change as seen within our communities.

A stronger focus for future work needs to be on analyzing efforts on the mitigation of climate change impacts and one prime example is by reducing global greenhouse emissions. Such a tool in place at the decision making level is the International Kyoto Protocol Agreement and having more linkages internationally to enable this action between countries. Other essential areas is more work towards a cleaner sustainable development strategies for the socioeconomic well being for Indigenous Arctic residents (more in detail analysis on the socioeconomic impact of CC in the arctic), and more resources in place for adaptation to communities within the circumpolar countries. But for most Indigenous Peoples, there is not enough time to adapt to the effects of Climate Change.

The ACIA follow up process is needed to ensure that two main areas are identified and assured. A big aspect is that the science and TEK is there and needs to become in effect for the scientific community and indigenous groups within these areas. However, the two main areas as noted is the mitigation analysis and adaptation process that still needs to be identified and further looked in. Major areas within these main parts include sub-regional consultation, awareness, and networking amongst each participant within the Arctic Council.

At the community level, Indigenous Peoples need not only to speak more on the

affects of climate change issues but to work on creating preventative strategies that are sustainable, community based and that would not harm our environments nor enhance the loss of our culture and traditions. There has to be a mechanism in place to distribute the awareness of Climate Change to the circumpolar regions and to look in detail on the sub-regional impacts for local community members and for them to get involved. A greater need would be to have regional programs for our communities that would be based on research projects to record knowledge that is more traditional and western science monitoring of the changing environments due to Climate Change. This is essentially needed to help us understand the changes that are to come with Climate Change.

The local governments and scientists have to continue to listen to what we, as Indigenous Peoples, have always been saying about climate change. The survival of our ancestors has ensured the traditional knowledge that has been carried down to us and still today, we live by this knowledge. Our knowledge is just as important as to western scientific knowledge. Listen to those who live out on the land and experience climate change on a daily basis. We are and have always been living proof of the changing environment.

Climate Change presents a major and growing challenge to the Arctic and to Indigenous Peoples. While we know that our climate is changing, and that our cultures are at great risk for continued change, the impact of the actions of what we take or to not take will determine the lives of the future generations before us. It is evident that global greenhouse emissions need to be reduced on a large scale to combat the amount of future human induced impact on the climate. As an Indigenous Youth, I want to say that we should not compromise the importance of the land and of our cultures due to the Climate Change but we need to look forward to determine what we are going to leave for our children and of their children to survive. Haih keh-Mussi Cho. Thank you.