

Arctic Indigenous Languages Symposium

**Tromsø, Norway
19-21 October 2008**

Summary

For the first time, the Arctic Council brought together indigenous peoples at a symposium to address the importance of indigenous languages in maintaining cultural diversity. Also for the first time, a major Arctic Council event was organized and led by the indigenous peoples organizations that have “permanent participant” standing inside the Council. This event was held in Sàpmi, or Saamiland.

The successful symposium was an initiative of the Arctic Council’s Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG), and came about through a mandate from the Salekhard Declaration, 2006. That declaration stated: "Ministers representing the eight Arctic States, convening in Salekhard, Russia, [r]ecognizing the cultural diversity in the Arctic represented by more than 40 distinct peoples, cultures and languages ... [e]ncourage Member States and other parties to support the cultural diversity of the Arctic and especially uphold and revitalize the indigenous languages”.

The Tromsø symposium was organized by the Inuit Circumpolar Council along with the local assistance of the Saami Council, and the strong support of Gwich'in Council International, Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Arctic Athabaskan Council, and Aleut International Association. The Government of Canada was especially instrumental in promoting and supporting the planning and implementation of the symposium.

The symposium attracted 84 participants, including delegates representing the Arctic Council's permanent participants, delegates representing member states, and others interested in the status and role of indigenous languages. A day prior to the start of the formal proceedings, participants participated in a cultural gathering which included reindeer soup, Saami singing, and Saami Yoik: the art of remembering. Symposium participants were also hosted by the Government of Norway in a reception on the same day.

In the keynote address, in five symposium sessions, in a youth forum, and in general discussions, guest speakers and other participants addressed the status and trends of Arctic indigenous languages, the critical role of indigenous language in protecting culture and transferring traditional knowledge, technology and media as tools to promote and strengthen indigenous languages, the role of indigenous languages in protecting the Arctic environment, and the role of government and international organizations in legislative development and standards setting to promote and enhance indigenous languages.

Participants shared best practices, engaged in debate with policy makers and other experts on indigenous issues, and finally adopted a comprehensive set of recommendations calling for action by the Arctic Council, member states, international organizations and indigenous peoples' organizations to support the revitalization of indigenous languages. Among the recommendations made to the Arctic Council was a call to support a comprehensive assessment of the state of Arctic indigenous languages, upon which language promotion and revitalization activities can be planned.

The symposium provided a significant opportunity for indigenous peoples of the Arctic to highlight the critical connection between culture and sustainable development, to galvanize action (in the form of policy shifts and increased access to resources) by key players across the Arctic, and to turn hopes into reality.

The participants left this meeting determined to ensure that indigenous languages remain a priority for the Arctic Council and that the recommendations made here are acted upon.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Arctic Indigenous Languages Symposium was held in Tromsø, Norway from October 19-21, 2008.
2. Its aim was to provide a forum where Arctic indigenous peoples could learn from one another and develop practical ways to revitalize their languages to ensure their strength for generations to come. The Symposium was mandated by the Arctic Council which in the Salekhard Declaration of 2006 encouraged Member States and other parties to support the cultural diversity of the Arctic and especially uphold and revitalize the indigenous languages, support the Arctic Indigenous Languages Symposium and welcome further projects in this important field.
3. The Symposium focused on five different but cross-cutting themes:
 - the State of Arctic Indigenous Languages
 - Protecting knowledge (traditional and other) – the critical role of indigenous language
 - Using new technology and media to promote and empower indigenous languages
 - Indigenous Languages: an important key to preserving the Arctic environment
 - Legislative development and standards setting to promote and enhance indigenous languages
4. Coming out of the Symposium's discussions are the following recommendations which recognize and are addressed to those parties which are considered the most appropriate for responding to and implementing the proposed actions.

Recommendations to the Arctic Council:

5. As recognized by the Arctic Council in the Salekhard Declaration, the Arctic Council supports and encourages the revitalization of indigenous languages. It is important to go beyond good intentions. As such, it is recommended that the Arctic Council:

a) Reinforce the importance of Arctic Indigenous Languages in promoting and supporting the social, spiritual, cultural, physical and economic wellbeing of Arctic indigenous peoples and by extension, the Arctic and its environment.

b) Lead and facilitate inter-regional, international, and intergovernmental activities to strengthen the use of indigenous languages across the Arctic.

c) Through the Sustainable Development Working Group, undertake an assessment of Arctic Indigenous Languages to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the state of Arctic indigenous languages which will inform future action aimed at maintaining their diversity and vibrancy. Such assessment should include:

- collection of adequate and accurate data on the current status of Arctic indigenous languages;
- specific indicators of language endangerment in the Arctic context which, if they are observed, should mandate state response.

Particular attention should be paid to seriously endangered languages.

d) Recognizing that youth must be empowered to participate in international politics and spearhead linguistic research, it is recommended that the Arctic Council mandate the University of the Arctic to enhance opportunities for language exchange and to engage youth in international collaborative research specifically involving language.

Recommendations to Arctic States:

6. Recognizing that Arctic indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their languages, oral traditions, histories, writing systems, literatures, Arctic States should:

a) In partnership with indigenous people, undertake multi-year, comprehensive, complex and holistic responses, with long-term vision and sustained support, to support the growth of indigenous languages.

b) Recognize the uniqueness, legitimacy and value of each language, including the importance of indigenous languages to health, development and well-being of indigenous communities.

c) Use the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and other relevant human rights standards as the basis to develop legislation, policies,

and programs which strengthen the daily use of indigenous languages at all levels, within and outside indigenous communities.

d) Ratify existing regional and international instruments that contribute to the protection of endangered languages including the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992), the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005) and the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003).

e) Ensure that an enabling environment in which speakers of indigenous languages are not forced or coerced to give up their languages in order to succeed in national life.

f) Indigenous people should establish and control their education system. Education policies for indigenous languages must include opportunities for all indigenous people, including people of all ages, to achieve and maintain high levels of competence in their mother tongue. Educational policies must further include mechanisms and incentives for training and retaining indigenous educators at all levels. Special attention should be paid to implementing quality indigenous bilingual education policies.

g) Support the United Nations system in its efforts to encourage and promote indigenous languages and the establishment of instruments which underpin this encouragement and promotion.

h) Support efforts in recognizing language development, curriculum development and standardization where initiated by Arctic indigenous education authorities, language institutes or commissions.

i) Ensure that Arctic Council states make the necessary resources available to achieve substantive equality between indigenous peoples and national dominant societies for the preservation, revitalization and promotion of indigenous languages and cultures, recognizing the cost of implementing programs and projects in remote areas.

j) Arctic indigenous peoples' languages will always be used in the management of natural resources locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

k) Arctic states, territorial, regional and indigenous governments must support the preservation, enhancement and development of indigenous languages.

Recommendations to the United Nations system including the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and UNICEF and other intergovernmental organizations:

7. The United Nations system is called upon to take the following actions:

- (a) In recognition of the importance of indigenous language in protecting and promoting indigenous peoples' identity and culture, and given the diverse richness of Arctic indigenous languages, the international community, through the United Nations, is asked to draft a convention to protect and encourage indigenous languages. Such a convention should include applicable criteria for recognizing and defining languages as endangered, with attention to how these criteria may be applied differently in different contexts.
- (b) Information on UNESCO's work on standard-setting instruments should be made available to Arctic indigenous peoples and Arctic States to support their work in establishing appropriate standardization mechanisms across the Arctic;
- (c) UNESCO is asked to support , intellectually and financially, Arctic Indigenous peoples in their engagement in and contribution to standard setting activities and programs of policy development; and
- (d) UNEP, UNFCCC and other UN and intergovernmental organizations active in climate change and related environment issues are asked to recognize and incorporate in their deliberations and decisions acknowledgement of the importance of indigenous languages in conveying traditional knowledge and concepts which are an essential and significant element in understanding and responding to the impact of climate change in the Arctic. Furthermore, such organizations are asked to continue to recognize indigenous languages as essential elements of sustainable development in the North, and as indicators of community well-being.

Recommendations to Arctic Indigenous Peoples (individuals and organizations)

8. Arctic indigenous peoples should:

- a) Encourage cooperation amongst indigenous peoples and governments at regional, national, and international levels recognizing the significant contribution indigenous languages make to the social, cultural and economic prosperity of the Arctic.
- b) Urge indigenous leaders to put priority on indigenous languages.
- c) Ensure that future Arctic indigenous generations are able to maintain and enrich these languages, in part by:
 - focusing on intergenerational transmission of the indigenous language;
 - promoting career opportunities that require the knowledge and use of the indigenous language;

- making efforts to use the indigenous language in all facets of daily life;
 - developing effective mechanisms to motivate learning and use indigenous languages;
 - accepting innovative ways of using the indigenous language.
- d) Select and promote auxiliary, standard dialects as a strategy to increase inter-regional and international sharing of information and materials and as a language survival strategy, while respecting the richness of dialectal diversity.
- e) Promote and create effective programs and materials for teaching and learning the indigenous language, cultural, social and political history and encourage creative expression in the indigenous language using new and traditional media.
- f) Ensure that regulatory bodies in the realm of telecommunications recognize and respect indigenous languages in their policies and decisions to afford an equitable level of services to indigenous communities.
- g) Establish mechanisms for communicating information, best practices, and recommendations for Arctic indigenous languages and for assessment and evaluation of the results of the proposed recommendations.
- h) Exercise the right to protect the collective knowledge of one's culture against mass publication and distribution while being researched for the study of climate change.

October 21, 2008