

# **The Barents Euro Arctic Council's Working Group on Environment**

## **Conference on Climate Change in the Barents Region**

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### **Introduction**

First of all I would like to thank you for the invitation to give a presentation and share our views with you. For those of you who have heard my story before, I will let you know that I have left out the blueberry part, since the plant and the berry are appearing again after being away for some years during the years of birch larvae invasion.

My name is Gunn-Britt Retter, I am the head of the Arctic and Environmental unit of the Saami Council. I could also add: welcome to my neck of the woods, as I live only 35 km west of Vadsø, in the Saami community Unjárga – Nesseby, where I have my office, whilst our head quarters are in Ohcejohka on the Finnish side. The Saami Council is an indigenous peoples' organisation with NGO status. The Saami Council members are 9 national level Saami organisations and associations from all the four countries the Saami peoples live in today: Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden. Kind of the Saami answer to the Barents Council, only we are much older, established in 1956. We represent the Saami civil society and have status as Permanent Participants to the Arctic Council and roster status in the United Nations Economic and Social Committee (ECOSOC) and participate actively in various UN processes concerning indigenous peoples.

In my presentation I will touch upon both adaptation and mitigation issues from a Saami perspective, before I conclude with some recommendations in the conclusion. But first I would like to reflect a bit about communication of the climate change issue.

### **Theatre – what do we communicate**

The local children's theatre in Deatnu – Tana showed in June, for the first time, the play they have worked with since last fall: "Eatnanspáppastallan", in English it would be "Playing with the globe". In brief it is about the Christian God and the Sun losing hope in human beings due to their accelerating energy consumption on the globe having devastating impacts on life. Not being in the position to instruct the human to stop up to think about their behaviour, God and the Sun allies with the underground people, Ulda, who finds a child to help.

I did not have the opportunity to see the play myself. But talking with the play writer, she told me the children were very good in improvising the parts concerning the consequences of the overconsumption and climate changes, but when it came to solutions, they were stuck. In the play they use magic to solve the situation. This raises for me a number of questions: what do we really communicate to the public about climate change, when the children do not even see any solutions? Can we, or you, the politicians, the policy shapers -use magic to solve the climate change challenge? Or do we have tools and solutions at hand?

As indigenous people in the high north, we already face many challenges related to climate change, not only to biodiversity, the environment and living resources that our culture still depend upon, but also related to the intensive change in land use when finding solutions to the challenges and in developing mitigation strategies. Most intensive threat, however, is the increased access to

non-renewable resources in our homelands that has created a “race” to the Arctic

## **Adaptation**

### **Ceavccageadgi**

At the cultural historic site of Ceavccageadgi/Mortensnes, in Unjárga/Nesseby municipality, archaeological investigations prove that the site has been continuously settled from about 11,000 years ago until the present. After the ice retreated 13,000 years ago the land has been rising. This land rise can be seen with the human eye, as natural terraces in the landscape. People traditionally settled at the sea shore, on the terraces. Today we can read the history of the settlements by walking from the highest hill down towards today’s sea level one step being a step in 100 years of history.

The Ceavccageadgi site, being very interesting for historical reasons, is in fact also a walk through a history of climate adaptation. Archaeologists are able to tell a story of how house construction and lifestyles have changed with changing climatic conditions, and conversely it may also be possible to learn how the climate has changed, based on how people were living at the time. During warmer periods, around 7,000 to 3,500 years BC, communities were more stable and had only a summer and a winter settlement and solid constructions of pine wood. During colder periods up to around the birth of the Christ, the constructions were simple and people became more mobile. The aim was always to find a place with living resources they could utilise, and with shelter and firewood for the colder parts of the year.

Archaeologists can tell a lot about the diet at a certain time in history by investigating domestic waste. Remains of fish, sea mammals and birds tell us what kind of species our ancestors depended on during various periods. Their diet mainly consisted of cod, seal and whale, as well as birds, mostly migratory birds such as kittiwake, red knot, common redshank and European

widgeon. Investigation of domestic waste from settlements from a warmer period also reveals fish species normally found in warmer waters than we have today, which are thus no longer found in the fjord, such as whiting and moonfish or cusk (a member of the cod family). People of course utilised what was available for them at the time. As with the contemporary fjord fisheries, the past taught us not to simply rely on one species for survival, but rather to depend on the diversity of species available throughout the year. In Varangerfjord today that means cod in the winter, salmon in the spring, pollock/coalfish and haddock in the summer, and flatfish and halibut in the autumn, all of which are equally essential and valuable to our culture.

The indigenous peoples have survived through many changes through history, so I would claim we have the capacity to adapt to environmental changes. We have done that before, and we are still there.

### **Traditional Knowledge**

With the climate changes we might face challenges never faced before. We need to be prepared. Facing new challenges with globalization and increased resource development, decision making has to be based on the best available knowledge, both traditional knowledge and science. The Saami people believe the best knowledge is our TK. TK has been developed in and for the living on survival in our homelands. Describing TK's relevance to adaptation, I draw extensively from Johan Mattis Turi, director of the World Reindeer Herding Association, describing in the EALÁT project presented to the Arctic Council Ministerial in April this year TK's importance for reindeer herding communities' possibility to adapt to climate change.

Reindeer herding peoples have lived and worked across wide areas of the north since time immemorial and have accumulated unique knowledge about the natural environment in which they live. Today, reindeer herding communities everywhere are facing profound changes in their societies. The

challenges of climate change, increased development and globalization are of such proportions that we need to use the best available knowledge in order to adapt to the future. Obviously, scientific research has been and will continue to be very important. But often the best available knowledge is the knowledge embedded within reindeer herding communities: TK developed by centuries of close observation of reindeer and nature which has been handed down from generation to generation. Reindeer herding peoples have always known that they must work in collaboration with nature, not against it. TK is based on experience and is knowledge that is accumulated in people's memory and actions over multiple generations. It is validated in the same way that scientific knowledge is found valid through trial and error. The crucial difference between them lies in how knowledge is obtained. Turi talks from the reindeer herders perspective, but this is valid also for the Saami culture as a whole.

It is important to remember that knowledge grow roots where it is developed and used. Indigenous peoples must therefore have the right to develop their own strategies for adapting to climate change and this goes hand in hand with the right to develop their own knowledge and research institutions. We must see the implementation of traditional knowledge alongside scientific knowledge in governance, public plans and industrial projects. We need to establish our own research institutions along side documenting the traditional knowledge, our researchers and students should test and prove our TK and develop Saami science that is equally valued with any other kinds of science. As Saami politicians this is the kind of science we need to base our decisions making on. A science developed by ourselves for ourselves for the best management of our homeland and its resources. Only based on such knowledge can the Saami political bodies take pan-Saami decision that can assist our local communities to adapt to climate change. Based on this the Saami children might see solutions for the challenges they will inherit from

our over consumptive generation. We need to raise the value of TK and the research based on that to match the science you are conducting, to be able to integrate TK and science in a good manner, then we together can base our decisions on the best available knowledge.

## **Mitigation**

But as indicated initially, the efforts to mitigate climate change causes almost as great a problem to the Saami people as climate change itself. The exploding interest in renewable resources such as wind-mills and hydro-electric dams intensify pressure on our lands never seen before. The Saami have contributed little to climate change, and we are already suffering disproportionately from its effect. Nonetheless, when the countries with Saami population are exploring increased use of renewable resources, they wish to concentrate such industrial plants, with associated roads, power cords and other infrastructure, on Saami traditional land.

For instance, in a formal response to the government, the Northernmost Swedish County Administrative Board on 3 March 2009 stated that should a proposed construction of a wind-mill park within the reindeer grazing lands of Östra Kikkejaure Saami community resulting in the community no longer being able to pursue reindeer husbandry, the national interest to combat climate change still takes precedent. This would imply that the cultural roots of the Östra Kikkejaure reindeer herders are pulled up. They will be thrown out of the lands their forefathers have used since time immemorial, and that they are currently trying to pass on to their children. I would submit that it is not fair of the majority society, being the main contributors to the global warming, to demand such a sacrifice by its indigenous population.

## **Recommendations**

All decisions should be based on best available knowledge, both traditional knowledge (TK) and science. Firstly, there is a need to value TK and science equally. Integration is to merge two equal values and out comes something new. The objective by integrating TK and science is to create new knowledge. It is an urgent need to support and build institutions that gather/documents, tests and develop TK in order to be able to become an equal partner to western science.

The Barents Euro Arctic Council (BEAC) can support the development of indigenous led projects that contribute to capacity building of our youth, who again will develop our institutions in the near future.

In the meanwhile, the Barents cooperation should involve indigenous peoples and existing institutions in the policy negotiations and project development. The Arctic Council serves as a good model for a partnership between Member states, indigenous peoples and research institutions. Only economy, and to some extent human capacity, restricts our participation in the work of the Arctic Council. Barents cooperation has not integrated indigenous peoples' organisations in the same way.

Further the national states should involve indigenous peoples, in equal partnerships with national authorities, in the development of climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies and research.

Finally, but maybe first and easiest, involve indigenous representatives in the national delegations to UNFCCC COP 15 in Copenhagen in December this year, and support the Indigenous peoples' organisations to participate actively and efficiently in the negotiations.