



**A Speech
by
the President of Iceland
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Council of the University of the Arctic
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Distinguished rectors
University presidents and directors
Professors, scholars, scientists
Ladies and gentlemen

It is both an honour and profoundly inspiring to have participated here today in your deliberations on the future of the Arctic. Listening to the presentations, reports and discussions, I was reminded how far we have progressed since I was in Rovaniemi thirteen years ago, when I was invited to give the anniversary speech at the University of Lapland celebrations.

Back then the Arctic was still peripheral in the theatre of global concerns. The North was seen as an enchanting realm of frost and cold with white expanses of snow and crystal-clear ice, a token of purity and beauty, the northern lights and winter darkness suggesting a mystical dream land, and the summer sun and bright spring nights symbolizing eternal day.

In recent years, however, we have witnessed a dramatic transformation. What was once the periphery is now centre stage. The Arctic Regions and other northern parts of Russia, the United States, Canada and the Nordic countries have become crucial to the future of the world, to developments in energy production and global transport, to the monitoring of climate change and the future well-being of those who rely on the ice and the oceans for their very survival, together constituting a new reality which has fundamentally changed the political and economic landscape in the North.

One could even say that with respect to the Earth as a whole, the Arctic and the North have become the new intellectual frontier in the sense that they call for scientific research and cooperation, discoveries and active, scholarly participation in the same way as, in the 18th and 19th centuries, exploration on frontiers in different parts of the world was based on academic endeavours.

This new intellectual frontier must focus not only on research and scientific cooperation, but also on new policy discussions between representatives of the countries that formally belong to the Arctic and those from the entire global community. We cannot conduct a dialogue on the future of the North in political isolation; it must become a global concern.

In this respect, the cooperation between the universities and the research institutions in Arctic countries and the creation of projects together with institutions of learning in other parts of the world have reached a new and higher level of priority.

The reason is simple: Without extensive scientific knowledge and a firm basis in research, the comprehensive policy formulations in the North are likely to have only limited success. Our progress, the fate of the people in the Arctic, must be firmly founded on scientific findings. Thus, the training of scholars and the education of the young are of the utmost importance.

This was already evident in the final years of the 20th century and therefore I proposed in 1998, here in Rovaniemi, the establishment of the Northern Research Forum, a network of scholars, scientists, researchers, policy makers, officials, regional and national leaders as well as advanced students – a kind of academic and policy-making village square, open in a democratic way to all who wanted to contribute to a successful future of the Arctic.

Through my association with the Northern Research Forum, for which the University of Lapland and the University in Akureyri served as early promoters, I have in the first decade of the 21st century had the privilege of supporting the advancement of the University of the Arctic, of witnessing how this unique academic establishment has become a major pillar in the new Arctic structures of cooperation and progress.

It is an indication of the joint mission shared by the Northern Research Forum and the University of the Arctic that following the Council Meeting here in Rovaniemi the Open Assembly of the NRF will soon be held in Iceland, directly attached to a meeting of the Third Pole Forum which is a gathering of glaciologists and other natural scientists,

primarily from the Himalayan countries, whom I and the University of Iceland have invited to convene in our country. Their concerns are closely linked to the title and the theme of the NRF Open Assembly “Our Ice Dependent World” – a title which reminds not only ourselves but people everywhere that the melting of the ice has wide-ranging consequences for the entire earth.

Let me therefore take the opportunity here today as chairman of the NRF Honorary Board, a body which also counts my good friend former President to Finland and Noble Laureate Martti Ahtisaari among its members, to invite your universities and institutions to send participants to the NRF Open Assembly in Iceland which will be held from the 4th to the 6th of September, to come either yourselves or to send scientists, scholars and promising students.

It will be the first time that we in the North have an opportunity to discuss the future of the Arctic and the world in a dialogue with representatives of the Himalayan nations, with experts from China, India, Nepal, Bhutan and other countries.

In encounters with people, leaders in faraway places I have learned how the experience of Arctic cooperation is of great interest to others. A fascinating example occurred in Bangladesh a few years ago when a government minister who also happened to be a tribal king of over 400,000 people had familiarized himself in great detail with the rights and the political challenges facing the indigenous people in the Arctic; had studied the role of indigenous representatives in the Arctic Council. He used this knowledge to support a stronger political role for his tribe and others within the state of Bangladesh.

The growing awareness of how climate change is fast becoming the paramount threat to the survival and well-being of people all over the globe is probably the main reason why the Arctic has gained this new relevance. As the Bangladesh minister said to me: “The greatest security threat to Bangladesh in the 21st century does not come from the armies of India and Pakistan but from the melting of the ice in your part of the world!”

Therefore, it is appropriate to bring the issue of a sustainable Arctic to the table, but not only to the table of our eight Arctic countries, but also to global forums where all nations are represented.

The fate of the Arctic reflects the fate of the world – and vice versa. Without a greener world there will in coming centuries not be an Arctic.

Thus, our concerns are both global and regional, national and local but fortunately we can celebrate numerous achievements that demonstrate how Arctic communities can successfully embrace a green path to progress.

Energy provides a good illustration. The profile of the Arctic in the global media and in discourse among leaders in other countries is dominated by its plentiful supplies of gas and oil; the reservoirs of fossil resources, representing as much as a quarter of the untapped global fallback.

What tends to be forgotten in all this is the excellent pioneering of clean energy that can also be found in Arctic countries. For example, Iceland and Norway top the global league tables in clean energy.

In my early youth, Iceland was still dependent on fossil fuel; over 80% of our energy came from imported oil and coal. We were a poor nation of farmers and fishermen with life-styles and traditions that can still be found in the northern communities of Russia, Alaska, Canada and even three Scandinavian countries.

Through systematic utilisation of our geothermal and hydro resources we developed our current energy system in which 100% of the electricity and space heating comes from clean and sustainable resources.

Consequently, the country has become a magnet for foreign investment: aluminium smelters, data storage and other energy intensive operations for which a long term access to clean energy at fixed prices provides an enormous competitive advantage.

A similar transformation from fossil fuel to clean energy can be executed all over the Arctic, bringing clean energy to communities and providing attractive basis for investments. The geothermal potential of many Arctic regions has perhaps been the forgotten secret of the region's energy future and the hydropower potential is enormous.

During my Presidency I have been privileged to initiate discussions on geothermal possibilities in both Alaska and Russia, in Chukotka and Kamchatka, bringing with me Icelandic experts, scientists, engineers and project managers, presenting a vision where a geothermal progress could not only provide electricity to aluminium smelters and other industries, but also hot water for heating cities and villages, melting snow in streets and pavements, for swimming pools and spas that improve quality of life and strengthen the growth of tourism.

Hot water from geothermal resources can also be used to heat greenhouses and thus create suitable conditions for vegetable farming in

the Arctic, fostering a new type of agriculture in small and large communities. Indeed, the Arctic could well become a major provider of tomatoes, cucumbers, green peppers and other high-quality products which fetch good prices in the advanced food markets of Europe and America.

This is not some futuristic dream but a realistic programme which could in the coming years be executed based on the proven track record of my country.

Similarly the hydropower potential of the Arctic offers enormous possibilities, especially in the light of the successful operation of the ocean electric cable between Norway and the Netherlands. This is for example of a great relevance for Greenland. It is rich in hydro power resources; that is one of the reasons why Alcoa is so interested in placing there a new aluminium smelter. Through a network of ocean cables from Greenland to Iceland and hence to Scotland and the European grid and also through cables from Greenland via Canada towards the American grid, Greenland could in the near future become one of the major new providers of clean, hydro-based electricity to the Western World, enjoying the favourable position of having a choice between Europe and America.

Clean energy and the sustainable use of natural resources could indeed become major pillars in creating a green profile of the Arctic, especially if the management of fish stocks will be based on the principles of scientifically controlled quotas.

Our oceans are the home of important fish stocks that could be threatened if we fail to reach agreements on the management of these critical resources. Although we can draw on successful examples, regrettably there have also been times when success has proven elusive.

Michel Rocard, the former Prime Minister of France and now President Sarkozy's ambassador to the Arctic has recently pointed out that climate change will soon challenge us to negotiate how to control, in a sustainable and successful way, the open sea fisheries that the melting of the ice will make possible. The Arctic nations must therefore come together and develop a durable mechanism for sustainable Arctic fishing.

The melting of the ice will also open up new sea routes, linking Asia to America and Europe in a new way, revolutionising global trade as the Suez Canal did a century ago. How will we deal with the growing commercial traffic in the Arctic waters? How will we handle the environmental threats and meet in responsible ways the opportunities which this will offer? That will be a big challenge for a greener Arctic.

Furthermore, our way of life, the organisation of our communities, our daily activities, must also increasingly be built on green principles. We are witnessing at first hand the threat of climate change and that should motivate us even more to adapt greener life-styles and thus make our personal contributions to a better world.

In this respect the indigenous communities of the North have a lot to teach us and, through their formal role within the Arctic Council can bring a key message to the international community: respect the wisdom of those who have for centuries lived with nature and of its resources, incorporate their voices and their legal rights into the decision-making of global organisations.

In the Arctic, climate change is proceeding three times faster than on the big continents, but our regions could also provide a vision of a green future, the proof that it can indeed be achieved; the Arctic as a double signpost, showing the threat but also showing the solutions.

It is certainly a daunting task but rich in intellectual challenges, opportunities for universities to excel, exercise leadership through discoveries, scientific dialogue and progress.

As I said earlier, the Arctic is in many ways the new intellectual frontier. Therefore extensive and productive cooperation among our universities is of the utmost importance.

It is a privilege to be with you here today and I assure you of my wholehearted support for your mission; and I welcome all of you to join us in Iceland in September.