



**Speech**  
**by the President of Iceland**  
**Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson**  
**at the**  
**Global Roundtable on Climate Change**  
**New York**  
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Distinguished scientists,  
business leaders and public officials  
Dear friends

Our endeavours this morning have been a fascinating beginning. The dialogue has demonstrated the need to achieve a broad consensus in the global debate on climate change, on the scientific evidence and proper responses, both in public policies and in our way of life.

I am deeply grateful to my friend Jeffrey Sachs for including me in this distinguished gathering and thus enabling me to broaden my vision and strengthen my views, and to understand better what needs to be done.

People in the Northern regions are being more noticeably affected by climate change than people in most other places. Climate change is taking place faster in the Arctic. The melting of the ice, the transformation of the tundra, the retreat of the glaciers and the enhanced force of the rivers – these things are affecting our lifestyles and future prospects in a dramatic way.

I have often said that if anyone doubts the urgency of the need to analyse and react to climate change, then they should take a journey to the North; it will provide a healthy warning, a wake-up call not available anywhere else in the world.

The trouble with the debate on climate change is that, for most people, it is highly abstract. It consists of predictions, assessments of uncertainties, conflicting presentations of scientific data, claims and counter-claims which become worked up in the media into a familiar but largely incomprehensible background noise.

The debate is made even more complex when political leaders and candidates running for office take diametrically opposing stands and vested interests of various types then exploit this confusion in order to strengthen their position, both within our economic systems and in our governmental structures.

It is therefore a highly laudable undertaking – and a brilliant idea – to approach the debate from a new angle, to gather together representatives of companies and corporations, industrial and business associations and throw in some scientists, public leaders and officials of international organizations and attempt to achieve, through informed debate and open dialogue, a substantial consensus which could influence the decisions that nations need to take, either individually or collectively.

I believe that this approach is both refreshing in its originality and fundamentally democratic. It rests on the premise that dialogue and debate will bring us together and lay the foundation for the right course to follow. Admittedly there is no guarantee, no certainty regarding the outcome – but such is the essence of the democratic way: the willingness to share the risks openly with others.

I am indeed honoured to be invited to join you on this journey and I look forward to further meetings in the coming years. Maybe one of them could take place in Iceland, where we would be able to show you some of our solutions; how we have replaced coal with geothermal power so now over 90% of our houses are heated in a safe way without causing any pollution.

Many people believe that this has always been so in my country and that Iceland is almost alone in being able to utilize the geothermal option. Both statements are wrong. Before World War II, our capital city, Reykjavík, was shrouded in smoke from coal fires and a large part of the harbour was given over to facilities for the coal-carrying ships. Gradually, first in the 1940s and the 1950s and then with increasing vigor and ambitious investments, we started to drill for hot water in different parts of the country, in the north, the west and the east. Consequently, geothermal power stations, large and small, have been built in most regions in recent decades.

The advantage of geothermal power is that it can be tailored for any need, for a city or a region, for a village or a single household. This reminds us that our thinking on energy resources has been dominated by large projects, by big dams or nuclear stations; our mindset and our policy framework in the debate on energy solutions have been geared to gigantic solutions. No study has yet been made of how an interlinked network of small-scale energy structures could contribute to meeting global energy needs in the future. But it is of the utmost importance that such a study should be undertaken.

An understanding of geothermal power and the evolution of its use in my country in the last fifty years offers many interesting guidelines for such an endeavour. It provides ideas for the debate and illustrates how a peacemeal approach can, over time, produce a comprehensive change in the energy system of a nation, and how a different mindset can transform our ability to reduce pollution.

The other claim, which is often made, is that Iceland is a unique case, that geothermal power is so rare that it does not really make a difference in the global picture. It therefore comes as a surprise to many people to hear that, in projects and joint ventures with other countries and through the United Nations University Geothermal Training Programme, which is based in Iceland, we have in the last 25 years engaged in geothermal cooperation with nearly 50 countries, including the United States, China, Russia and India - four countries that will play a key role in any global reaction to the threat posed by fundamental climate change.

The dominant direction of the energy sectors in most countries has been different, and therefore the potential of geothermal power has largely been ignored. California is a case in point; it suddenly woke up to its geothermal potential when the great energy crisis of recent years hit it hard.

During a meeting in Iceland, our Roundtable could also engage in an examination of the hydrogen option. Six years ago, Iceland agreed to join DaimlerChrysler, Shell International and Norsk Hydro in testing how a hydrogen-powered traffic system could evolve. The first hydrogen power station in the world freely open to the public was inaugurated in Iceland 2003 and since that year hydrogen-powered buses have been transporting people from one part of Reykjavik to another.

Of course, as Wally Broecker has outlined in his paper, there are various difficulties associated with the hydrogen option, but I must say that the pioneering project we initiated with those prominent corporations six years ago has progressed faster than any of us expected.

A visit to Iceland could also enable all of you to study in detail how climate change is affecting the North- the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions - and to examine the remarkable report which was submitted last November to the ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council, an international organisation founded a decade ago and embracing the United States, Canada, Russia and the five Nordic countries.

The evidence from the Arctic is indeed convincing and the consequences of the changes taking place in the Northern regions will affect the entire world, primarily through rising sea levels all over the globe and through dramatic

changes in the conveyor belt of ocean currents which stretches from the North Atlantic to the Indian Ocean and onwards into the Pacific.

The report to the Arctic Council is the most comprehensive analysis of what is happening in the Arctic regions. It was prepared by a large gathering of scientists and representatives of research institutions from the eight member countries, and cites mounting evidence, backed up by accounts from people who live in the far North, those who see the effects of climatic change on their daily life.

But the report is also of great political importance because the Arctic Council has become one of the pillars of the new relationship between Russia and the United States, a forum where representatives from Washington come to speak on behalf of the American Administration.

A journey to the North would, for example, offer the following evidence:

- The melting of glaciers throughout the Arctic and sub-Arctic, both in my own country and in Alaska.
- The melting of the Greenland ice sheet, which has recently been taking place faster than ever before.
- The diminishing of lake and river ice, which has reduced the ice season by up to a month, leading to severe economic consequences for both the oil and the gas industries and for the mining of diamonds and various metals.
- The growing flow of fresh water from the arctic rivers into the Atlantic Ocean, thus affecting the balance of salt level which drives the global conveyor belt of ocean currents throughout the world. The implications of this for global and regional climates, and for living conditions in Africa, Asia and other parts of the world, are indeed dramatic.

Rising sea levels would have disastrous consequences for people in distant regions, consequences akin to the destruction of communities in the wake of the recent tsunami. The giant wave can thus be seen as a forewarning of our future fate if mankind fails to unite in common action, fails to join in the creation of a global programme dedicated to the elimination of the climatic threat.

The abstract nature of the debate on climate change has been a stumbling block to the creation of enhanced public awareness; therefore the concreteness of the changes happening in the North could be a fundamental pillar of an improved understanding.

When presenting the findings from the Arctic Council to the Delhi Sustainable Development Summit last February, I invited any leader who doubted the wisdom of the warnings on climate change to join me on a journey through the Arctic and the northern regions and to engage in a dialogue with the indigenous people who feel the emerging threat more strongly than any others.

I reiterate that invitation here today. Perhaps our Roundtable should also engage in such a journey, a journey which would give us the opportunity to bear personal witness to the essence of our debate, to the growing threat to our climate, to the lifestyle, the well-being and the safety of the people who already feel climatic change in a dramatic way.

But let me also emphasise the need to reach out to a broader section of those who hold public office, to people who are democratically elected, to those who represent the people in different parts of the world, in nations large and small.

We should in the coming months seek to enlarge our Roundtable to include a broader section of political and public leaders, so that when it comes to our debate on policies and long-term solutions, we will have at the table a representative cross-section of the dominant currents in the public mood.

Only in this way can we hope to be effective, to make a difference, to influence in a permanent way the course of action to be adopted by the community of nations.

It is in this spirit that I approach our endeavour, and I am deeply honoured and grateful to have been invited to be amongst you. I hope the message which I and others bring from the North will, in a constructive way, provide guidelines for our deliberations.