United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

Statement by UNESCO

8th Session of the
UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues:
Regional Focus on the Arctic

21 May 2009

Climate Change and Arctic Sustainable Development: scientific, social, cultural and educational challenges

UNESCO is pleased to report on the outcome of the International Experts Meeting on "**Climate Change and Arctic Sustainable Development: scientific, social, cultural and educational challenges"** that was held in Monaco in early March this year. During this 4 day event, experts in the social and natural sciences, ethics, education, and international affairs sought the expertise of indigenous peoples in formulating an integrated approach toward facing the challenges of climate change in the Arctic. Supported and hosted by the Principality of Monaco, the event was opened by H.S.H. Prince Albert II of Monaco, and the Director General of UNESCO. The Executive Director of UNEP (UN Environment Programme) also came to address the experts group, and the Arctic Council was represented by the Chair of its Sustainable Development working group.

UNESCO brought together in Monaco, 42 experts from 13 countries, including from all of the Arctic states and Greenland. Mr Lars Anders Baer participated as a member of the Permanent Forum. In addition to participants from the Arctic Council, UNEP and WMO (World Meteorological Organization), experts included circumpolar indigenous peoples working with the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) and the Sami Parliament. Interdisciplinary expertise extended across the fields of the natural and social sciences, culture, education, ethics, law, health and international affairs.

The issue of Arctic climate change brings with it a clear sense of urgency. Rapid change is underway in the cryospheric, terrestrial, oceanic and atmospheric systems of the Arctic. Many of these changes are currently outpacing climate model predictions. Indigenous communities have been observing profound changes in the Arctic sea ice environment for several decades. An ice-free "blue" Arctic Ocean may become a seasonal reality much sooner than projected. This will engender profound changes in arctic ecosystems, and the culture and livelihoods of indigenous peoples. It also has profound implications for economic activities in the Arctic, including increasing exploration and exploitation of petroleum and mineral resources, as well as heightened marine shipping across an increasingly ice-free zone.

Understanding and responding to global climate change is a challenge that requires the combined efforts of the scientific community, indigenous communities, governments, regional and international organisations from across the globe. While in past decades, research efforts have focused upon the physical and climate sciences, today a dramatic shift is underway. Climate change adaptation and response have become an unavoidable necessity. The development of appropriate adaptation and response strategies has therefore emerged as a central preoccupation of all actors, including the UN system.

But adaptation cannot be addressed in piecemeal fashion. To be effective and meaningful, it requires a broad interdisciplinary approach. In order to understand and enhance societal capacities to respond to climate change, scientific monitoring and assessment must be combined with social, economic and cultural concerns. In order to ensure that climate change adaptation measures are tailored to the needs of Arctic peoples, indigenous peoples must be full partners in international climate change debates, and indigenous knowledge and practice must be recognised as essential to a successful response.

The Arctic and sub-Arctic regions are home to many indigenous peoples, whose lives will be dramatically affected by the climate-induced changes that are taking place. But indigenous peoples are not only victims of climate change. They are well placed to observe and respond to climate change impacts. Indeed, attentiveness to fluctuations and alterations in the natural milieu has always been an integral part of

their ways of life, and remains of crucial importance even in areas where lifestyles have been modified by colonialism and globalisation. While the environmental transformations engendered by climate change are expected to be unprecedented, in-depth indigenous knowledge of strategies for coping with change represent a crucial foundation for new adaptation measures. In addition, for some Arctic indigenous communities, climate change may bring opportunities to benefit from expanding industrial activity and shipping. Juggling emerging economic benefits with potential negative impacts from environmental degradation and the erosion of traditional livelihoods remains a daunting challenge.

In Monaco, despite the breadth of the issues being addressed, despite the diversity of actors, including physical oceanographers, biologists, medical doctors, anthropologists, legal experts, ethicists, indigenous peoples … the experts group succeeded in bringing together their diverse perspectives and priorities. In particular, a pointed effort was made to draw on indigenous expertise and acknowledge the value of sustaining traditional cultures. Mayor Edward Itta of the North Slope Borough and Alaskan president of the Inuit Circumpolar Council declared during the concluding session (and I quote): “This is the first time in many, many meetings similar to this that I actually felt useful to my people. (…) For the first time as an Alaskan Inuk I feel great hope because my words were taken seriously and weight was put on them.”

The 42 experts concluded that a key challenge to achieving sustainable development in the Arctic will be in coordinating the interdisciplinary and international effort necessary to confront the changes that an ice-free “blue” Arctic Ocean will bring to northern ecosystems, the culture and livelihoods of indigenous peoples, and economic activities in general.

They formulated a series of recommendations that met with the consensus of the entire group, and that they organized into several areas of concern, namely:

- Education
- Cultural heritage
- Well-being and health
- Economic development
- Resource management
- Research and monitoring systems
- Arctic governance
- Policy and decision support

The concerns and priorities of indigenous peoples are woven throughout these recommendations.

The recommendations include establishing “a working/advisory group to develop dialogue and strategy on the challenges of climate change for circumpolar indigenous peoples, including safeguarding intangible heritage and building synergies between indigenous and scientific knowledge.” Other objectives range from promoting employment opportunities through the conservation of traditional forms of activities for circumpolar indigenous peoples, to ensuring access to the international scientific research community to all areas of the Arctic Ocean.

UNESCO is now following up on the recommendations of the experts group and looking forward to continue its work alongside indigenous peoples, the Arctic Council, and other key partners, to help foster fully integrated approaches to the local and global challenge of Arctic sustainable development in the face of climate change.

The full meeting report and recommendations are available at www.unesco.org/links