

Opening

Rector/President of the University of Tromsø: Jarle Aarbakke

Welcome to the Indigenous People's Forum Conference 2010. This is the eleventh forum conference and the subject of this conference is Indigenous Participation in Policy Making: Ideals, Realities and Possibilities. From the very start I will say this is a very important subject, and I am confident that this forum will bring its discussion and its political and scientific merits a good bit further.

The University of Tromsø is proud to be a university that hosts many programs that are of relevance and importance to indigenous peoples around the world, and of all our international programs, above all is our Master program in Indigenous Studies in conjunction with the Master program in Peace and Conflict Transformation. These programs recruit students from all over the world, and contribute to the fact that this university is, by percentage, the most international university of Norway. Around ten percent of our students come from abroad, and around twenty percent of our professors and associate professors come from abroad. We want that number to increase, and we want this university, even more so than today, to take part in international issues. We feel the most important way of doing so is by facilitating student exchange and programs that attract international students.

I am now in a committee looking into the development of the High North on behalf of the Norwegian government and on behalf of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Over the last five years this has been an important and interesting task. We are looking ways to develop local, regional, international and global knowledge, in order to enhance the uses of human and natural resources in this part of the world, namely the High North. For those of you that are not familiar with the term High North, it is not synonymous with the Arctic. It's a political term rather than a geographical term, and it denotes the fact that there are many issues, especially regarding climate and energy, in the High North for the circumpolar nations of Canada, USA, Russia, Finland, Norway and Sweden, that can only be addressed in an international collaboration. In this context, you will suddenly and obviously realize that indigenous issues are of greatest importance, because this is, by tradition, the land of indigenous peoples. So whenever there is a discussion about resources and the use of resources in the High North there is also a discussion of development that immediately interests those of us that are devoted to looking into indigenous issues.

Why do I mention this, in an audience where many of you, for instance the Minister of Culture and Sports of Guatemala, Jeronimo Lancerio, are here representing southern regions? I had the privilege to visit Guatemala and Nicaragua in 2004, where I was shown the work and important programs developing for the Mayans. By comparison, this is a small university, nine thousand students, and I think that in 2004 San Carlos University had one hundred and seventeen thousand students. However, the issues, programs and political agenda, are in my opinion, very much the same. Details are different, but for instance the issue of indigenous participation in policy making, is quite similar in both places.

In September, the Prime Minister opened the Fram Center, or the High North Research Center on Climate and the Environment, here in the city of Tromsø. The University is highly involved with the five flagships in this program. I will just briefly mention them. One flagship is on climate effects on fjord and coast ecology. We have fjords and coasts all over the world, and research in this program will address the multiple ways climate change impacts the physical conditions of fjords and coasts, and how in turn habitats and food supply are affected. This is one of the flagships in which indigenous issues will be addressed to a very large extent. Another is the effects of climate change on terrestrial ecosystems and landscapes. Changes in northern terrestrial ecosystems will be highly relevant to society, in particular for agriculture, forestry, reindeer herding, and other nature-based industries. In addition, these changes will affect species concentration, tourism and recreation, and issues related to climate adaptation in the North. Included in this research will be work on the significance of climate change for Sami culture and settlements. Lastly, research with relationship to indigenous issues is that taking place on hazardous substances. Mankind is producing hazardous substances all over the world. They are concentrated in the North, and climate change reinforces the importance of filling the gaps in our understanding of the distribution of pollutants in the Arctic and their effects on the ecosystems and human health. The program also addresses the need for this knowledge to be incorporated in international agreements and processes.

There are many issues to be addressed when enhancing our knowledge on how to use both human and natural resources, in a smart and sustainable way. It takes many people to accomplish this and I therefore congratulate you on subject of this Forum Conference-Indigenous Participation in Policy-making: Ideals, Realities and Possibilities. At this time, the conference is now officially opened, and I wish you a good experience here in Tromsø.