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ABSTRACT: CIRCUMPOLAR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

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Circumpolar indigenous peoples, culture heritage, and development with identity

Indigenous peoples are among the first to face the direct consequences of climate change, owing to their dependence upon, and close relationship with, the environment and its resources. Climate change exacerbates the difficulties already faced by indigenous communities, including political and economic marginalisation, loss of land and resources, human rights violations, discrimination and unemployment. Although they contribute very little to the underlying causes of climate change, indigenous peoples are helping enhance the resilience of ecosystems they inhabit and are interpreting and reacting to the impacts of climate change in creative ways, drawing on traditional knowledge and other technologies to find solutions which may help society at large to cope with impending changes.

Indigenous peoples in the Arctic region depend on hunting for polar bears, walrus, seals and caribou, herding reindeer, fishing and gathering, not only for food to support the local economy, but also as the basis for their cultural and social identity. Some of the concerns facing indigenous peoples there include the change in species and availability of traditional food sources, perceived reduction in weather predictions and the safety of travelling in changing ice and weather conditions, posing serious challenges to human health and food security. In Finland, Norway and Sweden, rain and mild weather during the winter season often prevents reindeer from accessing lichen, which is a vital food source. This has caused massive loss of reindeer, which are vital to the culture, subsistence and economy of Sámi communities. Reindeer herders must, as a result, feed their herds with fodder, which is expensive and not economically viable in the long term.

Reducing vulnerability and implementing adaptation to climate change in the Arctic represents a significant challenge for the region given the predictions in the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA, 2005) as well as other work such as the

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2007). Although ACIA did not specifically assess vulnerability or adaptation needs in the Arctic, it highlighted the climate trends and projected their impacts on Arctic environments and people. ACIA provides basic information that can inform the planning of vulnerability reduction and adaptation measures including at the local level. This Arctic Council project, VACCA (Vulnerability and Adaptation to Climate Change in the Arctic) was approved by the Arctic Council in 2007 and was designed to provide practical, useful knowledge and information sharing at different governance levels and for different sectors so that this learning can be incorporated into policies and decision making.

In the Arctic Council framework it has been undertaking studies, surveys, collected information on the expertise, previous and ongoing projects, and strategies and measures on vulnerability and adaptation to climate change in the Arctic. The greatest strengths of the survey and projects are the large number and the impressive variety of responses, showing that interest and capacity are increasing for, and are being used to deal with, climate change vulnerability and adaptation in the Arctic. The community-based projects are also important in demonstrating the bottom-up approaches that are used. One example is the *Ealát* projects in Norway. The use of local knowledge for dealing with climate change is also highlighted as being particularly important, with projects such as *Inuit Food* exemplifying the necessity and methods of doing so.

Recommendations:

Call upon UNESCO, UNEP, UNFCCC and other UN and intergovernmental organisations active in both climate change and related environments and active in the field of culture, education and research to incorporate in their deliberations and decisions acknowledgement of the importance of indigenous languages in conveying traditional knowledge and concepts which are an essential and significant element in understanding and responding to the impact of climate change in the Arctic. Furthermore, such organisations are asked to continue to recognise indigenous languages and cultures as essential elements of sustainable development in the North, as indicators of community well-being.