UNPFII 2021 – 20th session

Agenda item 3: “Peace, justice and strong institutions: the role of Indigenous peoples in implementing Sustainable Development Goal 16”.

Intervention / written statement by Inuit Circumpolar Council

The North Water polynya

Pikialasorsuaq (The North Water Polynya) is the largest Arctic polynya and biologically one of the most productive regions in the Arctic. It is vital to many migratory species, and for generations Inuit have recognized it as a critical habitat upon which the surrounding communities depend.

The Pikialasorsuaq is under increasing threat from various drivers of change and in turn the biodiversity and communities that depend upon it are also at risk. Most concerning are the impacts of climate change that include the increasing erosion of the ice bridge responsible for protecting the phenomenon of the polynya. Coupled with globalization, climate change has also brought increased shipping, resource development, tourism and the potential of commercial fisheries to this northern marine region.

This ecosystem has supported Inuit for millennia and is central to Inuit hunting and harvesting. Inuit on both the Canadian and Greenlandic sides of the Pikialasorsuaq have recognized the area as critical habitat for many migratory species upon which they depend for their food security as well as cultural and spiritual connections. In short, the health of the Pikialasorsuaq directly influences the health and well-being of Inuit communities in the Pikialasorsuaq region.

The recommendations of the Commission are an opportunity for Canada and Greenland to take part in reformulating relationships between governments and the Indigenous people they represent.

- Changes in the land and ocean have been, and continue to be observed and noted by people who live in this region and who study the polynya. The implications of climate change for the Pikialasorsuaq and the species that rely on it are largely unknown. However, some impacts and consequences of this change are already very clear.

- The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted in 2007, sets out a foundation upon which the Commission has built its recommendations. Denmark was an early signatory to UNDRIP and in 2016, Canada removed its objection to two paragraphs related to the declaration spelling out the right to free, prior and informed consent. In accordance to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Inuit have the right to: autonomy and self-government in matters relating to internal and local affairs, as well as the right to ways and means for financing their autonomous functions (Article 4).

- In exercising the Inuit right to self-determination, Inuit have the right to: maintain and strengthen distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining the right to participate fully in the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the State (Article 5).
• participate in decision-making in matters, which would affect these rights, through representatives chosen by the Inuit in accordance with Inuit procedures, as well as to maintain and develop indigenous decision-making institutions (Article 18).

• maintain and develop their political, economic, and social systems or institutions, to be secure in the enjoyment of their own means of subsistence and development, and to engage freely in all traditional and other economic activities (Article 20).

• Central to the Commission’s Recommendations is that Inuit have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas, and other resources and to uphold these responsibilities to future generations in this regard (Article 25).

• Further Inuit have the right to use the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired (Article 26).

• Inuit have the right to own, use, develop and control the lands, territories and resources that they possess by reason of traditional ownership or other traditional occupation or use, as well as those which they have otherwise acquired (article 26).

• the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of these lands or territories and resources. States shall establish and implement assistance programmes for indigenous peoples for such conservation and protection, without discrimination (Article 29);

• determine and develop priorities and strategies for the development or use of these lands or territories and other resources (Article 32);

• maintain and develop contacts, relations and cooperation, including activities for spiritual, cultural, political, economic, and social purposes, with our ‘Inuit’ as well as other peoples across borders (Article 36).

We believe that this work of the Inuit Circumpolar Council can serve as a model for Indigenous Peoples world wide.