

Opening Address

Tarja Halonen
President of the Republic of Finland

It is a great pleasure for me to be here in Oulu at this opening of the 4th Open Meeting of the Northern Research Forum. I am particularly pleased that the Forum meeting takes place in the presence of its initiator, Dr Ólafur Grimsson, the President of Iceland.

The Northern Research Forum has become an important forum for addressing the opportunities and problems of the north. The northern and circumpolar peoples and regions are today facing rapid social and environmental changes, as well as the challenges of globalization. We need these kinds of meetings to deepen our understanding on the issues relevant to the north and to seek the means to respond to common challenges

Viewing the globe from the perspective of the North Pole, it is clear that the northern regions form a natural area for cooperation. For the peoples of the north – such as the Sámi people – having contacts across the borders is just normal. There are many cultural, traditional and language ties linking the people of the region. They have learnt to live in very demanding environmental conditions and their respectful attitude towards nature is a unifying factor. These ties have certainly encouraged many forms of cooperation in the northern regions.

When you look at the map of Finland, the venue for this session, the city of Oulu, is located roughly speaking halfway up Finland. Almost one third of the surface area of Finland is above the Arctic Circle. It is, therefore, not surprising that we are very committed to working for the benefit of the northern regions and peoples and their living conditions as well as the fragile environment. There is a long tradition of close cooperation and cross-border contacts among the Nordic countries here in the north. Since the 1990s cooperation in the region has developed tremendously, and nowadays also involves the Russian Federation. Important landmarks

in the cooperation include the establishment of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council in 1993 and the Arctic Council in 1996, the latter also involves Canada and the United States.

Finland introduced the initiative on the Northern Dimension soon after its accession to the European Union. We wanted to bring the challenges and opportunities of northern Europe - that is the Baltic Sea, northwest Russia and the Arctic areas - to the attention of the whole EU. The main purpose of our initiative was to increase cooperation and to consolidate stability, welfare and sustainable development in northern Europe and thereby promote security and development throughout the European Union and in its neighbouring areas.

The Northern Dimension became EU policy in 1999. Since then, the Northern Dimension has developed well and practical steps have been taken particularly in the areas of environment, public health and social well-being. We would like to move forward in the areas of transport and logistics, as well.

Northern Dimension policy is currently being renewed thoroughly and it is one of the priorities of the Finnish EU Presidency this autumn. We believe that intensified regional cooperation benefits not only the region, but also Europe and the international community as a whole. This is especially true when it comes to issues such as infectious diseases, the Arctic environment and climate change issues, cooperation in research and trade connections.

The renewed Northern Dimension will be transformed into a common policy involving the European Union, Iceland, Norway, and the Russian Federation as partners, and Canada and the USA as observers. This means that the EU and all the partner countries in the region

will jointly agree on the objectives and mechanisms of the renewed policy. The Northern Dimension will also be used as a regional tool in cooperation between the EU and Russia. I hope that the renewal of this policy will strengthen the commitment of all partners and thus give a fresh impetus to practical cooperation in many fields.

The northern regional councils have an important role in Northern Dimension cooperation. The Arctic Council is a forerunner in circumpolar cooperation and has, for example dealt with environmental issues, including climate change.

Climate change is a universal challenge, and a particularly important one for the economies and communities of the far north. The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA) has been a powerful wake-up call. The findings of ACIA and the results from other recent surveys seem to suggest that climate change is progressing faster and with graver implications in the Arctic than previously believed. The results indicate that there are strong feedback links between the Arctic climate system and the global system. The melting of the polar ice cap and glaciers could have catastrophic global consequences. The regional impacts of climate change on the ecosystems and livelihoods of indigenous peoples are already visible.

The harsh environmental conditions, difficulties in access to resources, and sparsely populated areas are specific challenges faced by the circumpolar region. During the past half-century, however, information and communications technologies have helped speed up development - for example by means of telemedicine, innovative education methods (including distance learning) and energy and transport technologies. Technical advances can also support the promotion of the use of indigenous languages.

In relation to increased maritime activity, the Arctic Council is undertaking an Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment (AMSA) during the period 2005 to 2008. The main purpose is to increase understanding of how maritime activities will develop in the future and what impact any increased activity will have on the environment, economies and communities in the Arctic. We must take studies like this seriously and ensure that we respect the aim of sustainable development when planning future maritime activities in the north.

As a part of this Northern Research Forum meeting, a special session called the Town Hall Meeting, will take place tomorrow and will focus on the findings and issues raised by the Arctic Human Development Report (2004) and the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (2004-

05). It is vital that the results of these two important reports are communicated to the public, all relevant stakeholders and decision makers. Wake-up calls relating to these issues are constantly needed.

The Barents cooperation forms an important part of Finland's international cooperation. Finland is chairing the Barents Euro-Arctic Council until the autumn of 2007. We have chosen to focus on strengthening the dialogue and cooperation between all relevant partners in support of sustainable regional development, in particular in the economic, social and environmental fields. In order for it to be successful in this aim, the Barents cooperation relies on the active participation of the regions, civil society, NGOs as well as the population of the region, and also the indigenous peoples. Science, education and research are important areas of sectoral cooperation in the Barents framework. The role of northern universities is central in this respect, and their activities have received wide recognition nationally and internationally.

The Barents region has a great deal of natural resources, including a significant share of the world's potential oil and gas reserves. It has become a region of great economic expectations. Science and technology can provide the means to facilitate the utilization of these resources in a sustainable manner in Arctic areas that were previously inaccessible. We also have to take proper account of environmental aspects and accept that energy resources will not last forever. We must work together to combat climate change by reducing emissions, saving energy, developing cleaner technologies and promoting the use of renewable energy resources.

Dialogue between policy-makers and scientists, in today's globalized world, is of the utmost importance. Scientific research can help open our eyes to face the future challenges and persuade us to take action. The global and regional perspectives in this dialogue complement and enrich one another. The Northern Research Forum provides a valuable platform for the exchange of views and experiences on northern issues.

Finland is a committed and active partner for northern issues in her various roles as a Nordic country, as an EU Member State, as a member of the regional councils, and as a neighbouring country. I am happy to note that in this Forum all these different roles seem to interact

I would like to thank the organizers of this event and to wish the participants in this 4th Northern Research Forum Open Meeting interesting and rewarding discussions – and a lively exchange of views.