

Gunn-Britt Retter, Head of Arctic and Environment Unit, Saami Council (Facilitator):

Climate change is accelerating transformations across the Arctic, with direct consequences for Indigenous communities and local livelihoods. How can European polar research and coordination efforts better support decision-makers in developing responses that are relevant to the realities of Arctic communities?

Maria Grigoratou (Head of the European Polar Coordination Office):

Thank you.

I would like to start with a very simple observation on which we based our work at the European Polar Coordination Office:

The Arctic is changing, and the way we understand and govern the Arctic needs to change with it.

We are seeing changes in sea ice, ecosystems, permafrost, ocean and landscapes. But for me, the most important point is not simply that the Arctic is changing. It is that some of the assumptions on which we have based decisions are changing with it.

The conditions that were considered normal are becoming less predictable. And that has very practical consequences; for how communities travel, how infrastructure is planned, how food systems and livelihoods are supported, and how ecosystems are managed.

For Indigenous Peoples and local communities, this is not a distant future. It is already part of everyday decision-making.

So how can European polar research and coordination better support those decisions?

We need science for policy, but we also need science and evidence-based policy. And the two are not the same.

If we only fund research for its immediate policy application, we risk becoming very good at answering yesterday's questions.

That is why we need long-term observations and sustained support for fundamental research; because we cannot know in advance which discoveries will become essential for society tomorrow.

This is both an opportunity and a responsibility for the European Union.

The EU is the second biggest funder of polar research. Public investment through the EU gives us the opportunity to build knowledge that no single country could build alone.

But it also gives to the EU a responsibility to protect and sustain that capacity.

And this is where I see the **European Polar Coordination Office, EPCO**, playing an important role.

The point of coordination is not simply to bring people together. It is to make science better, more connected and more capable of answering questions that no single country or institution can answer alone.

But the value of Arctic research cannot be measured only by how well it serves European policymakers.

The Arctic is someone's home.

Indigenous Peoples and local communities have their own priorities, knowledge and decision-making structures. European research needs to recognise and work with those realities, particularly where research directly concerns their lives, environments and livelihoods.

That means meaningful engagement, respect for Indigenous rights and knowledge, and relationships that go beyond one-off consultation.

Scientific research and Indigenous and local knowledge are different knowledge systems. They can challenge, complement and enrich one another, helping us better understand change and make better decisions.

And in the end, the test is simple: **does the knowledge we produce help people make better decisions?**

That requires us to invest in the science that can answer today's questions, while protecting the fundamental research, observations and relationships that will allow us to answer tomorrow's.

Because the Arctic is changing faster than our traditional planning cycles. **We need to make decisions today for a future that will look different from the conditions we have known in the past.** And we need to make no mistake: people in the Arctic, in Europe, and around the world, do not want to look at the future with their backs turned.

They want to face it.

We may not be able to predict every change that is coming.

But we can choose whether our knowledge systems, our institutions and our decisions are ready to meet it.

That is the opportunity before us. And I believe it is also our responsibility.