High Level Launch Event – IDIL Arctic Region Remarks New York City

As we relish in this moment, we are reminded that it has taken a great deal of effort to get to this day, over many years, at so many different levels including the strong advocacy work from the Arctic through Inuit Circumpolar Council and the Sami Council. That we are all here today, gathered to launch this Decade, which is so important to Indigenous Peoples around the world, once again demonstrates our strength, determination, and resilience, and demonstrates how important our languages are to us. Congratuations to all of you for your efforts. Congratulations to all those who are no longer present with us.

For Arctic Indigenous Peoples, our languages and the diverse dialects within our languages, are an outward expression of who we are and how we understand the world around us. Our languages are crucial to our political, economic, social, cultural, and spiritual rights. It is in our languages where our traditional knowledge resides: our knowledge on ecology, medicine, cosmology, spirituality. In fact, every time an Indigenous person utters a word in an Indigenous language it is an act of self-determination.

We all know that our languages are intrinsically tied to who we are as a peoples and it is a vehicle in which to share our world views. Languages, with their varied vocabulary and sayings, provide us with an entryway to glimpse into other understandings of our place in the world. Yet, as Indigenous Peoples we find ourselves in places where our languages and dialects are in various levels of vitality.

This decade is an opportunity to bring further focused attention and action to support and resource Indigenous Peoples languages. We want and expect our languages to remain strong for future generations. Member states must work with Indigenous Peoples to achieve long lasting, transformational change that will leave a positive legacy on our languages and dialects – especially because, in many instances, it is those same Member States that have played an active role in diminishing the strength of our languages. Now it is vitally important that they support the strengthening of our languages; and that they provide direct and sustained funding to Indigenous Peoples to promote and revitalize our languages in all community spaces including in our education systems and in the provision of essential public services.

In closing, I envision a time where my fellow Arctic Indigenous Peoples can stand a little taller in their own homelands, with dignity, knowing that they can function in all aspects of life in their own language receiving essential public services in the areas of health, justice and education.

I look around and I urge all of us – Indigenous Peoples, governments, academia, United Nations programs and agencies, the philanthropic community – to work together to implement the Global Action Plan so that our languages and our communities may thrive; so that every child can speak, play and work in their own Indigenous language.

May this launch be the marker in time, in which there was a transformative commitment to support the building blocks necessary to reverse the decline of Indigenous Peoples languages. We all need Indigenous Peoples languages to thrive.

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