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Arctic Circle Student Briefing

# Arctic Circle Student Briefing Our last chance?

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When leaders of the Arctic region assemble at one place, great things are anticipated. Everybody feels the necessity of action beyond great words spoken in the plenary sessions. However, the main stage often went to people with a financial interest in the region and occasionally ambitious plans to exploit it. Indigenous people are granted their own stage but not in discourse with other stakeholders. Ólafur Ragnar, chairman of the Arctic Circle, emphasizes open and honest dialogues with critical questions from the audience. Still, more than once, he misses to pick questions from women or the youth and instead hands the microphone to familiar faces in the front rows. After all, the exciting discussions took place in the break-out sessions. Ideas such as pumping sulfur dioxide into the stratosphere to cool the planet are received both with horror and curiosity. Halldór Þorgeirsson, chairman of the Climate Council in Iceland, looks troubled when he points out that “we are in deep shit,” and therefore, it is necessary to think about Plan B, although he would rather stick to Plan A for now. As senior director for the Carnegie Climate Governance Initiative, Cynthia Scharf points out that “We have no risk-free options anymore.” Break-out sessions like this show the urgency of actions against global warming, which does not always seem to be the main goal throughout the assembly.

In contrast, melting sea ice opens up new trade opportunities as sea routes become ice-free and therefore stay navigable for extended periods (LePan, 2020). The melting ice also gives access to significant oil and gas fields, and several stakeholders suddenly become very interested in the Arctic Regions (LePan, 2020). When an audience member asked Jongmoon Choi, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs from the Republic of Korea if he finds this to be a conflict of interest, to exploit and protect the region, he simply answered “yes” and moved on to the next question.

Other ambitious goals include Icelandair to go net-zero in 2050 or earlier. “Green Hydrogen” as sustainable aviation fuel is aimed to replace kerosene sooner than later, and Icelandair wants to become one of the first airlines to fly carbon neutral in the future.

A sense of reality returned in the “Stories that need to be told” session, when inspiring filmmakers, writers, and photographers shared impressive experiences from their arctic journeys. After a long day of talks about arctic finances and politics, a true sense of nature and survival returns through visual storytelling. The same goes for the fantastic film series of the Sámi people, screened in the evening.

While the conference brings together leaders, scientists, and the public for sharing knowledge and creating ideas, it certainly lacks equality. Judging by

who will feel the effects of the climate crisis primarily, the youth oftentimes did not get the chance to speak up to their decision-makers throughout the assembly. Hopefully, there will be enhanced dialogues between different groups in future assemblies, so the voices of the youth and minority groups get their rightful stage.

References:

LePan, Nicholas. (2020, February 13). The final frontier: How Arctic ice melting is opening up trade opportunities. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/02/ice-melting-arctic-transport-route-industry/>