



Submission from the
Sámi Parliament in Sweden
to the Report of the Special
Rapporteur on the rights of
indigenous peoples to the
General Assembly
*Impact of COVID-19 on
indigenous peoples*

22 June 2020

I. About the Sámi Parliament in Sweden

The Sámi people are the indigenous people of Sápmi. One people in four states; Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. The Sámi Parliament in Sweden, established through the Sámi Parliament Act in 1993 is the popularly-elected representative body of the Sámi people in Sweden. The Sámi Parliament also functions as a government agency on Sámi issues.¹

The overall task is to advocate, promote and protect Sámi rights and interests in order to ensure their economic, social and cultural development. The activities carried out by the Parliament cover a wide range of areas such as Sámi economic development; including traditional livelihoods, reindeer husbandry, hunting and fishing, strengthening and revitalizing the Sámi languages, promoting and protecting Sámi cultural expression, cultural heritage and traditional knowledge.

The Sámi Parliament thanks the Special Rapporteur for the opportunity to contribute to his report on the Impact of COVID-19 on indigenous peoples and would like to provide the following information.

II. Information and data

1. How does the State collect and analyse information on the impact of COVID-19 on indigenous peoples and individuals? Is disaggregated data on indigenous peoples, including health impacts, available?

There is no official statistical data on Sámi wellbeing, economic development, social status etc. This lack of data makes it challenging to present a comprehensive picture of livelihoods, industry/business, well-being and health, culture and social development, rights recognition, discrimination and the nature of change over time.

The Sami Parliament is responsible for the production of some statistics (e.g. on the reindeer industry), but has limited resources and no mandate with which to collect data. While the Sami Parliament has an electoral roll which could be a useful source of data, it cannot use this list to produce statistics due to the legislative prohibition of government agencies collecting data on ethnicity. Even collection of such data on voluntary basis is prohibited by law.

As such there is no disaggregated data on the Sámi and health impacts available. The Sámi Parliament is unaware of any initiatives by hospitals, health care or test facilities collecting and analyzing information and data on COVID-19 health impacts on Sámi individuals.

¹ This submission focuses on the situation within the Swedish part of Sápmi and is not intended to present a comprehensive view of the overall situation in Sápmi regarding the impacts of COVID-19 on the Sámi people.

III. Dissemination of information

2. How is information about COVID-19 and prevention measures disseminated in indigenous communities? Is such information available in indigenous languages?

The Public Health Agency of Sweden provides general information on their website on how to protect yourself and others from spread of infection in three Sámi languages davvisámegiella, julevsámegiella and áarjelsaemien.² On the website there are some information leaflets and posters available (mainly in davvisámigiella) with additional information regarding elderly people and about the corona virus and the disease COVID-19.

In addition, some municipalities with the legal obligation to communicate in the five recognized minority languages (where Sámi languages are included)³ disseminate information in Sámi languages on their websites.

Information has mainly been made available online. There is also a Sámi broadcaster (Sameradion) part of public service that provides news in Sámi languages. To our knowledge there have been no dissemination of information or awareness raising initiatives directed at Sámi society or communities.

IV. Economic, social and cultural impacts

3. Please provide information on the economic, social and cultural impact of lockdowns, quarantines, travel and other restriction of freedom of movement on indigenous communities. Please provide information on measures taken to ensure indigenous communities do not experience discriminatory impacts on their access to livelihoods, food and education. How are indigenous peoples taken into account in the development of assistance and relief programmes? Where are the gaps if any?

Closed borders and travel restrictions

The border closing between Norway, Sweden and Finland has had severe negative consequences for the Sámi people. The Sámi are one people living across the nation state borders drawn by the states without the consideration of the movement of the Sámi people across these borders as they pursue their traditional livelihoods, cultural traditions and social relations. The reindeer herding is based on free range movement between grazing lands in Norway, Sweden and Finland and family members within a Sámi family usually resides in different countries depending on the seasons – following the cycles of the reindeer.

The free movement within Sápmi – the Sámi homeland from east to west have been and is still restricted by state authorities. Norway and Finland closed its borders to Sweden in

² <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/smittskydd-beredskap/utbrott/aktuella-utbrott/covid-19/skydda-dig-och-andra/information-pa-olika-sprak/nordsamiska/>

³ These are so called fövaltningskommuner – administrative municipalities – more info available here <https://www.government.se/49b72e/contentassets/bb53f1c5ff8504c5db61fb96168e728be/national-minorities-and-minority-languages>

March 2020 and has still not reopened them. Reindeer herding has been accepted as a valid reason for border crossings from Sweden to Norway. The situation has been especially difficult at the Finnish/Swedish border due to restrictions from the Finnish government and authorities.⁴

The Parliament has received several statements from affected Sámi who have been hindered to reunite with family members and conduct cross-border reindeer herding and has raised the issue with the Swedish government.

Economy

It is difficult at this stage to assess the long term impacts on Sámi economy, businesses and livelihoods. The Sámi Parliament has conducted a survey on the financial impacts of Sámi businesses with focus on reindeer herding. The survey shows a drastic decrease in demand of reindeer meat (mainly from the restaurant sector) which is expected to result in lower sales volumes and lowered prices next year. As the demand decreases and less reindeers are slaughtered this results in larger reindeer herds. Since the pasture lands are already under pressure due to competing land use (natural resource exploitation, wind power, infrastructure) and impacts of climate change the increased herds is a cumulative effect that further aggravates the situation for reindeer herding.⁵

Sámi economy is mainly made up of local, small-scale, family based companies (SMEs) and has not been reached by Swedish government measures to support the Swedish economy. This mainly as the measures has been tailored to credit-based, large-scale companies with more employees and focus on financial growth and economic values. As an example 93% of the reindeer herding companies are not helped by the government measures (such as financial compensation to prevent layoffs, and lower employer fees) as they are run as private entities under sole proprietorship (enskild firma).

Culture and languages

The Sámi Parliament has no funding of its own and is dependent on funding provided by the Government. The Sámi Parliament is concerned about the financial impacts the COVID-pandemic will have in the public allocation of funds. If the budgetary funds are decreased this will impact the Parliament's financial support to Sámi organizations and cultural life.

⁴ As an example the following information has been provided by the Finnish Border Authorities "For the sake of public health and health security, closure of Finland's borders is enforced in accordance with international obligations. Limitations apply for all regions and all passengers, also for reindeer herders in Lapland area. Under certain circumstances, reindeer herding may be considered as allowed necessary cross-border work traffic or allowed necessary traffic for employees who, based on a permanent employment contract, work in the intrinsic travel-to-work area on the border. The decision whether entry to Finland under these exceptions is possible, will be made based on case-to-case consideration at the border check conducted on border crossing points. All passengers should be ready to provide necessary clarification about the purpose and circumstances of their entry, so that it is possible to conclude that entry is necessary under the conditions of current public health situation. It is not able to provide general or specific permission to border crossing beforehand, as there is no legally defined process for that." https://www.raja.fi/current_issues
https://www.raja.fi/current_issues/guidelines_for_border_traffic

⁵ <https://www.sametinget.se/150167>

It is still early to assess the impacts on Sámi culture and languages. So far the COVID-pandemic has resulted in cancelled language courses and vocational training in Sámi traditional livelihoods (duodji – handcraft). Depending on the future development more far-reaching impacts on the intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge and social structures of the Sámi society could occur.

V. Impact on other rights

4. Please provide information on how States of emergency may contribute to threats or aggravate ongoing human rights violations against indigenous peoples, including with regards to the freedom of assembly and the protection of their traditional lands and resources. What measures have been taken to protect the lands, territories and resources of indigenous peoples against invasions and land-grabbing by external actors during the pandemic?

Impacts on political assemblies

Although Sweden has not declared a state of emergency or lockdown. Recommendations and restrictions on assemblies has impacted the political work of the Parliament. The 85th plenary of the Parliament to be held in Stuehkie- Stockholm the 26- 29 May was cancelled due to current restrictions. Also the Parliamentarian conference (of the MP's of the respective Sámi Parliaments in Sweden, Finland and Norway) to be held in Anár- Enare the 13-14 August has been cancelled.

Currently virtual/online-solutions are being explored in order to minimize the negative impacts of Sámi self-determination and political life.

The Sámi Parliament has recently received funding by the government to start the work of establishing a truth and reconciliation commission. The Parliament intends to conduct this work through consultations with the Sámi people. However, the current situation prevents the Parliament to organize such gatherings and assemblies.

Amendments of the Minerals Act

The Government is proposing to the Riksdag a legislative amendment to the Minerals Act that would make it possible for holders of exploration permits to prolong the validity of such permits one additional year.⁶ According to current legislation, the validity of exploration permits can already be extended (depending on the circumstances) for a total of fifteen years. The government has stated that the impacts of COVID-19 is the reason behind the proposed amendment. As has been highlighted by several human rights monitoring bodies mining activities including the exploration phase have negative impacts on Sámi land rights and livelihood and the Parliament has expressed its disapproval to the amendments.

⁶ <https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2020/06/ett-ars-forlangning-for-undersokningstillstand-med-anledning-av-covid-19-till-riksdagen/>

VI. Participation and support

5. How are indigenous peoples given the possibility to shape the national COVID-19 response to ensure it does not have discriminatory effect on their communities? Is their input sought and respected in the programs that could affect them?

The Sámi Parliament does not have permanent influence within the Swedish Parliament in any formal roles, such as seats or appointments, despite being an organ of the Swedish Government and an elected, representative governing body of the Sami people who are Swedish citizens.

No Sámi representatives have been invited to participate in decision making processes on COVID-measures affecting the Sámi. The Sámi people has not been consulted on the impacts of the national response and or on needs for measures and programs to address the situation and impacts from a Sámi perspective.

The government's focus on and priorities to address the COVID-pandemic raises concerns that ongoing work on Sámi issues, such as the adoption process on an Act on Consultation.

6. What measures have been taken to provide health care and other forms or urgent assistance for remote communities?


The measures undertaken by Sweden are not adapted to small, remote and sparsely populated areas and communities where most of the Sámi people live. Although social distancing also applies to the Sámi other restrictions would be more relevant considering the family structure and long distances between communities.

During holiday seasons in April travel restrictions/recommendations were issued by the Government and the Public Health Agency to avoid spreading the virus to smaller, remote villages and regions with lower medical and health care resources and infrastructure capacities in order to lessen the burden and pressure on those areas.

VII. Our message

Indigenous peoples' knowledge, traditions, values and livelihoods are fundamental to build sustainable societies and to restore the relationship between people and nature. Our internal resilience can only serve as a natural protection and be maintained if nature and the environment is healthy. The COVID-19 pandemic provides the global society with an opportunity to reevaluate goals and priorities and to redefine what development means. It gives us the opportunity to transformative change where we can halt the unlimited exploitation of natural resources, the global warming and increasing inequalities within and between nations.

On behalf of the Sámi Parliament



Per-Olof Nutti

President of the Sami Parliament