



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES  
MAJOR GROUP

# SDG PROGRESS REPORT

# THE ARCTIC REGION

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#HLPF2021

This report covers the Arctic region, which in this context is constituted by Inuit Nunaat and Sápmi, covering the northern and high-altitude areas of what is today known as Easternmost and Westernmost regions of the Russian Federation, USA, Canada, Kalallit Nunaat (Greenland), Norway, Sweden and Finland.

The COVID-19 pandemic struck the world, and the Arctic region has been no exception regarding the fast spread of infection. This report is based on first-hand observations and experiences by Inuit and Saami in different communities, related to the pandemic.

In Inuit Nunaat, the spread of the coronavirus highlights the urgent need to remedy the profound infrastructure deficit that contributes to vulnerability and underlies the health challenges experienced by too many Inuit. Many Inuit communities across Inuit Nunaat lack infrastructure, including potable water and sewage services, overcrowding due to lack of housing, and affordable, accessible broadband accessibility as very real and pressing issues. The concern has only increased because compounded threats to the Inuit basic health and well-being are manifesting themselves.

In Sápmi, the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic have showcased that the Saami people in fact live, work and function cross-border. Since national statistics do not disaggregate data based on ethnicity, there are no official numbers of COVID-19 cases and related impacts on Saami people. Therefore, this report mainly focuses on how the Saami are impacted of closed borders and lockdowns, which have posed consequences for Saami culture and economies and separated families from loved ones. In times of crisis, coherent and coordinated strategies and measures made by nation-states are especially important to avoid posing challenges upon the Saami and our ways of life.

There are studies on living conditions, economies, health and mental well-being carried out in the Arctic which provide in-depth knowledge of some aspects, and from some locations in Sápmi. However, the dominant picture is shortage of demographic data of Inuit and Saami, thus it is challenging to provide reliable analysis of the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in our Arctic region.

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The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 struck the world, and the Arctic region has been no exception regarding the fast spread of infection. The direct and indirect effects of the pandemic have exposed pre-existing inequalities, from access to health care and freshwater to overcrowding in housing, and apart from the danger with the fast spread of infection, response measures made by nation-states posed challenges to Inuit and Saami and our ways of life.

This report covers the Arctic region of Inuit Nunaat and Sápmi, the homelands and territories of Inuit and Saami. Inuit Nunaat comprises approximately just over 40% of the Arctic region, and covers Chukotka (Russia), Alaska (USA), Canada, and Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland). Sápmi covers the geographical area of reindeer husbandry in Norway and Sweden, the Saami administrative area in Finland and great parts of the Kola Peninsula in northwest Russia.

The Arctic states have adopted different approaches to the categorization of Indigenous Peoples and how this is operationalized in statistical and legal terms varies (Arctic Human Development Report, 2014). Inuit Nunaat covers a vast area with rural and remote Inuit communities, most with access only by air or sea. According to censuses, approximately 170,000 Inuit inhabit Inuit Nunaat: 1530 in Chukotka (Russia), 50 000 in Alaska (USA), 65 000 in Canada, and 51 000 in Kalallit Nunaat (Greenland).

Sápmi is inhabited by a mixed population - the Saami people and majority national populations, as well as communities with people of other minority language groups. Ethnicity is not recorded in censuses in Norway, Sweden or Finland and therefore there are no exact numbers of Saami people registered. While Saami mostly constitute a minority within majority society, there are areas in all four countries with dominantly Saami communities.

Saami are recognized as Indigenous Peoples in all nation-states that constitute Sápmi even though both legal definitions and legal positions differ nationally, as well as how they are implemented in practice. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, three Saami parliaments have been established in Norway, Sweden and Finland. They are all democratically elected institutions that represent Saami political interests both nationally and internationally but their roles and responsibilities differ. In Russian Sápmi, two organizations have together formed the Kola Sámi Assembly (Kuellnegk Nyoark Sam' Sobbar) in 2010.

The aims of the assembly are to represent the Saami people and to work towards a recognized Russian Sámi Parliament. It is however not recognized by the regional nor federal government.

In times of COVID-19, the unitary states in Sápmi (Finland, Sweden, and Norway) have guided their response and mitigation measures nationally while the federal states (the Kingdom of Denmark, Canada, and the Russian Federation), have had each level of government establishing risk management and mitigation measures for Inuit Nunaat. These actions have had different impacts, both positive and negative, but it is important to underscore that many challenges became starkly evident during the pandemic. When looking at these impacts, it is important to acknowledge the interconnectedness of issues such as mental and physical health, and the dependence of healthy humans in a healthy Arctic environment.

# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE ARCTIC

The 6th Arctic Leaders' Summit (ALS6) in Roavvenjárga – Rovaniemi, Finland in 2019 comprised Indigenous leaders from all over the Arctic. In the ALS6 Declaration<sup>[1]</sup>, Arctic Indigenous Leaders specifically expressed their concerns about the impacts of drastic climate- and environmental change, with adverse implications for flora and fauna and the health of animal and fish populations. The Arctic region is disproportionately more vulnerable to the adverse impacts of the changing climate and Arctic Indigenous Peoples are among the first to experience these changes directly, with harmful impacts upon food security, cultural, spiritual, and well-being. State-led responses dealing with climate change are not sufficiently responsive to the dire circumstances which also leave Indigenous voices out in this work of actions.

Arctic Indigenous Leaders also underscored the need for recognition of, and respect for, both traditional and contemporary economies, along with current health disparities and a need to utilize holistic indigenous health care when providing care for mental health and well-being.

The above expressions enshrined in the 6th Arctic Leaders' Summit Declaration could serve as a testimony of an aspiration for Indigenous Peoples' sustainable development.

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[1] VI Arctic Leaders' Summit Declaration, Roavvenjárga (Rovaniemi, Finland) November 13 – 15, 2019.

# ACHIEVING THE SDGs

Leaving no one behind is a central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs.

However, there is generally little contact between state authorities and Indigenous organizations and institutions on the implementation of the SDGs. There is also a pressing need for increased capacity within Arctic Indigenous organizations to work with the SDGs, at local level up to engagement on international level. It is however challenging to report on the achievement of the SDGs if there is no baseline to start from.

A further limitation is monitoring progress towards achieving SDGs for Arctic Indigenous Peoples. National statistics do seldom reflect the living conditions of Indigenous Peoples within their nation-states. The United Nations Development Programme (UNEP) monitors a variety of statistics that lead to an annual Human Development Index (HDI) which captures many of the aspirations included in the SDG's. Seven of the eight Arctic Council countries rank in the top 17 of countries with the Russian Federation ranking 52[2]. However, this is not indicative of the reality of Arctic Indigenous Peoples in these countries.

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, representing Inuit within Inuit Nunangat (Canada), have in their Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (2019) addressed that Agenda 2030 should be considered as a framework for new investments in Inuit-identified priorities and based on acceptance of Inuit Nunangat as a policy, geographic and social space. Based on identified needs, the first six SDGs are of utmost importance and relevance: poverty, hunger, infrastructure, health and wellness, education, gender and housing, including clean water. In all these, Inuit rank well below Canadian standards and Inuit communities find themselves statistically within those of the poorest countries in the world. Therefore, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami highlight that the SDGs and their guidelines should be used to close the gap between Inuit Nunangat and the rest of Canada and indicators to assess each of the 17 SDGs should be developed jointly with Inuit. They should furthermore be disaggregated to demonstrate outcomes among Inuit versus the total population of Inuit Nunangat, rather than reported only by provincial or territorial jurisdiction.

In Sápmi, there is a general perception of lack of inclusion and cooperation between state authorities and Indigenous organizations and institutions regarding the work and implementation of Agenda 2030. Due to the lack of Saami perspectives in the national implementation, the Saami Parliament in Sweden has developed its own steering document for working with the SDGs, published in 2021. The challenges highlighted by the Saami Parliament regarding the implementation of the SDGs in Sweden from a Saami perspective all underline a knowledge gap. There is a lack of information and data on the Saami people, a general lack of knowledge about the Saami – culture, livelihoods, knowledge and values - within society at large, and a lack of knowledge about Saami contributions to sustainable development. Therefore, enhanced Saami participation, influence, and cooperation within national and global implementation, and secured resources and knowledge raising efforts are areas highlighted for the future work of implementing the SDGs[3].

The lack of Saami perspectives is also raised by Saami youth, but in more general terms, not only regarding the Swedish VNR processes. The Swedish government highlighted that youth will be a special area of concern in their VNR and has arranged consultations with youth representatives in their preparations. However, Saami youth express that there is a need for addressing Saami youth separately when touching upon youth issues since their interests and realities often differ from the ones by non-Saami youth.

Norway and Sweden have both committed to submit Voluntary National Reviews in 2021. In Finland's 2020 Voluntary National Review report, the Saami Parliament was invited to write their own section without the Finnish government editing or censoring the text. This is a good way to ensure that the Indigenous voice and perspectives are reflected, and the latter a requisite for these perspectives being reflected in an accurate way.

Finland explains in their VNR report that the Finnish statistical data do not necessarily allow the in-depth disaggregation required and emphasized in certain SDG indicators since disaggregation on the grounds of vulnerable group status seldom is possible in statistics. Moreover, disaggregation on the grounds of race, ethnic minority grouping, Indigenous status and disabilities are currently void from official statistics for ethical reasons. It is considered inappropriate to pinpoint minority groups in statistics compiled for the needs of an equal and democratic society. The same attitude is observed in other Arctic states.

Even though there is a lack of statistics regarding the Saami, there is some information that is highlighted. Norway's 2016 VNR report stated that Saami face challenges relating to access to culturally adapted health care services. Finland's 2020 VNR and Sweden's 2017 VNR both state that especially those who belong to minorities face discrimination in different areas of life, and here refer to the Saami people among others. Studies in Norway have found that Saami face more discrimination than the majority population and earlier studies made in Sweden point towards the same results[4]. [5] However, the position and the rights of Saami as Indigenous Peoples in the light of the SDGs are not separately addressed in above mentioned VNR's, making them quite deficient. In the Russian Federation's VNR report from 2020 there are no mentions to the Saami at all.



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[4] Ketil Lenert Hansen, Maria Melhus, Asle Høgmo & Eiliv Lund, 2008.

[5] Sámi Parliament in Sweden, 2016.

# COVID-19 IN THE ARCTIC: CHALLENGES AND IMPACTS ON AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

## INUIT NUNAAT

Inuit Nunaat covers a vast area with rural and remote Inuit communities, most with access only by air or sea. On one hand, this made Inuit community response to the pandemic straightforward, with leadership responding to protect their respective communities from the pandemic. On the other hand, many communities lack the basic health infrastructure to be able to deal with severe medical emergencies, much less a pandemic. This situation was pointed out by the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) in a March 2020 statement issued before the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic.

The spread of the coronavirus highlights the urgent need to remedy the profound infrastructure deficit in Inuit Nunaat that contributes to vulnerability and underlies the health challenges experienced by too many Inuit. Inuit communities historically experienced devastating loss of life due to lack of immunity to preventable diseases such as influenza, tuberculosis, and other viruses and diseases. The lethal impacts of disease were compounded by the absence of the resources and infrastructure required to effectively prevent and respond to them[6].

Despite being the original inhabitants of some of the most affluent countries in the world, the gaps in basic infrastructure continue to contribute to severe health risks. These include “overcrowding, food insecurity, lower life expectancy, and a high prevalence of tuberculosis are among the inequities experienced by our people that are linked to poor infrastructure. Many homes lack running water and a flush toilet. Many more depend on aging and deteriorating piped and haul systems[7].” Inuit Circumpolar Council has worked together with the Saami Council and others through the Arctic Council Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG) to draft a briefing document[8] designed to provide the Arctic Council with background and options on how to deal with the pandemic.

[6] Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2020a.

[7] Ibid.

[8] SDWG, Arctic Council. (2020).

Work continued through the latter half of 2020 into the next year. ICC argued that the spread of the coronavirus provided an opportunity to create new conditions of equity and justice in the Arctic region and highlighted the urgent need to remedy the profound infrastructure deficits in Inuit Nunaat mentioned above – deficits that afflict Indigenous Peoples and their communities throughout the Arctic.

Inuit communities historically experienced devastating loss of life due to lack of immunity to preventable diseases such as influenza, tuberculosis, and other viruses and illnesses. The lethal impacts of disease were compounded by the absence of the resources and infrastructure required to effectively prevent and respond to them. The memories of the Spanish flu that devastated many Inuit Nunaat communities a hundred years ago are still fresh – and are behind the quick decisions and actions to close communities in the face of the novel coronavirus. In some parts of Inuit Nunaat, the memories are even fresher. Inuit in Chukotka were in touch with a local doctor who remembered the effects of measles outbreaks in the early 1960s when everyone was sick and “smoke did not blow from any chimney in the village, the sick people had no strength to get up to light the fire.” Diseases like tuberculosis remain a scourge throughout Inuit Nunaat.

The parallels between tuberculosis and Covid-19 are stark: both are highly infectious, and both require community driven responses and people centered approaches. A 2020 article in The Lancet echoed Inuit calls for action and called for culturally appropriate, community-centered approaches: “Equipped with culturally appropriate information and ownership of the resources needed to tackle COVID-19 and tuberculosis, Inuit communities can protect and prepare their members[9].”



*Inuit across our homelands are working to maintain our traditional culture under very trying circumstances. We are used to living together in groups. Social distancing is a foreign concept and our past experiences with such an advisory were triggered by devastating illnesses such as tuberculosis (TB), measles, and polio. This is why we must adapt. The issues we have been working to overcome for decades, such as overcrowded housing, lack of proper sewage and potable water systems, high rates of TB, and poor broadband connectivity become starkly evident during a pandemic and increase the risks of spreading the disease.*

Dalee Sambo Dorough, chair of Inuit Circumpolar Council [10]

[9] Monroe et.al, 2020.

[10] Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2020b.

While many other regions are turning to information technology to continue “business as usual”, availability and affordable access to such services is either non-existent or cost prohibitive. It should be noted that these infrastructure gaps and the overall deficit are pre-existing. But in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic they are being felt more acutely and compound the very real exposure and risk that Inuit face both individually and collectively. For example, there are only two hospitals in Inuit Nunangat, located in Iqaluit and Inuvik which are capable of providing acute care to a combined total of 86 patients. They are not equipped to provide long-term in-patient care and other community health centres are not equipped to provide in-patient care. Long distances for specialized medical care are a matter of life and death in some situations. For example, in Greenland one needs to be transported to Nuuk for ventilator treatment – and approximately a third of the population live outside of Nuuk. In Nunavut, the same situation exists and at the beginning of the pandemic it was reported that there were only four ventilators in the entire territory.

Inuit also have limited access to physicians. For example, 82% of Inuit do not have a family doctor in Inuit Nunangat. While Canada has fewer physicians per capita than most other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the lowest number per capita is in Inuit Nunangat. For example, Nunavut had only 27 physicians per 100,000 population in 2015, the lowest number in the country.

The general disparities faced by Inuit and other Arctic Indigenous Peoples have recently been discussed by researchers[11].

Despite precautions the coronavirus affected all parts of Inuit Nunaat. Greenland was able to close its doors and keep the virus out, with approximately 30 cases reported and no deaths. Inuit Nunangat, the Inuit homeland in Canada, reported around 300 cases and one death at the end of 2020. Roughly estimated, the Inuit regions of Alaska had nearly 1500 cases but only two deaths. Nevertheless, the effects of the shutdown were felt throughout many parts of Inuit Nunaat. Food security was threatened in Alaska and Canada as crucial airline schedules were reduced, threatening supplies of food that must be imported from the south. The need to have regional airlines declared critical infrastructure in Nunavik, which was raised by then Makivik President Charlie Watt at a special session of the Canadian Senate committee on health in April.

While looking at the impact and response of governments to the COVID-19 pandemic it is important not to lose sight of the interconnectedness of the challenges and external pressures that Inuit face. There is a need to recognize the interrelated and interdependent nature of health and well-being to multiple, diverse conditions and needs. For example, safe and healthy food is related to a greater role in determining harvesting activities, and also depends on a safe and healthy environment. At the same time, any recovery from the pandemic needs to have a climate change lens.

In December of 2020, the Canadian government announced that \$30 million from the Emergency Food Fund was to be transferred to Indigenous Services Canada, where approximately \$8 million was earmarked for Inuit organizations to address the further exacerbated situation of food insecurity related to the pandemic. Through Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), the national Inuit association in Canada, funding was then provided to the four Inuit regions. Government support in Canada and Alaska helped hunters and fishers to continue to provide for their families and communities. Many people moved out to cabins to harvest, thereby reducing the number of people in crowded housing conditions.

To counter social media misinformation related to food and Covid, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami issued a statement supported by government scientists, about the fact that people would not likely get COVID-19 from eating marine mammals like Narwhal and Beluga. In Alaska, the whale hunt was affected by the inability of people to move between communities.

Domestic violence increased during the pandemic, leading Pauktutit, the Inuit women's association in Canada, to lobby the government for funding to support five women's shelters across Inuit Nunangat. It also put together plain language fact sheets for individuals on how to access COVID-19 supports.

Students moved to online learning, a challenge in many communities where internet access is poor. In Canada, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the national Inuit association, secured a \$1 million donation from a private foundation to support students. The funding was divided between the four Inuit regions.

While the pandemic continues and, in some regions, has worsened, Inuit draw a number of lessons from recent experience:

1. Quick action by communities and regional authorities in closing travel from the south to what are mostly fly-in communities, as well as travel between communities, is seen to have been an effective response in keeping the virus out, or at least minimizing people's exposure to it.
2. In many places, the speed at which action was taken was in part driven by memories of past epidemics and the devastating effects they had throughout Inuit Nunaat. This includes the Spanish flu 100 years ago, outbreaks of measles, mumps and chicken pox in the 1960s, and more recent effects of H1N1 and other new zoonotic diseases.
3. The main message here is that local, community responses can happen quickly. In the case of Inuit and other Indigenous Peoples, this is a clear link to the right to self-determination in practice.
4. However, in the region of Nunavik, Canada, the Inuit birthright organization, Makivik, was not informed or consulted about closing region – announced by government and health board. There needs to be an examination of how different government structures responded – what was successful and what should be improved.
5. For Inuit, the crisis levels of unemployment are nothing new – high levels of unemployment are the norm throughout Inuit Nunaat, and other example of the kinds of inequities which must be addressed.
6. COVID-19 has reinforced inequities that already exist.

In regard to SDG 14 Life Below Water it is crucial to underscore that Inuit are an integral part of Arctic ecosystems, including the marine environment. Many of our communities are coastal communities, where Inuit are intimately tied to coastal seas and the Arctic Ocean. For generations, Inuit subsistence activities have been and continue to be in harmony with, and an important part of, the dynamic processes of Arctic ecosystems. The profound relationship between Inuit and other living species of the natural world has economic, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. These perspectives of Inuit and ties with nature must be fully recognized and understood in relation to achieving SDG 14.

To do so, we have centered much work on safeguarding this element of our way of life by emphasizing our reliance on the marine environment. We have worked to continue our sustainable use of and protection of the Arctic marine resources through the recognition of our rights and interests in our coastal seas.

We have consistently called for the coordination and coherence of priorities, policies, and principles in the field of policy and decision making concerning the marine areas that we use, including the sea ice presently being diminished due to climate change. Both our traditional and contemporary economic activity is tied to these ecosystems and the biodiversity of our coastal territories.

Inuit have engaged internationally to promote our aims. This work is ongoing in relation to Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction as an outstanding feature of the UN Convention on the Law of Sea. In addition, we are participants in the International Maritime Organization to monitor developments related to the Polar Code as well as regulation of heavy fuel oil use in the Arctic. We are also direct participants in the Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean and in particular, the specific area of use of our significant and extensive Indigenous knowledge. We have also shared information and are working to influence the International Marine Protected Areas Congress [IMPAC5] dialogue as well as potentially the UNESCO Oceans Decade.

Unfortunately, in order to achieve the objectives of the SDG 14, there is little to no coordination and coherence of these multiple and increasing number of international agreements and intergovernmental fora concerning the Arctic coastal seas and the Arctic Ocean, either by governments or other institutions. This reality makes it difficult for an organization such as the Inuit Circumpolar Council to monitor and provide input about the fast-paced changes that we are witnessing firsthand throughout our coastal communities. Such perspectives would provide the best available information and knowledge to government, intergovernmental organizations, researchers, and others working to achieve SDG 14.

Climate change is an enormous force in this regard, and we face multiple, compounding impacts throughout Inuit Nunaat, ranging from water temperature fluctuations to birthing of walrus in coastal seas due to lack of sea ice to invasive species to increased vessel traffic to militarization, all contributing to overall environmental insecurity.

One of our major contributions has been in the area of ***Principles And Elements For A Comprehensive Arctic Policy*** as well as Indigenous knowledge. We are convinced that with the ethical, equitable, fair, and just use of our knowledge and engagement of our Indigenous knowledge holders can contribute to cooperative research. In light of increased resource development and environmental degradation, resource managers must have access to the best possible information relating to terrestrial and marine ecosystems on which to base their decisions.

In summary, in order to ensure our contributions to SDG 14, recognition of and respect for our unique knowledge and our holistic understanding of the Arctic which is needed to understand the impacts of climate change in the Arctic. This requires recognition of our status, rights, and role in climate context consistent with the right of self-determination, including research. In addition, the effective engagement of our leaders and communities as well as Indigenous Knowledge can be achieved on terms defined by our people and our communities. In this way, we can make contributions to truly support and enhance co-production of knowledge.

## **SÁPMI**

The number of COVID-19 cases in the Saami area varies. Since there is no ethnical disaggregation of data on COVID-19 cases of infections nor deaths in any of the four countries the Saami people inhabit, the distinction can only be made based on geography and knowing which communities traditionally and still today have large percentage of Saami population. As for now, there is no such research done related to the pandemic.

Within national contexts, Sweden has had the highest infection and excess death rates, compared nationally between the Nordic countries. The Russian Federation had the highest number of excess death rates in Europe in 2020. However, it is important to underscore the size of the Russian Federation's territory and population compared to Norway, Sweden and Finland in this context, as well as the size of the populations in various cities in Russia that are quite large in comparison.

Finland and Norway have both imposed lockdowns while Sweden has remained open with strong advice on how to limit the spread of the virus. None of the Nordic countries have posed strict curfews as other countries in Europe. The Russian Federation had one lockdown lasting for nearly two months and then re-opened region by region. In the Russian part of Sápmi, regional governments early put in restrictions to halt the spread of infection. The Murmansk Oblast has been one of the regions opening up the latest in Russia, with malls, cafés and gyms closed for a long time.

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In both Norway and Finland, the virus has been most spread in the areas around the capitals and around the larger cities in the south. Finland is the only country that for a period of time limited travel around the densely populated region around the capital. Commuting workforce, along with tourism and traveling from south to north during holidays seemed to be contributing to peaks of infections in all northern areas in all countries.

The virus hit the Russian Federation at the end of March 2020. The vast country prevented the large spread of infection in the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and Far East territories for some time. However, the later outbreaks in the northern territories are linked to ongoing extractive industry projects with commuting workforce. Quarantine measures for industrial workers were put in place, which might have contributed to the few outbreaks but continued to be the primary source of outbreaks in Russia's northern territories in general.



Picture: Susanna Israelsson / Saami Council

[12] Central Bureau of Statistics Sweden, 2021.

[13] The Moscow Times, 2021.

Despite already existing cooperation agreements among the Nordic countries, uncoordinated actions were taken nationally to protect the spread of infection. Border closures heavily affected lives in border communities [14] and the Saami people, that lives across several national borders, were no exception from the rule. Families living on different sides of the borders were separated and the movement across borders interfered with the social life of Saami as people.

A great part of the Saami economy is Saami wide. Many Saami businesses are small or micro-businesses, often in combination with several other activities and often characterized by combining non-market values and market participation, with sustainability, *árbediehtu*[15] and culture at center. The cultural field, as well as the market for *duodji* (Saami handicrafts), stretches across the whole Sápmi and the audience and networks do not know the borders. Reindeer husbandry, that in some areas operates on the national borders, with migration routes that require crossing the borders to reach grazing lands, risks severe consequences if this necessary freedom of movement is restrained. This happened when the pandemic struck the north, but in Norway and Sweden, national authorities rapidly came with exceptions for reindeer husbandry in the summer of 2020 and allowed herders to cross the border without having to stay in quarantine afterward. Finland and Russia remained closed.

Closed borders have resulted in major economic consequences for the Saami cultural field. According to a survey carried by the Saami Council in the summer of 2020, individual art and culture practitioners, Saami festivals, and other cultural institutions witness a loss of income, loss of audience due to event bans, and loss of cross-border mobility, which drastically has limited access to markets and cooperation. The national policy instruments, inclusive of various subsidies and compensation schemes, do not adequately cover or support the Saami cultural field and there is therefore a need to adjust them[16].



*The biggest economic consequence for culture-Sápmi is the closed national borders. They have been a major obstacle for Saami artists and cultural workers who work cross-border daily. The pandemic has helped to emphasize that the Saami art and culture field is a cross-border field.*

Christina Hætta, head of the Saami Council's Culture Unit

Support systems shaped after the needs of the majority society is something that also has become visible for the sector of reindeer husbandry.

[14] Nordregio: Giacometti & Wøien Meijer, 2021.

[15] *Árbediehtu*: Traditional Sámi knowledge

[16] Saami Council, 2021.

In Sweden, the Saami parliament has highlighted the issues with reindeer herders' businesses not meeting the requirements for *turnover-based support for sole traders*[17] that was put in place by the Swedish government in the light of the pandemic. Reindeer meat is exclusive and sold to many restaurants but a decrease in demand for reindeer meat and products has made it hard to sell to butcheries which has affected both local and individual economies[18]. Many families depend fully on the income that reindeer bring, so apart from making the economic situation for many reindeer herders uncertain, the decrease in demand also risks lowering sales and prices following year.

On the other side of the border, the company Finnmark Rein in Norway report that the pandemic resulted in sales going up by 40% between March and August 2020. But the butchering volume during Sept – Feb 20/21 was only half of the normal amount which made it difficult for the company to keep pace and thus made delivery challenging. Even though not experienced everywhere, an explanation to the increase in demand experienced by Finnmark Rein could be well in line with new tendencies that embrace and support ecologically and locally produced food.



Picture: Jannie Staffansson / Saami Council

[17] Turnover-based support is direct support based on loss of turnover. Companies can receive compensation for 75 percent of their fall in turnover, but this requires that the sole trader had a turnover of at least SEK 200 000 during the previous year. Source: Government Offices of Sweden, September 2020.

[18] Saami Parliament in Sweden, 2020.

As for February 2021, there is still no answer from the Swedish government on the Saami Parliament's request for earmarked support to the sector of reindeer husbandry[19]. The Norwegian government and the Saami Parliament in Norway have through the revised national budget provided economical support to Saami businesses. The Saami Parliament in Sweden has, through additional support from the Swedish government, provided financial support to the cultural field.

With closed borders and travel restrictions put in place, many tourist companies reported total stops in their activities. Since many Saami combine duodji, reindeer husbandry and other activities with tourism, the economies of these companies and families are highly affected.

While for example travel restrictions in many cases can result in positive outcomes for reindeer husbandry due to less activity in the mountains and the forest areas, higher demand for recreational activities in Swedish Sápmi has put a lot of pressure on the mountain areas, and especially on the reindeer that become disturbed. This specific case has raised debates on who has proper rights to claim the mountain areas, not only putting two businesses against each other but also spurring racism and prejudice against reindeer herding Saami on social media.

The socio-economic situation for the Saami people does not differ largely from the overall population, even though the material content and culture of the socio-economic foundation is distinctly different. Saami have equal access to health services as the society at large.



Picture: Saami Council

For remote areas that means the same challenges as well, related to long distances for access to health care and acute health services, unacceptable weak emergency preparedness, access to few respirators and so on. Lack of recognized cultural competence within health care services, e.g. lack of Saami-speaking nurses and doctors, as well as lack of knowledge about Saami culture and way of life is another challenge. Cultural competence has many times been highlighted as especially important when dealing with suicide prevention.

[19] Radio Sápmi, 2021.

National and Saami media are probably the main sources of information for many people. The municipalities, which are at the lowest level in the public administration, have used information leaflets, social media, and text messaging to their residents for quick, short and direct local information of restrictions, cases or where to get help. General information and advice regarding COVID-19 have been translated to several Saami languages and made available in media and on national health authorities, as well as Saami Parliaments' webpages and in Saami media. However, the measures taken, and the material made, even though translated to many Saami languages, are not culturally adapted to Saami circumstances and the general digitization might have affected the reach and contacts with elderly people or those lacking access to internet and social media.

Meeting the social and cultural needs is challenging in times of the pandemic, not only because of closed borders and lockdowns but due to social distancing and the general call to limit the contact with people outside of one's home. Intergenerational physical distancing and limiting exchange between young and elders is new for the Saami culture. How the pandemic has affected people's mental health is not yet documented, but there is reason to believe that isolation and insecurity will have or have had, a negative impact on the health of individuals.

The lack of social interaction also affects people when limiting cultural activities and other gatherings. Mitigation efforts such as limiting the number of people participating and helping at important gatherings within the work of reindeer husbandry risks having negative effects on knowledge transmission for the younger. Additionally, reindeer husbandry is family-based and requires specific competence and knowledge which means that there might be no replacement to call if someone gets sick. This is indeed challenging, making reindeer husbandry especially vulnerable to stressors such as a pandemic[20].

Saami youth express concerns regarding the natural transmission of knowledge since the contact with elders and relatives have been restrained. There is also expressed need for the creation of new safe Saami spaces since all physical cultural and political gatherings, festivals, and events are canceled. Even though online activities are put in place, the necessary face-to-face gatherings and meetings needed for youth work and cooperation have been impacted negatively.



Picture: Jannie Staffansson / Saami Council

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*Our yearly congress is cancelled and arranged online for the second year in a row now, which is not near being the same thing. Our whole year of work depends on this congress with the members. That is where we as youth connect with each other, new and old faces, and decide upon the future work of the organization. Not being able to meet physically has further consequences than we did expect.*

Sanna Vannar, chair of Sáminuorra, the Swedish Sámi Youth Association

Like many other parts of the region, operating from home has been necessary due to lockdowns and restrictions. Most of our lives are regulated by the laws and regulations of the respective national state and Saami therefore face the same challenges with lockdowns as the rest of the country where we live.

Sápmi is quite well connected, but the most unconnected places are also small Saami communities, especially those in the Russian Federation. While distance work and studies periodically have become the new norm, posed with challenges for both cooperation and connectivity, Saami teachers and pupils already hold experience in this field as this has been in place for a long time to solve the shortage of Saami teachers. However, the digital shift indeed makes it challenging for some communities while lacking equal possibilities to good connectivity.

Furthermore, distance work and online activities have also created a bigger demand for being available when the possibilities to attend online meetings and conferences have become accessible for a broader crowd. This is exhausting for many.

A life more centered to home due to lockdowns and restrictions can pose further challenges related to human health and well-being. Results from a study conducted in Norway 2017 found that Saami women are subjected to violence more frequently than women in the Norwegian population at large[21]. Even though there are no comparable studies conducted amongst Saami in Sweden, Finland, and Russia, there is reason to assume that the situation is similar and that Saami women experience a higher level of violence also in those countries. The lack of concrete data speaks for the need for more studies in this regard.

UN Women (2020) report that domestic violence has intensified during the pandemic because of social isolation, restrictions in movement and lockdowns, which has increased women's vulnerability. It's highly likely that this is also the case for Saami women.

Due to the negative impacts the pandemic has brought upon many Saami cultural workers, there have been several initiatives developed to support the cross-border Saami cultural field. For 2021, Saami Council has shifted parts of their yearly cultural grants to support Saami art and culture practitioners by creating possibilities to apply for home residency cultural funding. This home residency support hopes to be an opportunity that will give cultural workers time to reflect and develop new ideas within a network of others[22]. Additionally, a think-tank of experts from the Saami cultural field was established in 2020, which in a long-term perspective aims to serve as a forum in which Saami experts discuss the needs and opportunities for the cultural field and propose measures and policy solutions to tackle them.

The Saami cultural field has digitized many of their activities and proven to be flexible during difficult times. Even though more resources to digitize work and communication are needed, the digital shift has been described as beneficial for larger outreach to new platforms, and for networking with others – even though not optimal since it complicates things because the field is divided by the borders[23].

Many organizations in Sápmi have also digitized or either canceled or postponed important meetings.

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[22] Saami Council, 2020.

[23] Saami Council, 2021.

Even though physical gatherings are to be preferred for many reasons, Saami youth report that online activities in some cases make it possible for larger outreach and cross-border participation. Saami youth in Sweden have arranged digital events, courses and concerts to support young artists, but also for maintaining the important arenas for youth that are so important.

Related to food security, there seems to be enhanced attention towards locally produced food in society and a general rise in awareness of the origin of goods in light of the pandemic. Local initiatives, through campaigns that encourage supporting local entrepreneurs, have been made in parts of Sweden, and Norway for example. How successful these campaigns have been in having effects on Saami entrepreneurship is not known, but hopes are that this can contribute to a more local sustainable society that continues to support reindeer herders' and other Saami businesses.



Picture: Christina Haetta / Saami Council

# RESPONSE MEASURES AIMED TOWARDS THE ARCTIC

In the light of the pandemic, national and local politicians have called for faster start-up of planned industrial development projects due to the need for investments and employment opportunities in times of increasing unemployment. However, developed response measures in terms of COVID-19 recovery packages aimed to ensure labor opportunities and economic stability posed by the Arctic countries will have a negative environmental impact on the region, and little of the money appear destined to support Arctic communities.

WWF's Arctic Programme's report "Left out in the cold: COVID-19 green stimulus and jobs in the Arctic" (2020) concludes that the overall impact of the fiscal stimulus packages will be negative and therefore fail to deliver sustainable long-term development. Policies that encourage increased investments in fossil fuels escalate risks from climate change and strategies aimed to secure environmental protection lack funding for environmental protection measures or how to implement them. Moreover, while green infrastructure and renewable technologies are highlighted as important for the creation of green jobs, it has raised concerns among indigenous communities since new developments risk affecting ecosystems and traditional livelihoods negatively. The report underlines that the social justice impacts of the stimulus packages lie outside of the scope of the study.



*Our greatest concern is that, in the heat of the pandemic, we will see increased efforts to get big encroachment projects up and going quickly to ensure employment opportunities in times of crises. We are concerned that large industrial projects are gaining fast track licenses to operate, leading to nature destruction, that again is harming the foundation for our livelihoods, causing crises both for nature and culture.*

Gunn-Britt Retter, head of Saami Council's Arctic and Environmental Unit

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[24] Arctic countries injected US\$3.5 trillion into COVID-19 fiscal stimulus programs in 2020.

From our perspective, the findings in the report reveal how the work on sustainable development needs to be anchored broadly within civil society, and the inclusion of Arctic Indigenous Peoples in the implementation of this work is therefore crucial for a development characterized by equity and inclusion for both humans and the environment (SDG 16) - if nation-states are serious with not leaving anyone behind.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE RECOVERY

To fully incorporate Leaving no one behind that is inclusive and culturally appropriate, especially now in times of COVID-19, requires effective mechanisms that include the participation of Arctic Indigenous Peoples and our institutions in decision-making processes (SDG 16). Meaningful involvement of Inuit and Saami is a prerequisite for achieving partnership (SDG 17) and for implementing the SDGs on national, regional, and local levels. To be able to engage meaningfully in the SDG implementation process, our societies need to be empowered, and our concerns, needs and collective rights recognized and respected (SDGs 10 and 16).

The pandemic has showcased that channels for participation at the local, national, and international levels have to be maintained and even expanded when online platforms are the new norm. Remote participation must be made accessible for all, with proper resources, and a larger focus on the participation of women, youth, elders, and persons with disabilities needs to be fully incorporated to ensure engagement and meaningful participation on an equal basis (SDGs 5 and 10).

Saami economies and livelihoods, e.g. within reindeer husbandry, duodji (handicrafts), tourism and culture (festivals, cultural work etc.), with their functions and markets do not know the borders. Therefore, the pandemic has created stressful situations for many Saami. For example, the reindeer herding sector and the Saami cultural field report income loss and uncertainty. National subsidies and compensation schemes put in place by nation-states either do not fit the needs or are inaccessible due to high requirements.

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[24] Arctic countries injected US\$3.5 trillion into COVID-19 fiscal stimulus programs in 2020.

To facilitate and encourage policy consistency and alignment (e.g. coordinated mitigation measures) across the countries that constitute Sápmi would be great support for the Saami culture and the implementation of SDG 8 - especially now in times of crisis. Furthermore, there is a need to properly recognize and acknowledge the importance of reindeer herding and its many contributions within national policies. Reindeer husbandry is not only a cornerstone for Saami culture but also creates employment and as a commodity resource, provides ecological and locally produced food products, as well as materials for Sápmi's many *duojárs*[25], from a sustainable chain. To fully secure food security and small-scale food production (SDG 2), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) and health and well-being (SDG 3) in Sápmi, measures and policies need to be developed that understand the interconnectedness of the Saami area, our ways of life and our contributions to sustainable development within society. But most importantly, the development of such policies and measures also needs our effective participation.

Due to the general lack of qualitative and quantitative data on Inuit and Saami, most available information on the health and socioeconomic impacts on Inuit and Saami comes directly from ourselves. As a result, assessments of the situation and appropriate public policies and responses to tackle the challenges that Indigenous Peoples currently face becomes difficult, as well as proper evaluation on SDG goal 3 on health and mental well-being, which are especially relevant now in times of crisis. Disaggregation of data by ethnicity could help reduce the invisibility of Arctic Indigenous Peoples in monitoring and implementing the SDGs and, therefore, there is a need to ensure the capacity among our institutions to handle data and statistics of our own people to serve as the baseline. If that is deemed challenging, other methods should be sought to be established to strengthen the baselines on the living conditions of Inuit and Saami.

Coping with the impacts on the coronavirus sheds light on the urgent need to remedy the profound infrastructure deficit in Inuit Nunaat. Inuit are calling upon governments to close these infrastructure gaps through major new investments in Inuit communities, prioritizing basic infrastructure such as housing, water, and sewer and broadband connections, which are echoed by other Indigenous peoples across the globe. Reducing inequalities (SDG 10), poverty and hunger and ensuring food security (SDGs 1 and 2) along with access to essential medical services (SDG 3) is crucial for reducing vulnerability to virus and disease. Focusing on universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable medicines and vaccines for all are the first steps to be near achieving SDG 3 on health and supporting population health in Inuit Nunaat.

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[25] Duojár: person who works with Saami handicraft

The right to health, is an essential part of recovery and economic sustainability and dealing with infrastructure deficit is of utmost importance for beating the pandemic and for being prepared for future waves of COVID-19 and other pandemics. Furthermore, ensuring access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services would also support SDG 11 on sustainable communities.

Long-term recovery must aim and strengthening health systems (SDG 3) in the Arctic in general. This not only means accessible healthcare secured for everyone but also the inclusion of intercultural approaches and increased cultural competence in all work related to physical and mental health. Overcoming discrimination and inequality (SDGs 5 and 10) also needs special measures. Being mindful of making efforts to implement SDG 10 could reduce inequalities experienced by Inuit and Saami in the daily life and those flowing out of the COVID-19 situation.

There is also a great need to identify how Indigenous values can be utilized and respected in the work of implementing Agenda 2030 in the Arctic. The fundamental principle of healthy and productive ecosystems, both on land and in water (SDGs 14 and 15), are the basis for Inuit and Saami culture and identity, and a necessity for food security (SDG 2). Our food systems and management practices rely on our collective right to lands and resources. Negative consequences caused by pollution, climate change and changes in the use of nature, amongst others, must be prevented and all efforts to tackle these issues need our full participation. Quality education (SDG 4) that is culturally appropriate, where Indigenous Knowledge as a knowledge system is equally valued as western science, should be the platform for such measures in the implementation work related to the SDGs. In current pandemic, we see that there is also a need to engage Indigenous knowledge in responding to environmental and health crises, such as climate change (SDG 13) and COVID-19 (SDG 3,) implying a holistic approach of well-being. Additionally, states need to show on the contributions from Inuit and Saami to sustainable development in all their monitoring a reporting processes.



*Indigenous peoples have long held a vision of the world that is based not only on reciprocity, but also long-term thinking and the interconnectedness of all life. Now more than ever, it is critical for these teachings to be brought to the fore.*

Christina Henriksen, president of the Saami Council

For this, the basis of our cultures must be secured and strengthened through land rights (SDG target 2.3 and SDG 16) and through the sustainable management of resources (SDGs 13, 14 and 15). Recognizing Indigenous rights is vital for sustainable governance in Indigenous communities.

To improve relevance and representation within the work of Agenda 2030 and attain greater equity and expand the knowledge base of sustainable development, Degai & Petrov (2021) argue, in line with the perspectives of Indigenous representatives and organizations in the Arctic, that there is a need to revise the SDGs and its framework. Objectives and indicators need to be broadened to be specific to the Arctic region and its unique environment. This could be by emphasizing the importance of cultural vitality, Indigenous languages, engagement of Indigenous knowledge in decision-making, along with thriving of Indigenous livelihoods, practices, economies and communities.

The concepts of Leaving no one behind address many key priorities that are relevant for Saami and Inuit, if addressed and included properly. In times of crisis, partnership (SDG 17) with Arctic Indigenous Peoples is especially important, not only for enhancing participation and support but also for developing adequate response measures that do not pose further challenges to Inuit and Saami and our ways of life, now or in the future.

Overall, social and economic equity (SDG 16), along with strengthening environmental sustainability (SDGs 13, 14 and 15) is crucial for becoming near being close to achieving the SDGs in the Arctic.

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