The Nordic Saami Institute

By Elina Helander*

Background and Aim:
The idea to establish a special Saami institution dates back to the 1920's when Per Fokstad, a Saami teacher, first introduced his thoughts on how Saami education and a research institution should be established. These ideas were again discussed in 1953 at the first Saami Conference. In 1968, Nordic Council passed a recommendation that the Norwegian government should consider the possibility of creating such an institution. The Nordic Saami Institute or »Sámi Instituhtta« was thus established in 1972 by Nordic Council of Ministers (Nordiska Ministerrådet).

The Saami population suggested that the Saami Institute should be located in the heart of Saamiland, Kautokeino. The goal of the Saami Institute is to work on behalf of the Saamis in the Nordic countries: to improve the social, cultural, judicial, and economic conditions of the Saamis.

Administration:
The »Sámi Instituhtta’s« administration consists of a board with twelve members. The members are appointed by the Nordic Council of Ministers; five of these board members are elected by the Nordic Council and seven of them are elected by the Saamis. Duties are administered by the Head of the Saami Institute, in accordance with the board.

The Nordic Saami Council functions as an advisory organ to the board of the Saami Institute.

Structure and Activities:
The Saami Institute has three main sections. First, a section for Education and Information; second, a section for Language and Culture, and third, a section for Livelihood, Environments, and Rights. Each section has a head and a secretary. I personally am the Head of Section for Education and Information. The Saami Institute employs 28 persons at present. Much of the work of the Saami Institute is devoted to a variety of research projects. The administrators or section heads spend much time in planning projects, apply for funds and manpower for these projects, and advise project workers.

Two types of research are being carried out at the Sámi Instituhtta: Basic research and Applied research. Some projects are both fundamental and useful at the same time.

In Stockholm, Sweden, there are about 1200 Saamis. The total number of Saamis in Sweden amounts to 17500. The Sámi Instituhtta made an investigation of the cultural needs of the Saamis in Stockholm. The results of this research are solutions to local problems. For example, the Saamis in Stockholm now have a »cultural centre« of their own. The centre is called «SADDJE« in the Saami language, meaning »a place to stay«. This is an example of applied research.

In the Section for Language and Culture, basic research is carried out in the linguistic area of »syntax«. An extensive project concerning Saami terminology has been started in the same section. One of the aims of this project is to discover new ways to develop new Saami words. The Universities of Umeå, Sweden, Tromsø in Norway, and Oulu in Finland are cooperating with this research.

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The Institute's work with the Saami language and cultural questions is generally characterized by a major aim, namely to create suitable growth conditions for language, traditional, and cultural expression in the daily life of the Saamis. An important part of this task is to record linguistic material on tape as raw material for linguistic research, and for the developing of teaching material.

Some words about the research taking place in the Section for Livelihood, Environment, and Rights. Economically speaking, the Saami people have depended upon reindeer-herding, farming, fishing, and trapping as basic means of support. One of the projects deals with reindeer-herding and the Saami villages. Questions such as »How are the reindeer-breeding areas being utilized?« and »How do Saami villages function?« are to be researched.

Among the most important research projects of the Institute is the legal-historical research of 'right to land and water' in the Saami areas. The project's goal is to disclose available documentation which hopefully will shed some light upon the more important points of this legal question. The economic expansion and the ever-broadening technical possibilities for modern utilization of natural resources within the Saami areas have created a fear among the Saamis who regard it as a threat to their environment; especially due to the fact that the Saamis do not have a sufficient voice in the decision-making process.

The Section for Education and Information deals with the following issues: Half of the Saami population can speak the Saami language. Many of the Saamis having moved outside Saami core areas, have become acculturated and assimilated. In May of 1985, I visited Saamni schools in Jokkmokk and Gällivare, in Sweden and observed that Saami children did not speak the Saami language with each other. Most of the Saami children had little knowledge of the Saami language.

The language and cultural situation differs in various parts of Saamiland. I collected data for my doctoral degree in Övre Soppero, in the northeastern part of Sweden, in the heart of Saamiland. There, all Saami children can speak Saami. Even though half of the Saamis master their own language, we are still concerned about the language situation. Many Saami children do not learn the Saami language at home.

The Saami Institute has an ongoing project in Jokkmokk, Sweden. The aim of the project is to study life in Saami homes: What does the upbringing of Saami children look like? What is Saami culture today? What does the cultural environment of Saami children look like?

Another project in Utsjoki, Finnish Saamiland, deals with how Saami children become bilingual: Where, with whom, and when do they learn the Saami language and Finnish.

A new Saami history book was written under the auspices of the Saami Institute and was approved for provisional printing in 1980. This history was written by a Saami in the Saami language. In the Section for Education, we have been publishing textbooks for schools, and we help in planning Saami education in schools, etc. The publication »Diedut« (annual reports and research reports) is published by the Saami Institute. The Nordic Saami Institute has many contacts with universities and people all over the world. We receive interesting letters from all parts of the world and try to answer them all. The need to disseminate information has increased greatly in the past years.

The Saami Institute uses several languages on a daily basis: the Saami language Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish. We use these languages both in writing and speaking. However, the language of communication within the Institute is the Saa-