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**COMPILING A SAAMI SOCIAL SCIENCE DATABASE - CAN IT BE  
DONE WITHOUT KNOWING WHO AND HOW MANY THE SAAMI ARE?**

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# COMPILING A SAAMI SOCIAL SCIENCE DATABASE - CAN IT BE DONE WITHOUT KNOWING WHO AND HOW MANY THE SAAMI ARE?

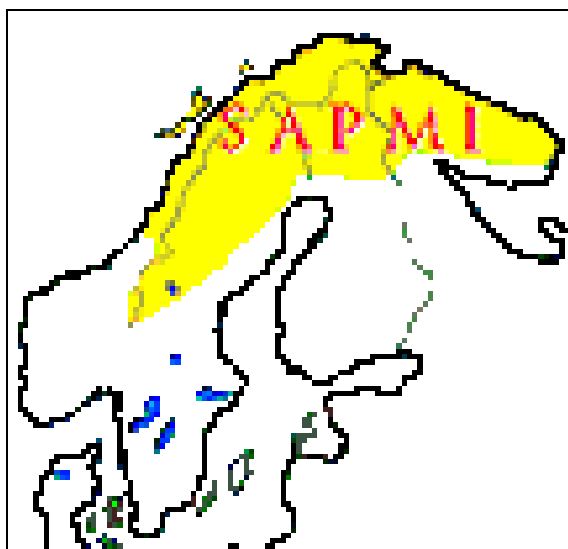
**Torunn Pettersen**

My paper is about some aspects of a project called *Saami Social Science Database (SSD)*. The background for the project is a general lack of up-to-date quantitative information on the Saami situation in most areas of society. The paper focuses especially on challenges in compiling such a database when no one knows who and how many the Saami are. The project is initiated of Nordic Saami Institute, a small research institute located in the Saami village Guovdageaidnu/Kautokeino in the northernmost part of Norway. *[My own professional background is varied, but my main subject is political science. I will also mention that I am a "rivgu", that is a woman of non-Saami background. Though, after living in a Saami local community for about ten years, I have learned to speak and read the Saami language - which is especially useful when working with Saami related topics as a professional].*

## **Geography and politics**

The Saami people has traditionally been living north on the Scandinavian peninsula and on the Kola peninsula (**Fig. 1 Sápmi**). The area is in the northernmost part of Europe - mainly north of the Polar Circle - and mainly with a rough climate and low population density. In Saami this area is called Sápmi - which in English corresponds to Saamiland. But Sápmi is not a country in terms of a nation state. On the contrary, the area crosses the borders of the four nation states Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Among these states, only Norway has ratified the ILO convention No 169 concerning indigenous and tribal peoples in independent countries. But also in the three other states, the Saami are mainly regarded as an indigenous people, and to some extent given indigenous rights. In Norway, Sweden and Finland - but not in Russia - there are established specific popularly elected bodies. They are called Saami Parliament (Samediggi) and deal with some (limited) political and administrative tasks. All Saami have right to vote in their respective Saami Parliament elections, also the many Saami who live outside the traditional Saami areas.

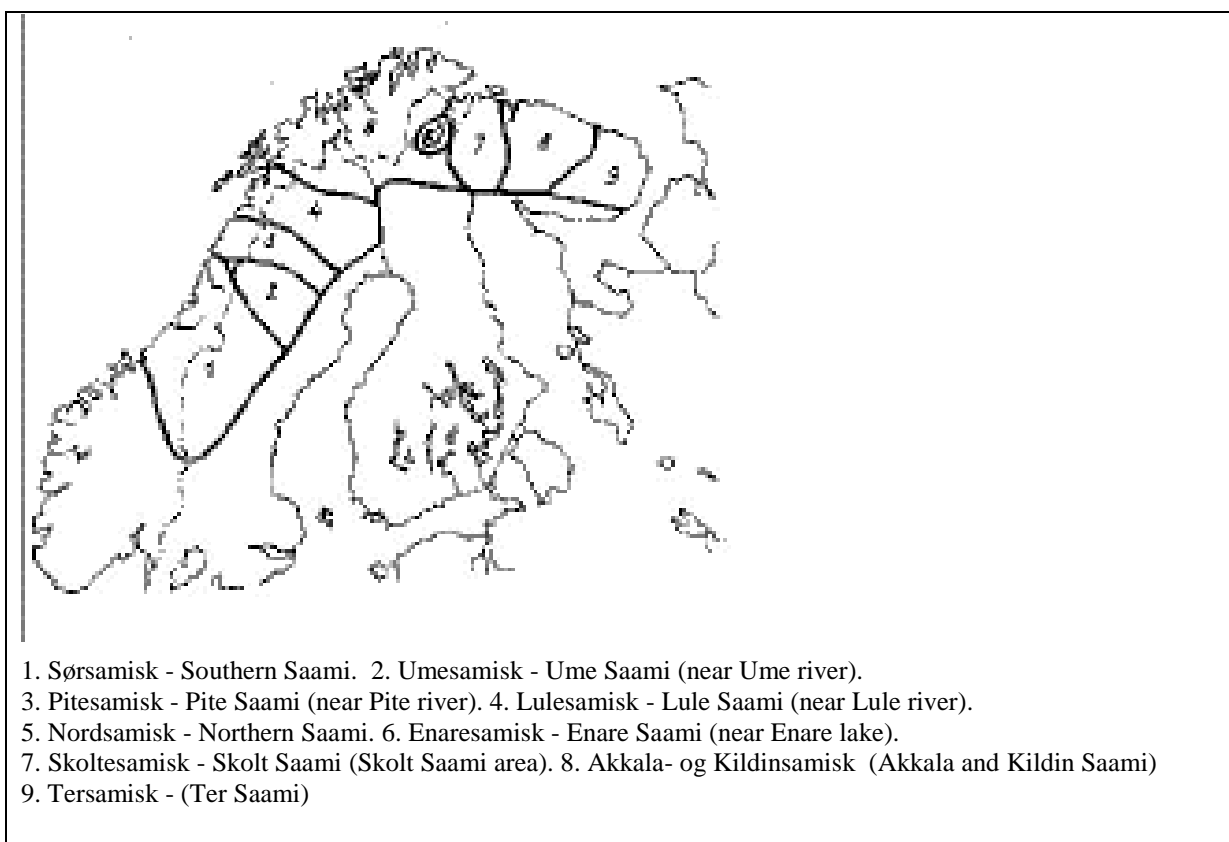
**Fig. 1. Sápmi (Northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia).** Source: [www.sametinget.se](http://www.sametinget.se)



## Language

Traditionally it has been spoken nine different Saami languages or dialects in Sápmi (**Fig. 2. Saami language**). But all over Sápmi the Saami language was until around 1970/80 under strong pressure from the authorities. This pressure resulted in decreased use of the language. It can be mentioned that it was forbidden to use Saami in schools, and many parents did choose to not learn Saami to their children (Jernsletten 1986). Today the language has a strong position in some areas in Sápmi, while it has almost disappeared in other areas. But even though language to many is a strong ethnic marker, an individual's ethnic identity is not tied up to whether the person speaks or doesn't speak Saami. The language does though have a special position. One reason for this is that your own or your nearest ancestors use of Saami as home language, serves as an objective criterion for the right to enroll in the Saami Parliament electoral register. I will return to this later in the paper.

**Fig. 2 Saami language or dialect groups.** Source: [www.samediggi.no](http://www.samediggi.no) / Ottar nr. 84, Tromsø Museum



## Information needs and knowledge about the Saami population

In general we know that reliable statistics about population, social conditions and economic life are essential for describing and analyzing a society and society development in precise ways. Besides, statistics are necessary for every steering body as a basis for evaluations and decisions. Establishing the Saami Parliaments has in such terms actualized the needs for Saami related statistics for documentation, planning and evaluation

Although there has been done quite a bit of research on Saami history, language, culture and identity management, no one is today able to answer questions about how many Saami there are, including how many users of Saami language there are. When estimates are given, they

vary between 50.000 and 100.000 Saami. All proposed figures include however that the great majority lives on the Norwegian side of Sápmi. The consequence of this situation is that it is not possible to give verified descriptions of the Saami as a group in terms of geographic distribution, demographic structure and living conditions. As a whole, little systematic, quantitative based knowledge and accessible information exist about today's Saami society - and no one is in charge of collecting and distributing such data. And the little information that does exist, are scattered in different reports published by different institutions. This is then - in short - the background for initiating the Saami Social Database project. For your information, it must be said that in this *starting phase*, we are working on data/statistics for the Norwegian side of Sápmi. On a longer term, it is however an aim to contribute to statistical solutions covering the whole Sápmi.

### **Ethnic affiliation is not registered**

The main reason why statistics about the Saami as a group are lacking, is that information about individuals' ethnic affiliation is not collected in any form in the nation states with Saami population. Neither is information about individuals' home language collected. It has however earlier, especially before 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, to some extent and after different criteria, been registered Saami affiliation in censuses in some of the northern parts of the nation states. The time doesn't allow me to say anything about the states' census histories and policies. It can though be mentioned that the last time when systematic surveys about Saami affiliation were conducted, was it because *Saami organizations* wanted this information as a documentation on where and how the Saami were living. In Norway this happened in 1970, in Sweden in 1972 and in Finland in 1962 (Aubert 1978). It was thereby *not* the state authorities that wanted such information. And neither do the authorities seem to want it today (Østby 2001) - nor do many individuals!

The figures that came out of these surveys are of course of interest. But at the same time we know that the figures are far away from being correct. One reason is that the surveys were conducted in limited geographic areas. Another is that many persons at that time didn't want to state their ethnic affiliation - or that they on purpose answered "No" to questions where they could have answered "Yes" (Aubert 1978). These choices must be looked upon in the light of the strong tendencies at that time to experience Saami ethnicity as a social stigma (conf. f.ex. Eidheim 1971).

Another aspect of this issue is that in order to get the right to vote in the elections for the Saami Parliaments in Norway, Sweden and Finland, one has to register in the respective states' official Saami electoral registers. This right is given to persons who confirm that she or he satisfies certain criteria for being a Saami. These criteria vary a bit from state to state, but the main principles are, a) an *objective* criterion according to that Saami language is the home language for the person in question or for hers or his nearest ancestor(s), and b) a *subjective* criterion that the person considers her-/himself being a Saami (conf. f.ex. the overview in Zorgdrager 1999). It must be emphasized that it is a *voluntary* political right to register in the electoral register, and many of the persons who satisfy both kind of criteria, choose - from different reasons - not to register. *One* reason that can be mentioned is a principal resistance against such registration. The Saami electoral registers must therefore never be mistaken as register over the whole (grown up) Saami population in the respective nation states.

### **Choice of statistical basis**

The actual situation is on the one hand a need for different types of quantitative Saami related information, and at the other hand lack of data about who are to be included in the Saami population as a whole. Thematically or geographically limited surveys which also include persons who declare that they have a Saami affiliation, can of course be conducted, but it will not be possible to know how representative the results will be for the Saami population as a whole.

In our database project we have considered different ways of dealing with the needs for Saami related statistics (in Norway). One method that we have considered is to construct some sort of Saami demographic database by combining earlier census data, the Saami electoral register and maybe other relevant registers. We know that a similar database is constructed in Sweden in connection with a project on Saami health conditions. From our point of view, we are at this stage careful with such a method. This is because it breaks with principles both about an individual's right to self-declaration on ethnic affiliation, and about not using register data for other purposes than a register is established for. Our choice can though be reconsidered in the future, dependent on how such a database would be used.

What we have done so far in the project, is to start with a *geographical approach* to the need for different kinds of Saami related data, included demographic ones. Different ways could have been chosen, but our basis is that the Norwegian Parliament in 1975 defined a geographical area in the region Northern Norway, which is now called *The geographical function area for the Saami Development Fund* (NOU 1988: 42). In the project we call this area the *SUF-area*, named after the Norwegian name of the development fund - *Samisk Utviklings-Fond*. Today the Saami Parliament in Norway administers the fund, and the purpose is to support activities of particular cultural, social and economical importance for the Saami population and especially for the main Saami settlement areas (Sametinget 1998a). These areas are also inhabited of non-Saami persons, but it is a Saami political aim that these local communities shall have stable settlement, varied ways of economic life and equal living conditions. This aim is set because sustainable Saami local communities are considered as premises for maintaining and develop Saami identity, language and culture over time (Sametinget 1998b).

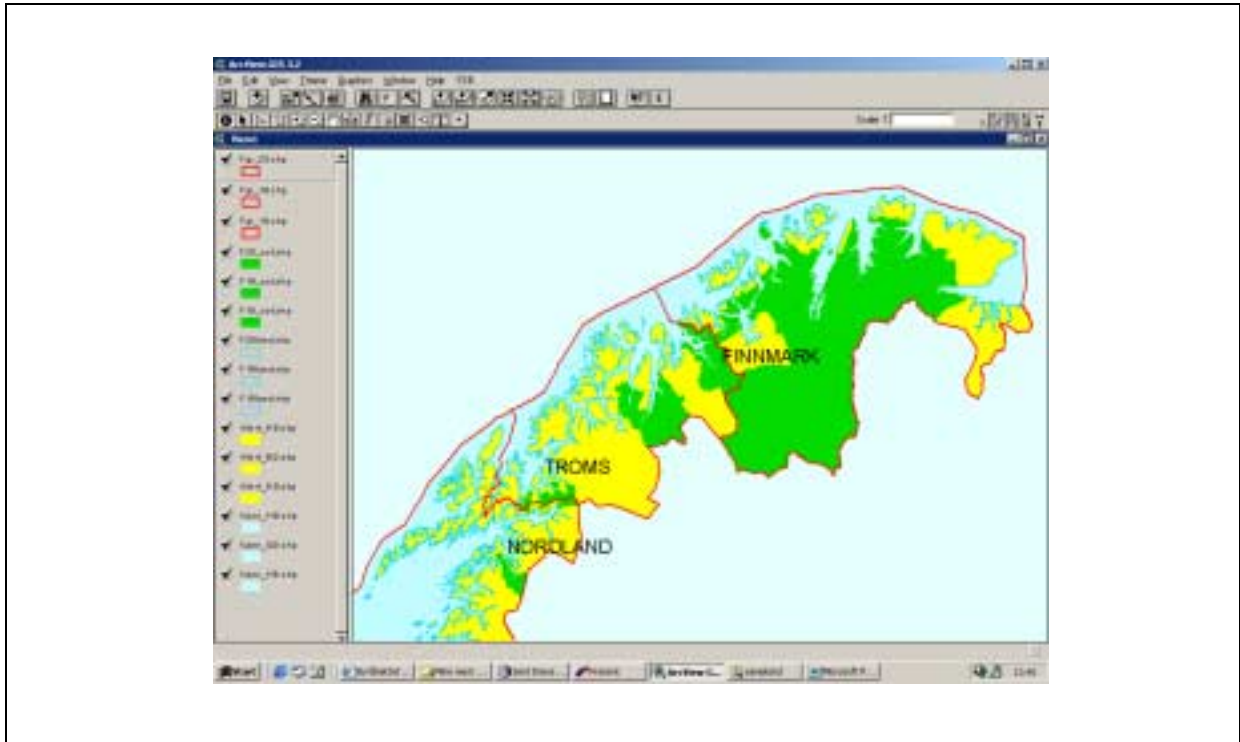
Our first choice of basis for Saami related statistics is therefore to treat the SUF-area as a *functional region* for which it can be made regional statistics. And because the Saami Parliament administers means for development in this area, the statistics will not only be descriptive, but also functional as a basis for different kinds of programs for action. Regional statistics for the SUF-area will however not be ethnic based statistics at an individual level, and it will not tell anything about Saami who live outside the area. Individual based Saami statistics have to be made in other ways - if it in the future becomes an indigenous-political wish to make some kind of registration basis for such statistics. Our method reminds then about what another indigenous people with its own steering body does, namely Inuit in Greenland. Similar to most European countries, Statistics Greenland does not register individuals' ethnic affiliation, only their country of birth (Grønlands Statistik 2000).

### **Regional statistics for Saami settlement areas - The SUF-area**

A major challenge in our approach is that the SUF-area actually consists of four geographically scattered areas in three counties (**Fig. 3: The SUF-area**). Furthermore it includes 20 municipalities - but 11 of them only partly (Sametinget 1998a). And because the 11 "munici-

pality parts" are described only in general terms in the Fund's guidelines, our first job when we started the specific work, was to convert the verbal descriptions to geographical entities which can be used in production of statistics. We found that this would be *basic (statistical) unit - grunnkrets* in Norwegian. This job involved several actors and took quite a bit of time.

**Fig. 3: The SUF-area.** Source: *Preliminary draft made by Statistics Norway.*

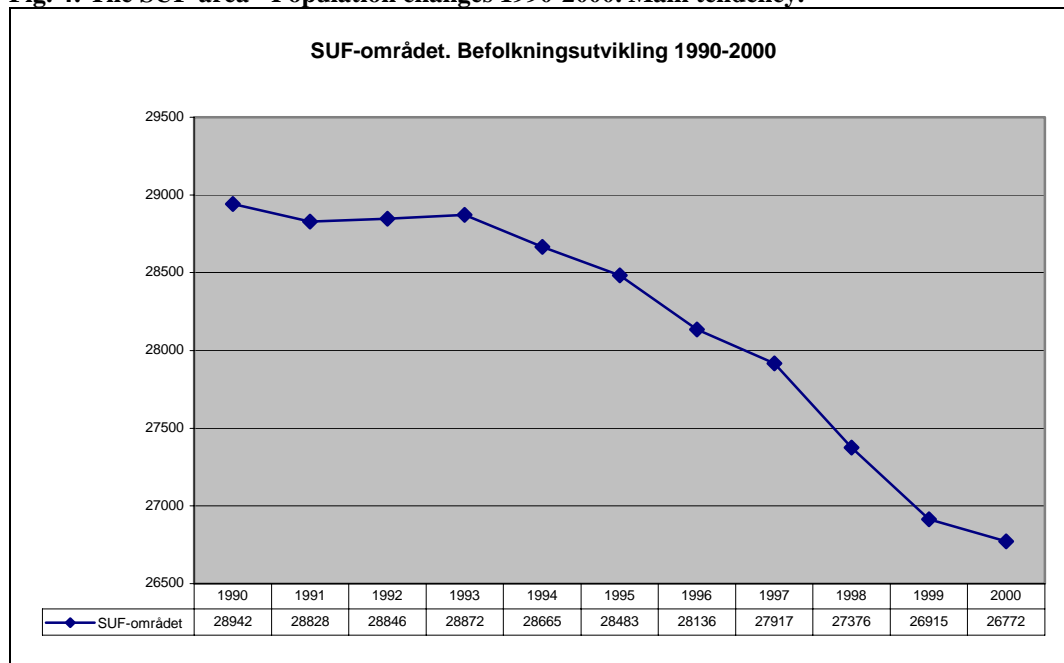


The next problem is that usually Norwegian official statistics are not published on the basic unit-level, but on the next level - *municipality*. Different kinds of data concerning the SUF-area must therefore be ordered as special orders from the Statistics Norway. This is both an expensive and time demanding process. *[I can mention that still we haven't received the data about births/deaths and population movements that we ordered early in May...]*. In addition, not all kinds of data are at all produced or published at the basic unit-level.

More could have been said about both the choice of statistical basis, about the process so far - and about future challenges. I shall however end my presentation with showing a couple of examples of the data we have processed about the population changes in the SUF-area. The figures are based on data for each basic unit in the SUF-area, received from Statistics Norway in June 2001. And as far as we know, this is the first time such demographic statistics for the whole SUF-area can be presented - due to our method based on use of basic statistical units.

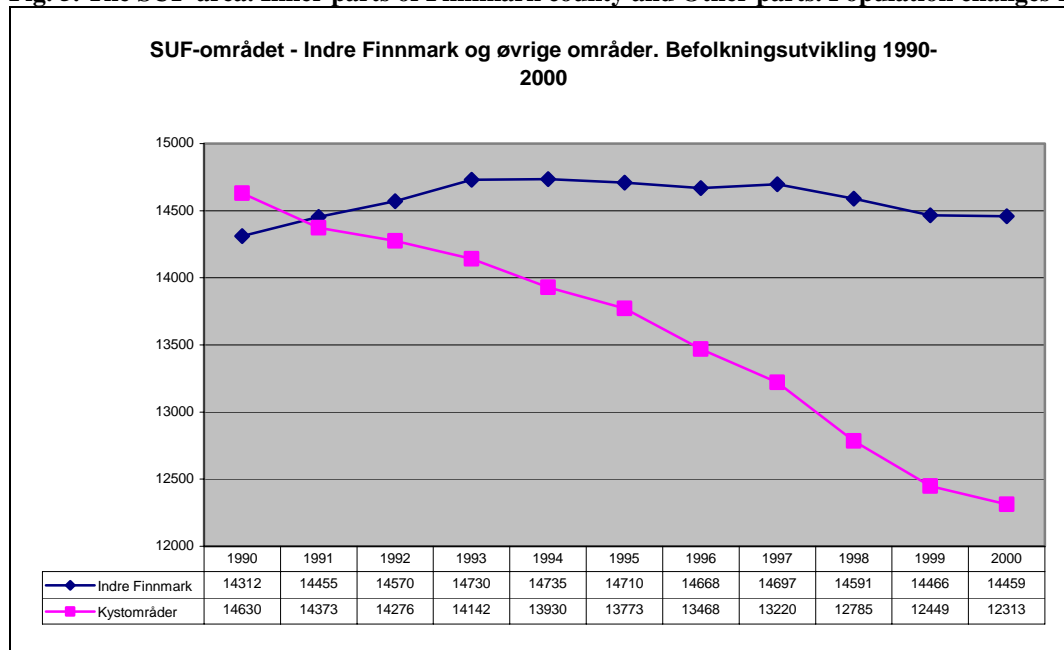
As the next figure shows (**Fig. 4: SUF-area, main tendency**), the population in the SUF-area has decreased quite a bit during the last decade. The total decline is 7,5 %. In the same period, the population in Norway as a whole has increased with 5,8 %. Also in the region Northern Norway as a whole, the population has increased, but then only with 0,9 %.

**Fig. 4: The SUF-area - Population changes 1990-2000. Main tendency.**



But there are also quite big variations inside the SUF-area. These variations can be described in many ways, but one especially remarkable difference is found between the inner part of Finnmark County and the rest of the SUF-area. As the figure shows, the former has increased and the latter has decreased (**Fig. 5: SUF-area - variations**). The reasons for this difference can be many, not at least changes in economic life. It is however also noteworthy that the inner part of Finnmark County, is that area on the Norwegian side of Sápmi where the Saami language has its strongest position. It is also where most of the Saami institutions are located - such as the Saami Parliament, Saami College, Nordic Saami Institute, some Saami media and the Saami Theater. And it is in this area that most inhabitants have chosen to enroll in the Saami electoral register (Hætta 1998).

**Fig. 5. The SUF-area. Inner parts of Finnmark county and Other parts. Population changes 1990 - 2000**



We have also started to process some data about the population's sex- and age-distribution. This is not yet verified, but *one* tendency seems to be that in most other areas than the inner part of Finnmark County, there are fewer and fewer women between 20 and 40 years, compared with men at the same age. This comes in addition to a general tendency to lower fertility nowadays than the relatively high one that was usual in many Saami communities (Aubert 1978). It is therefore not unlikely to anticipate both a decrease in population and an increased "sex- and age-imbalance" in many parts of the SUF-area - unless actions are taken.

And one such action can be to make it possible to continue the work that our database project has started. This would then make it possible to secure continuous statistical information about the development in the Saami settlement areas - and thereby give them who conduct research, community planning and politics at least *some* information basis for their activities. Whether it in the future should be possible to *also* create Saami statistics based at an *individual* level, is an open question which others than we involved in the database project must decide.

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