

Putting the puzzle together. The state of Sami sports research in Finland

Av Kati Lehtonen & Mikko Salasuo

Abstract:

Over the past few years, more systematic data has been collected about Finnish Sámi sports, its organization practices, and especially children's and young people's sports and leisure time in northern Finland and the Sámi Homeland. With the data collection, the Sámi people's ways of playing sports or being physically active have also become more visible in the Finnish sport policy. This article examines how research overall and its different forms and sports policy can support each other, and how research can be used to show the status of minorities in sports policy.

Keywords: Sámi sport, Finland, research, sport policy

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In this article, we consider the Sámi people and culture in the context of Finnish sport research and sports policy as a process, where data collection and policy aims are bundled together with the aim of increasing the understanding of Indigenous people. We trace the development that started at the end of the 2010s, where after collecting small pieces of data about Sámi sports a more

extensive survey of children's and youth's leisure time could be carried out in the spring of 2022. In the article, we make a synthesis of the implemented national Finnish written reports and research of Sámi sport, but we contribute with the research *The northernmost dimension of youth. A study of the leisure time and hobbies of children and young people in the Northern Lapland region and the Sámi community* and reflect the process as an example to research minorities.¹

We also strive to emphasize the importance of knowledge and research in sports policy and its contents. The article offers a perspective on how data collection, research, and surveys can be used to bring out groups and phenomena that are in the catchment area of sports policy.² The invisible can therefore be made visible with the help of research. For example, the aforementioned project was accelerated in the 2020s by the fact that the Sámi Parliament has raised the topic in its own strategy papers. In those documents, physical activity and sports are presented as a question of participation and as a right to maintain the traditions of the Sámi culture.³ The consideration of minorities in general in the national sports policy was also highlighted in a sports policy brief published in 2018. The policy brief emphasized that "sports activities that take minorities into account also support the participation of all active people. Minorities often face such barriers to equality which may particularly narrow the possibilities of getting involved in sports and sports activities".⁴

The research project *The northernmost dimension of youth* was a joint project between researchers, state administration, and the Sámi Parliament. It was also a joint effort of sports and youth researchers. The goal was to determine the ways children and young people in the North Lapland region and Sámi Homeland use their leisure time. An essential part of the research was the analysis of the answers of children and young people who identify as Sami. Before this study, there was no quantitative research available on their free time or hobbies and very little research at all.

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- 1 Mikko Salasuo; Kati Lehtonen & Kai Tarvainen, *Nuoruuden pohjoisin ulottuvuus: Tutkimus Pohjois-Lapin seutukunnan ja saamelaiseen yhteisöön identifioituvien lasten ja nuorten vapaa-ajasta ja harrastamisesta* [The northernmost dimension of youth. A study of the leisure time and hobbies of children and young people in Northern Lapland region and the Sámi community], (Helsinki 2023), Finnish Youth Research Society, web publications no. 182. Later in this article when we refer to this project, we use only the first part of the title "The northernmost dimension of youth".
 - 2 Mikko Salasuo & Kati Lehtonen, "Fokuksessa saamelaisalueen lapset ja nuoret. Havaintoja, huomiota ja kokemuksia vähemmistöjen tutkimisesta" [Children and young people in the Sámi Homeland. Observations and experiences of researching minorities], *Nuorisotutkimus*, 2022: 2 (vol. 40), p. 61–66.
 - 3 Sami Parliament, *Saamelaisten kulttuuripoliittinen toiminta- ja kehittämissuunnitelma 2020–2023*. [The cultural policy action- and development program for the Sámi people 2020–2023] (Sámi Parliament 2020a), p. 8–9; Sami Parliament, *Nuorisopoliittinen toiminta- ja kehittämissuunnitelma 2020–2023* [Youth policy action and development program 2020–2023], (Sámi Parliament 2020b), p. 7–8.
 - 4 Finnish Government, Government's Sport Policy Report (Helsinki 2019), p. 32.

The study was funded by the State Youth Council and National Sports Council. In the absence of any previous surveys, the research also became a sport and youth policy function. The aim of the study was to fill the research gap regarding Sámi children and young people and to produce knowledge about Sámi youth for the use of sport and youth policy.

While carrying out the research project, the perception that there was a significant information gap in the research on physical activity and sports of Sámi children and young people was strengthened. Some research on Sámi children and young people can be found in early childhood education, basic education, and social and health services, but not from the perspective of leisure time or hobbies. The research report *The Northernmost Dimension of Youth* was published in 2023.

The Sámi Homeland is an administratively, politically, and culturally unique area that differs in many ways from the rest of Finland. The regional special characteristics of the Sámi Homeland have not been reflected in the Finnish national sports policy.⁵ In general, the Sámi have been completely absent from the strategic and political goals of the national sports policy.⁶ This is also the situation in academic sports research where the first steps are only currently being taken to examine issues around the Sámi. Unlike in Norway and Sweden, there has been no systematic sport-related research of the Sámi in Finland.⁷

As known, the Sámi are the only legally recognized Indigenous people in the European Union. The Sámi's Homeland extends from central Norway to northern Sweden and Finland and to the Russian Kola Peninsula. There are about 100,000 Sámi in total, some of whom live in the Sámi Homeland and some in other Nordic countries and Russia.⁸

About 10,000 Sami people live in Finland, and their Indigenous status is enshrined in the Finnish Constitution. In Finland, the home region of the Sámi extends over the municipalities of Inari, Enontekiö, Utsjoki and Sodankylä. About 3,500 Sámi people live in this home region located in North Lapland. In total, around 19,000 people live in the same area. Most of Finland's Sámi population lives in the biggest cities and their surroundings: the Helsinki capital region, Tampere, Jyväskylä, Oulu, Kemi-Tornio, and Rovaniemi (Ibid.). In addition to the Sámi Homeland, there is also the Barents region, which is a political and administrative regime and covers the northern regions of

5 Kati Lehtonen, *Suomen saamelaisurheilun organisoituminen, toiminta ja yhteistyö pohjoisimman Lapin alueella* [The organization, activities and cooperation of Finnish Sámi sports in the northernmost region of Lapland] (Jyväskylä 2022), JAMK University of Applied Sciences.

6 Kaarlo Laine & Kati Lehtonen, "Liikunta ja urheilu saamelaiskulttuurissa" [Sport in Sámi culture], *Liikunta & Tiede*, 2021: 3 (vol. 58), p. 56–58.

7 Eivind Å. Skille; Kati Lehtonen & Josef Fahlén, "The politics of organizing Indigenous sport – cross-border and cross-sectoral complexity", *European Sport Management Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2021.1892161> Published online 04 Mar 2021.

8 The Sámi in Finland. Sámi Parliament's webpages: The Sámi in Finland - Samediggi, 25/9–2023.

Finland, Sweden, and Norway, as well as Northwestern Russia. Therefore, it can be stated that the North Lapland region in Finland is indeed characterized by the multi-layered nature of administration, languages and cultures, internationality, and special features related to nature (for example, the foothills of Lapland and the Arctic region).

We proceed in the article by first describing the research results and the data gathered on the topic and reflecting on the findings with available background material. In this way, the course of development in recent years and the different directions from which the exercise and sports of the Sámi have been approached can be understood. After this, the main focus is on the examination of a survey examining children's and youth's leisure time and hobbies, from which we present the key results and highlight observations related to the implementation of the process.

This article is theory-bound. The analysis is not directly based on a specific theory, but connections to various theoretical traditions are noticeable. This kind of approach can also be called abductive reasoning. Theory-relatedness is suitable for topics on which there is very little or no previous research. Researchers use previous theories in the analysis, but more by experimenting and testing the suitability of the material for different theories.⁹

Practical needs and challenges of organizing sports for children and youth as the starting point for data collection

Children's and young people's physical activity (PA) and sport participation have been an ongoing target of sport policy in Finland. Many policy actions have been carried out including data collection and monitoring of sport or PA. Based on this, over the last decade, the Ministry of Education and Culture has funded the development of a knowledge base on physical activity with the aim of building a comprehensive research system to monitor physical activity among children and young people. Data collections like the PIILO-study for small children, Move! measurements and LIITU (a study for school-age children and the youth) are examples of data-oriented sport policy actions, which have been also a root for data collections to minorities.¹⁰

Based on this progress, reports and surveys focusing on the Sámi have mainly focused on the opportunities for organizing sport and physical activity for children and young people in the North Lapland region and the Sámi Homeland. The first report was made by the regional sport organization Lapin

9 See more from Leena Åkerblad; Riitta Seppänen-Järvelä & Kaisa Haapakoski, Integrative Strategies in Mixed Methods Research, *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 2021: 2 (vol. 15), p. 152–170.

10 Marjukka Mikkonen; Korsberg Minttu; Kati Lehtonen & Jari Stenvall, "Sport Policy in Finland", *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 2022: 4 (vol. 14), p. 715–728.

Liikunta and was developmental and practical in nature by examining the operating conditions of sport in northern Lapland.¹¹ The aim was to map the resources, needs, and opportunities of the municipalities in the Sámi Homeland, as well as the views of the Sámi youth on the sport culture. The report's findings highlighted, for example, the importance of the local network, which was embodied by the state as supported projects and programs (for example, local grants distributed by the regional administrative agency), as activities carried out by regional and local organizations, as facilities and organized sports groups by municipalities, and as interaction between stakeholders.

From the point of view of children and young people, the results showed that sport and physically active lifestyles are a natural part of the everyday life of Sámi children and young people. The emphasis on everyday and beneficial sports or physical activity connected to nature reinforces the importance of nature as an environment to be active. Based on the interviews made for the report, goal-oriented exercise, and competitive sports were perceived as more foreign partly due to the lack of opportunities for exercise and partly due to the older generation's different understanding of sport.¹²

The studies related to the organizational practices of sport first focused on the activities of the Barents Sports.¹³ The Barents Sports and international cooperation in the Barents area have played a more significant role in the sport of the North Lapland region than Sámi sports. The Barents Sports activities have also been recognized in the national sports policy, unlike Sámi sports.¹⁴ Until 2020 the Ministry of Education and Culture subsidized the Barents Sports together with over 100 other national or regional sport organizations.¹⁵

The history of the Barents Sports is long and currently, it is described as a joint project between Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia aimed at young people aged 15–25 and involving up to 10,000 young adults every year. At a meeting of the “Felleskomiteen” joint committee for Nordic sports organizations in 1950, a form of sports cooperation was agreed for the northern parts of Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Until 1997 this was named the Calotte cooperation for sports. Competitions have been important through the decades. The formal Cap of the North Cooperation was launched and an agreement

11 Lapin Liikunta, *Saamelaisalueen liikunta ja liikunnan harrastaminen* [Sport and sport activities in the Sámi Homeland] (Rovaniemi 2020a), Technical report published by Lapland's Sport Federation, p. 2–3.

12 Lapin Liikunta, *Saamelaisalueen liikunta ja liikunnan harrastaminen*, p. 36–37.

13 Lapin Liikunta, *Barents Urheilun selvitys- ja kehitystyö* [Developing Barents Sports activities] (Rovaniemi 2020b), Technical report published by Lapland's Sport Federation and Ministry of Education and Culture.

14 Kaarlo Laine & Kati Lehtonen, *Lapin Liikunta Barents Urheilun koordinoijana* [Lapland's Sport Federation as a coordinator of Barents Sports] (Jyväskylä 2022), JAMK University of Applied Sciences, p. 2–3.

15 Subsidizes for sport organizations. Web page of the Ministry of Education and Culture, Liikuntaa edistävien järjestöjen yleisavustus - OKM - Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 25/9-2023.

between the sports associations in Finland, Norway, and Sweden was established. Over the years the most important platform for collaboration has been the Cap of the North Contest, called the Barents Games since 2014.¹⁶

The aim of the reform has been to achieve wider visibility for the Barents Games and the Barents Sports. There has been a desire to create competitions that would be better for young people in terms of the framework and content by differentiating the seasonal competitions from each other. In 2020 the regional sports organization of the Lapland region, Lapin Liikunta ry, was chosen as the Finnish organizing body for the Barents Sports. In practice this means that Lapin Liikunta has the responsibility for organizing and coordinating activities in Finland. Formal decisions are made in the committee, which includes two other regional sports organizations from the Kainuu and Oulu regions operating under Lapin Liikunta. After this turning point, the Ministry of Education and Culture no longer financially supported the Barents Sport project as an independent organization.

In recent two reports suggestions were made as to whether Barents Sports activities in Finland could also be an option to make Sami sports more visible nationally.¹⁷ However, such proposals need to take into account that Barents is a political-administrative regime and Sámi Homeland is the home region of the Indigenous people, whose inhabitants have a right to their own language and culture based on the constitution. Despite the different statuses (Homeland versus political-administrative regime), cooperation could be a realistic option, especially in northern Lapland, where there are few hobbies for children and young people. In a report examining Sámi sports in Finland, it is stated, on the other hand, that a prerequisite for cooperation is the strengthening of the Sámi Parliamentarians' own strategic hold on content related to sports.¹⁸ Currently, the practices of the Barents Sports project are in line with the decisions made by Barents Euro-Arctic Council, BEAC. Countries in the Barents region condemned the Russian attack on Ukraine in March 2022, and just over a year later Russia resigned from the BEAC.¹⁹

In academic sports research, Sámi issues have not been studied much in Finland. The starting point was the book *Sport in Scandinavia and the Nordic Countries* edited by Ken Green, Thorstein Sigurjónsson and Eivind Åsrum Skille.²⁰ In the chapter *Sports participation in Finland* Sámi sport was connected

16 Barents Games, *History of Barents Sports*, Web pages of Barents Sports, History of Barents Sports, 8/6–2023.

17 Lapin Liikunta, *Barents Urheilun selvitys- ja kehitystyö*, p. 30–31; Kaarlo Laine & Kati Lehtonen, *Lapin Liikunta Barents Urheilun koordinoijana*, p. 13–15.

18 Kati Lehtonen, *Suomen saamelaisurheilun organisoituminen, toiminta ja yhteistyö pohjoisimman Lapin alueella*, p. 14.

19 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland. Web page of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, BEAC, Barentsin euroarktisen neuvoston toiminta jatkuu ilman Venäjää - Ulkomministeriö (um.fi), 23/9–2023.

20 Ken Green; Thorstein Sigurjónsson & Eivind Å. Skille (eds) *Sport in Scandinavia and Nordic*

for the first time as a part of Finnish sport and sport policy.²¹ The most important thing was that the book project was a starting point for Nordic cooperation in Sámi sport research, which focused later on the organizational practices of Sámi sports in Finland and Norway.

The subject of an article published in 2021 was the structural changes of the joint sports organization of the Sámi in the Sámi Homeland.²² The results showed not only Norway's strong position in the joint organization and resourcing of Sámi sports, but also the frail organizational practices of Sámi sports in Finland. According to the article, the reasons for the weak position of Sámi sport organizations in Finland have a small number of Sámi people in Finland, but on the other hand, neither the joint sports organization of the Sámi Samiid Valáštallanlihttu (SVL) nor the regional organizations operating in different countries (SVL-S, SVL-N, SVL-F) have significantly advanced Finnish Sámi sports.

In addition, SVL's regional organization in Finland has always had only a few members, so it has fallen outside the aid criteria of the state sports policy.²³ More active operations and a stronger degree of organization perhaps would have made it possible to meet the criteria and become part of the national sports policy. However, the Barents Sports had an institutional position during the years, and it gained recognition from the state, which strengthened its activities in sports policy. Therefore, it has not been only a question of whether or not the practices of the organization meet the subsidy criteria, but it has also been a question of formal relationships, negotiations as well as ongoing institutional practices in the state's sport policy which have affected the position of Sámi sports and the Barents Sport in Finland.²⁴

In 2023 only one Sámi sports club (Anára Sámisearvi) operated in Finland. It organizes traditional Sámi sports activities for its approximately 100 members (e.g., lasso throwing and reindeer competitions) as well as football and floorball. Looking backwards at the history of organized sport in the Sámi Homeland, some interesting points arise. Riitta Eskola's article "Saami Sport on the Rise", points out how the beginning of the 1990s was an active time in Sámi sport.²⁵ The article was written one year before the Lillehammer Olympic Games, where reindeer racing was part of the Games as an exhibition

Countries (London & New York 2019).

21 Pasi Koski; Kati Lehtonen & Hanna Vehmas, "Sports participation in Finland", in Ken Green; Thorstein Sigurjónsson & Eivind Å. Skille (eds.), *Sport in Scandinavia and Nordic Countries* (London & New York 2019), p. 40–62.

22 Eivind Å. Skille; Kati Lehtonen & Josef Fahlén, "The politics of organizing Indigenous sport – cross-border and cross-sectoral complexity", p. 1.

23 Eivind Å. Skille; Kati Lehtonen & Josef Fahlén, "The politics of organizing Indigenous sport – cross-border and cross-sectoral complexity", p. 11–13.

24 See Eivind Å. Skille, "Ethno-politics and state sport policy: The case of how the Sámi Sport Association-Norway challenged the Norwegian Confederation of Sport's monopoly for state subsidies for sport", *Scandinavian Sport Studies Forum*, 2012: 3, p. 143–165.

25 Riitta Eskola, "Saami Sports on the Rise", *Motion*, 1993: 1, p. 4–8.

sport. The joint sport organization SVL together with regional associations in Norway, Sweden and Finland (SVL-N, -S, -F) were visible and expected to expand. The number of Sámi sports clubs in Finland was five, which is not many compared to Norway (30 clubs), but they were spread out in the Sámi Homeland in Finland. The most interesting thing when reading the article 30 years later was that the future of regional Sámi sport organization, SVL-F, was foreseen by one of the interviewed persons, Veikko Guttorm. He said that “in order to emphasize the importance of Saami sport in the future, the status of the association should be brought in line with that of the Finnish central sports organizations”.²⁶ Comparing this viewpoint to findings by Skille, Lehtonen and Fahlén, it is evident that the direction of the SVL-F has been just the opposite of the one Guttorm had described.²⁷

What might explain the progress is that Finnish sport policy and its organizational practices was at a historical turning point during the years 1992-1994. Unlike in the other Nordic countries, the history of the Finnish sports movements is characterized by strong politicization, resulting in the development of two separate sports movements, the ‘bourgeois’ sports movement and the ‘working class’s sports movement. This division lasted until the 1990s. In the other Nordic countries, the political nature of the sports movement had disappeared by the 1950s. The reform of the Finnish sports movement at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s was completely different from the other Nordic countries and fundamental in nature.²⁸

The reform was fueled by the New Public Management doctrine that had penetrated the Finnish public administration with its operating logic based on performance and domain-based thinking.²⁹ From the beginning of the 1990s the new doctrine was also applied to publicly funded sports organizations. The era of two central solid organizations, the Suomen Valtakunnan Urheiluliitto, SVUL (Finnish Central Sports Federation) and the Työväen Urheiluliitto, TUL (Finnish Workers’ Sports Federation), had come to an end which meant that the corporatist negotiation practices came to their end, as did the hegemonic era of sport movements. The two federations continued their operations but the politically based, centralized organization policy was gradually replaced by a decentralized sports policy, manifested in both the organizational structure and the distribution of resources. A completely new central organization, the Suomen Liikunta ja Urheilu, SLU (Finnish Sports Federation) was established

26 Riitta Eskola, “Saami Sports on the Rise”, p. 6.

27 Eivind Å. Skille; Kati Lehtonen & Josef Fahlén, “The politics of organizing Indigenous sport – cross-border and cross-sectoral complexity”, p.11–14.

28 Kati Lehtonen, “Building of the Legitimacy of a Sports Organisation in a Hybridised Operating Environment – Case Finland”, *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 2017: 2 (vol. 14), p. 5–6.

29 Markku Temmes, “Finland and New Public Management”, *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 1998:64, p. 441–456.

in 1993. The aim of the new organization was to represent the national sports organizations and serve their interests widely, not to act as a collective organization of sport federations.³⁰ The turning point at the beginning of 1990s was the starting point of instability in Finnish sport policy, which as a system is currently a mixture of state, voluntarily-based sport movements and business-oriented practices and actors.³¹ It is evident that this kind of landscape at the beginning of the 1990s nor after that was favorable for SVL-F which was looking for its identity and support.

As we have shown, in recent years, the sport policy itself has faded Sámi sport out from the sport policy agenda. However, in the last few years, there has been increased interest in knowing more and producing knowledge regarding the Sámi people's physical activity and the conditions for sports. Through some single investigations that have been made, North Lapland's and the Sámi Homeland's special features have come to the fore better both at the level of sports policy, administration, and in everyday life.

However, published reports have been specific, technical, and based also on the needs of state or regional administration. In addition, they are mainly written in Finnish which sets them apart from international discussions. One of the main reasons behind the lack of knowledge has been the difficulty in obtaining materials, which is also especially highlighted in the academic papers.³² For example, the development steps related to the organization of Sámi sports are poorly documented in official documents, and a large part of the information is based on oral tradition which makes research time-consuming and laborious.

Towards a study of children's and youth's leisure time

Researching minorities is not easy. It is especially difficult when trying to do quantitative research. The challenges of gathering quantitative data were encountered in 2021–2022 when a survey on the leisure time of children and youth was initiated. Belonging to Sámi or Sámi identity is not recorded in any official register. The Sámi Parliament does not have a list of Sámi children and young people. The acute key question was how to reach and identify the children and young people of such a target group.

The researchers used schools as an indirect way to reach Sámi children and youth. Children and young people from three out of the four municipalities in Finland's Sámi region, Sodankylä, Inari and Utsjoki, answered the

30 Marjukka Mikkonen et al. "Sport policy in Finland", p. 716.

31 Kati Lehtonen & Jarmo Mäkinen; "The Finnish sport system in transition: From a mixed model back to the Nordic sport movement?", in Mikkel B. Tin; Frode Tselseth; Jan Ove Tangen & Richard Giulianotti (eds.), *The Nordic Model and Physical Culture* (London 2020) p. 117–130.

32 Eivind Å Skille; Kati Lehtonen & Josef Fahlén, "The politics of organizing Indigenous sport – cross-border and cross-sectoral complexity", p. 7-8.

survey in schools. Since non-Sámi children and young people also attend the same schools, the questionnaire included a question about the experience of belonging to the Sámi community. Children and young people were allowed to determine their experience of Sámi themselves, which was also an ethically sustainable way to carry out the research. Using this method, 329 children and young people aged 10–19 answered the questionnaire, which was approximately a quarter of the entire age group in the area. Of all respondents, 113 answered that they belonged to the Sámi community.

The survey conducted in the spring 2022 was part of the Children's and Youth Leisure Survey 2022.³³ This was the second time that, in addition to a nationally representative sample of children and youth, a separate sample of children and youth belonging to a particular minority was collected.³⁴ The topic of the current study was children's and youth's leisure time and hobbies in the North Lapland region, as well as the special features of the leisure time of children and youth who identify with the Sámi community. The research setup was created in such a way that in the analysis it was possible to compare the ways of spending leisure time and hobbies of the majority population of Sámi children and young people. In addition, to the questions asked by the Sami people, forms of leisure time that are characteristic of the Sami culture were added as solution options. The survey had several questions about physical activity and sports.

It was also essential to examine which factors enable children and young people to continue their hobbies and which factors correspondingly influence them to stop their hobbies. A short piece of ethnographic fieldwork was also included in the data collection and research implementation. The researchers had a week-long field trip to Sodankylä, Inari and Utsjoki in the spring of 2022 at the same time as the survey was open at schools.

Because the research was financed by both the State Youth Council and National Sports Council, the purpose was to produce information more broadly about the sports activities of Sami children and young people as well as leisure time. The research was carried out in close cooperation with the Youth Council of the Sámi Parliament, which allowed the consideration of special themes concerning Sámi children and young people.

While the purpose of this article is not to report the complete results of the research, some observations related to playing sports and leisure time activities

33 Sinikka Aapola-Kari (ed.), *Vaihteleva vapaa-aika. Lasten ja Nuorten vapaa-aikatutkimus 2022* [Varied free time. Children and Youth Leisure Survey 2022], publications of the Finnish Youth Research Society no 181 (Helsinki 2023).

34 This first separate survey was published in 2019 and the focus group were children and young people with disabilities. See summary in Tiina Hakanen; Sami Myllyniemi & Mikko Salasuo (eds.), *Physical Activity Guaranteed. Survey of participation in physical activity and sport and the leisure time of children and young people with disabilities*, publications of Finnish Youth Research no. 142 (Helsinki 2023), p. 103–104.

will be presented briefly by way of an example. A comparison is made between the basic sample and those who identify as Sámi to highlight differences and similarities in their ways of spending leisure time.

Sport is a popular way to spend leisure time

In the study, the respondents were asked the question “Do you have a hobby, anything at all?” In connection with the question, there was also a clarification: “hobby does not mean only a guided activity, but anything that you consider your hobby, even if you do it alone at home. So, for example, reading, listening to music or self-directed exercise are also hobbies.” 87 percent of the children and young people who responded to the sample answered that they had a hobby. Boys mentioned having hobbies slightly more often than girls (89% / 86%). Those youth and children who spoke Finnish at home said they had a hobby a bit more often (88%) than those (82%) of the respondents whose families spoke Sami, Swedish or another language.

Of the activities asked in this study, children and young people most often reported self-directed exercise or sport (90%). Young people in the North Lapland region also reported spending time outdoors (85%) and with pets (77%). Seven out of ten respondents (72%) mentioned playing video games, while more than six out of ten respondents (65%) talked about fishing, picking berries or hunting.

In total, 57 percent of the children and young people living in the North Lapland region said that they practiced organized sports. This proportion decreases with age. While 61 percent of the respondents aged 10–14 said that they practiced guided exercise or sports, the corresponding share among those aged 15–19 was 49 percent. According to the results, the exercise and sports activities of children and young people in the North Lapland region were much the same as in the rest of Finland, but also some differences and special features were found.

The most popular form of organized sport hobby was ice hockey, which was named by 11 percent of the respondents as their favorite hobby. Ice hockey is also a popular sport for boys in the North Lapland region, as only one girl said she played ice hockey. Eight percent of all respondents named going to the gym as their favorite hobby, and the same proportion said soccer was their favorite hobby. Six percent said horse riding was their favorite hobby, four percent said floor basketball and volleyball were their favorite activities in their free time.

The sports activities of children and young people in the North Lapland region differ somewhat from the averages of Finnish children and young people, but the basic aspects of exercise and sports are the same. The three most popular exercise hobbies are the same, although in a slightly different order.

Northern Finland's special features are visible in children's and young people's sports activities, mainly in the popularity of ice hockey. The outdoor ice season is long and there are two ice rinks in the area. The municipality of Sodankylä also supports children's and young people's possibilities to play ice hockey by not charging ice fees at all for people under 18 years of age. The support has a significant impact on the costs of ice hockey.

The Sámi children's and young people's exercise and sports activities are not much different from other children and young people's activities in the region. Among young people who identify as Sámi, the most popular hobbies are football (10%), ice hockey (8%), volleyball (6%) and floorball (6%). Cultural differences become visible when looking more broadly at other leisure activities. Children and young people who identify with the Sámi community answered more often about spending time in nature. Similarly, they answered a little more often about fishing, picking berries, or hunting. 41 percent of the children and young people who responded to this survey took care of animals, for example, horses, cows, or reindeer. More girls than boys talked about taking care of animals (49%/32%). One-third of children and young people who identified with the Sámi community answered about reindeer herding, while the share of all survey respondents was 9 percent.

In the responses of children and young people from the North Lapland region, the majority of respondents (92 %) said that the hobby they liked the most and that takes the most time is one and the same hobby. The share of respondents who identified as Sámi was almost as high (88%). According to the results, the most significant reason for non-activity among children and young people who identify with the North Lapland region and the Sámi community is the lack of a suitable guided hobby activity or place in the surrounding area. Three out of five non-hobby respondents (61%) thought that this is at least a somewhat significant reason for not having a hobby. Other frequently cited reasons for not participating were lack of interest (56%) and lack of transportation (50%).

Concluding discussion

In Finland, the data gathered about sport and its different aspects in the Sami context has been a step-by-step process in which the “ends of the rope” have been connected, cooperation has been made with different levels of administration, and knowledge has been used to make invisible phenomena more visible. The Sámi Homeland is rarely thought of in everyday conversation as a “country” or a region with national borders and where people's opportunities to exercise and play sports are regulated in different ways, both politically and administratively. In other words, a nation that does not have “state borders” faces the administrative and political practices of a mainstream policy, which

can have significant effects on the opportunities to spend leisure time in a way that are part of one's own cultural distinctiveness.³⁵ Therefore, it can be stated that Sámi sport in Finland has not been independent of national borders either, even though it has been the overall objective in the organized Sámi sport of Norway, Sweden and Finland since the 1970s.³⁶

In the case of Sámi sport, it is also a question of how the national sports system resonates with the needs and practices of Indigenous people. The Sámi Homeland spans the territory of four countries which all have specific ways to organize sport. The role of the state and its regulation as well as public funding is different. For example, in Norway the role of the Norwegian Sports Confederation (NIF) has been and still is hegemonic in relation to the voluntarily based sports movement³⁷ and the relationship between Sámi sport and NIF has been negotiated by one side.³⁸ Comparably in Finland the role of a central sports organization has been weak since the 1990s and the state's position has been more prominent.³⁹ Sámi sports in the Nordic countries have therefore been quite different and heterogeneously organized. In addition, the Sámi community itself has multiple intentions, wills and voices.⁴⁰

From this perspective, the lack of visibility concerning Sámi sport both in research and on the policy agenda in Finland had not been unexpected. However, pluralistic ways of organizing sports, and the state's stronger role in Finnish sports policy might have had effort to the current situation where step-by-step the knowledge and awareness of Sámi people and their sporting or physical activity have increased. This was also the case for children's sports and physical activity at the beginning of the 2010s when the Finnish school system set up a new frame to increase children's and young people's physical activity instead of the sports club-based system, which had been the traditional and formal way of understanding sports policy in the Nordic countries.⁴¹ In a more pluralistic system, new openings or policy directions can be made more easily.

The Sámi's relationship to sports seems to be twofold. Sámi children and young people participate in mainstream sports and physical activities like other Finnish children and young people.⁴² The invisible part, i.e., the area

35 Kati Lehtonen, *Suomen saamelaisurheilun organisoituminen, toiminta ja yhteistyö pohjoisimman Lapin alueella*, p. 13.

36 Isak Lidström, *På skidor i kulturella Gränsland. Samiska spår i skidsportens historia*, doctoral dissertation (Malmö, 2021), p. 38–39.

37 Josef Fahlén & Cecilia Stenling, "Sport policy in Sweden", *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 2016: 3 (vol. 8), p. 515–531.

38 Eivind Å. Skille; Josef Fahlén; Cecilia Stenling & Anna-Maria Strittmatter, "(Lack of) government policy for Indigenous (Sámi) sport: A chain of legitimating and de-legitimating acts", *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 2021, DOI: 10.1177/1012690220988650, p. 2.

39 Kati Lehtonen, "Building of the Legitimacy of a Sports Organisation – Case Finland", p. 5–6.

40 Isak Lidström, *På skidor i kulturella Gränsland. Samiska spår i skidsportens historia*, p. 39.

41 Kati Lehtonen & Kaarlo Laine, "Creating new sport policy – The case of the Finnish Schools on the Move program", in Mikkel B. Tin; Frode Telseth, Jan Ove Tangen & Richard Giulianotti (eds.), *The Nordic Model and Physical Culture* (London: 2020), p. 21–35.

42 Mikko Salasuo; Kati Lehtonen & Kai Tarvainen, *Nuoruuden pohjoisin ulottuvuus*, p. 44–46.

left out of research and politics, is sports as part of Sámi cultural heritage.⁴³ For example, lassoing and reindeer competitions are traditional and important sporting cultural practices for the Sámi. Competitions and sports events are organized around them. Music and dance as well as nature are also an important part of Sámi culture.

As a matter of course, the Sámi way of life includes a lot of what is considered “exercise” or “sport” in the mainstream sport policy in Finland. When changing the perspective of the goals of the national sports policy, outdoor activities or fishing should be seen as part of recreation, well-being, or promoting an active lifestyle. It is precisely at this point that the question must be asked, do the Finnish actors in mainstream sports policy understand the special features of the Sami culture? What is an ancient cultural heritage for the Indigenous people may be a leisure time or hobby pursuit for the majority population.

From this point of view, Sámi sport is not only a question of engaging in sports or having an active lifestyle but also a way to build an identity and belong to the Sámi community. As Pedersen shows, sport has been used as part of a broader ethnopolitical struggle to revitalize Sámi culture and lay the foundations for greater political independence for the Indigenous Sámi in Norway.⁴⁴ Even though there are the traditional forms of sport that are part of Sámi culture, also the mainstream sports such as football or floorball are ways to communicate and maintain the language.

When it comes to the survey conducted in 2022, data collection, and the overall processes of increasing knowledge about Sámi sport, a key lesson has been the importance of cooperation and openness. Especially concerning the data collection in *The Northernmost Dimension of Youth* project, the researchers involved the Youth Council of the Sámi Parliament in the planning, implementation, and publication of the study right from the beginning. The Sámi community was also interested in research on children and young people, while the youth policy action and development program 2020–2023 of the Youth Council of the Sámi Parliament included the goal of promoting research that produces background and health information about Sámi youth. According to the program, the Youth Council promotes “the participation of Sámi youth in surveys and data collections”.⁴⁵ Based on this the Youth Council was a natural and pleasant partner for conducting the research.

43 Kaarlo Laine & Kati Lehtonen, “Liikunta ja urheilu saamelaiskulttuurissa”, p. 56–58.

44 Helge Chr. Pedersen, “A Sporting Nation: Creating Sámi Identity through Sport”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 2021: 12 (vol. 38), 1210–1227.

45 Sámi Parliament, Nuorisopoliittinen toiminta- ja kehittämisohjelma 2020–2023 [Youth policy action and development program 2020–2023], (Sámi Parliament 2020b), p. 15.

The cooperation and dialogue between the researchers and the Youth Council started immediately after funding agencies had approved the researchers' proposal on the target group and implementation of the isolated sample. This dialogue was both fruitful and necessary because researching Sámi children and youth without the permission of the expert committee of the Youth Council of the parishes would not have been possible or ethical. In general, the participation of the Sámi community in the research process was an important part of the implementation of the research.

Cooperation with the municipalities of the North Lapland region was also important. The first contacts were made more than half a year before the implementation of the survey and the dialogue continued throughout the research process. This cooperation and involvement with the municipalities also promoted the implementation of the research. The researchers' field session gave the research a face and offered an opportunity to justify the social significance and need for the research.⁴⁶ Children's and young people's leisure time was equally within the field of interest of the municipalities, state administration, and researchers. Therefore, one of the key learnings and results of this research was the added value produced by researchers getting into the field. When living in the digital age, this is a good reminder that doing research is often also a question of human interaction, respect, and trust between researchers and research subjects.

More important than the results might be that the results of the survey provide a starting point and basis for starting a more systematic quantitative study of physical activity, sports, and leisure time especially among Sámi children and youth. In addition, it can be stated that the Sámi people and their sport have reverted to the Finnish sport policy agenda based on the cooperation of the state's administration and Sámi Parliament during the last year's data collections and surveys.

⁴⁶ Main report (Mikko Salasuo et al., *The northernmost dimension of youth*, 2023) includes several quotes and observations based on the field diary entries.