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Research Report

Why language matters: Inequality perceptions among the Sámi in Sweden and Norway

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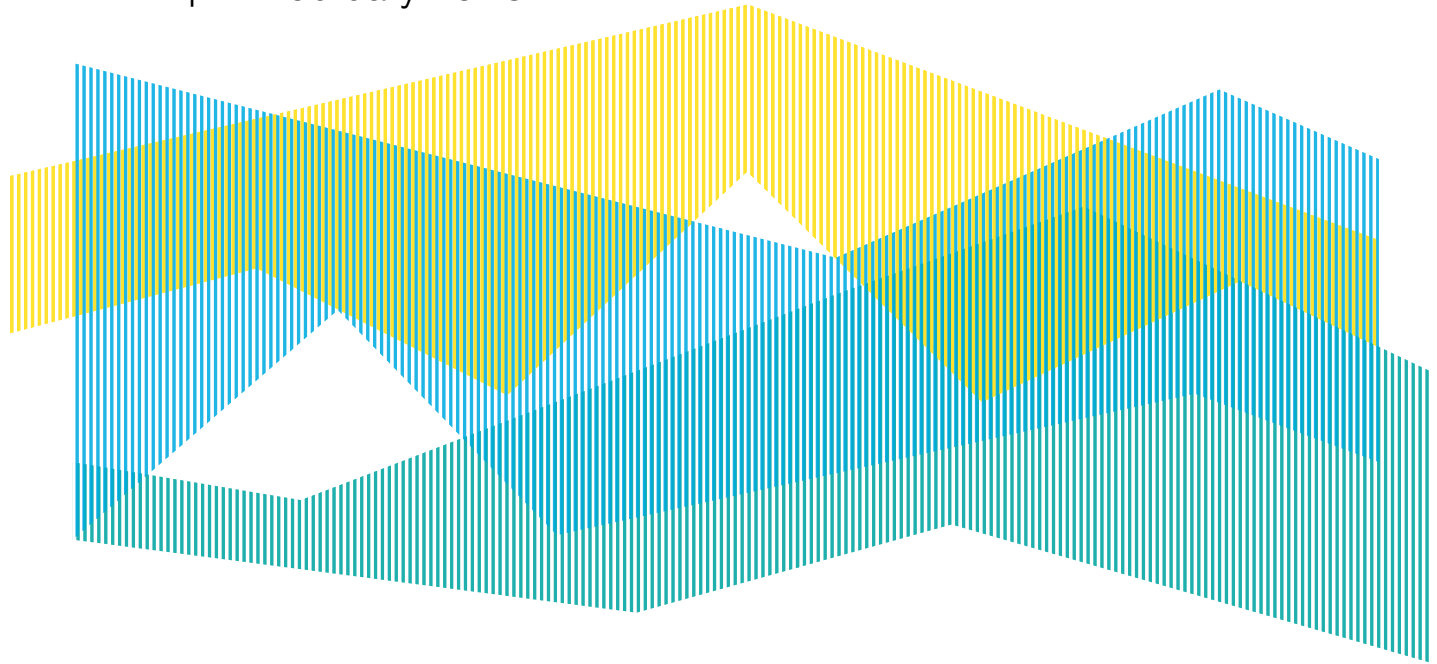
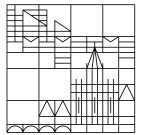
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Inequality and Language

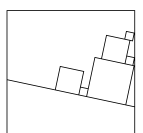
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Why Language Matters: Inequality Perceptions among the Sámi in Sweden and Norway

Abstract

Every two weeks, one of the world's estimated 7,000 languages dies. Yet what are the consequences of having to give up one's native language? Speakers of minority languages worldwide face barriers to using their languages outside their homes, often with negative consequences for educational and economic success. A new survey of the Indigenous Sámi in Sweden and Norway suggests that language policies are key to perceptions of inequality. Speakers of the Sámi languages have lower perceptions of their societal standing than Sámi who have given up the language. Combined with insights from an in-depth study on Sámi language education, our findings suggest that policies should facilitate language maintenance in linguistic minorities. Supporting these languages may help to reduce feelings of discrimination.



Our research data

In this Policy Paper, we explore findings from two research projects:

(i) The “Nordic Peoples Survey” was carried out at the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality” at the University of Konstanz. The survey was conducted in 20 northern municipalities (Figure 1) in Sweden and Norway in summer 2021. It was a full-population survey that reached out to every adult resident of these municipalities. A total of 2,396 people took part in Norway, and 3,020 in Sweden. Of the Norwegian respondents, 44.7 % reported having an ethnic Sámi background, while the share was 28.0 % in Sweden.

(ii) We connect the findings from the Nordic Peoples Survey to research by Yair Sapir in 2020, which was based on qualitative data including interviews with Sámi language activists and parents of Sámi school students, and discussion notes from a workshop on the Sámi languages held at the Swedish Sámi Parliament in 2019.

Introduction and overview

Global linguistic diversity is under threat, with less than half of the world’s 7,000 languages estimated to survive the next century. This loss has increasingly been addressed over the past decades, and linguistic rights are being seen as human rights. In the case of Indigenous peoples, the UN General Assembly adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007. It declares that Indigenous peoples “have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures”, and that “all states shall take effective measures to eliminate discrimination and promote tolerance”.¹ Likewise, researchers, parents and teachers are nowadays more conscious of the intimate connection between an individual’s mother tongue, identity formation, and the perception of discrimination by ethnic and cultural minorities.

When discussing matters of inequality in linguistically diverse contexts, one might primarily think of the Global South: Children in former colonies are forced to attend school in a language they do not know; climate change forces rural communities to leave their homes, migrate, and assimilate to a new urban community. However, linguistic assimilation and language inequalities also happen in places where they might be less expected, like Scandinavia, a prime case of social equality. In our research, we analyze the situation of the Indigenous Sámi population in Norway and Sweden, based on our recent Nordic Peoples Survey² and qualitative research by Yair Sapir.³ We focus on Sweden and Norway because their political systems are closely comparable, and because they are home to the largest number of North Sámi speakers.

In the Nordic Peoples Study, we find that people who use a Sámi language frequently are more likely to report experiencing discrimination. In Sweden, Sámi further perceive their own status as lower than non-Sámi respondents. As we will argue in this Policy Paper, our results suggest (i) that the inequalities that affect the Sámi are not fundamentally economic in nature, and (ii) that policies that support minority language and culture are key.

¹ Article 15. See https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

² <https://www.exc.uni-konstanz.de/en/inequality/research/projects/ethnic-policies/>

³ Sapir, Y (2020). Sveriges samiska språk: Revitalisering, utmaningar och möjliga lösningar. Svenska landsmål och svenskt folkliv, 143, 63–120.

Who (still) speaks Sámi?

The Indigenous Sámi languages are spoken in the arctic regions of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. Today, there are nine remaining Sámi languages, all of which are classified as endangered by the United Nations. North Sámi is the most widely-spoken, with around 20,000 speakers in Sweden, Norway, and Finland. Until the 1950s, the Sámi of Norway and Sweden faced harsh assimilation policies with detrimental consequences for Sámi language and culture. Over the past few decades, Sweden and Norway have employed strategies to revitalize the Sámi languages. Both have ratified instruments of international law, such as the UN Declaration and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Further, state-run schooling through the medium of Sámi exists in the Sámi administrative areas—municipalities in which extended language rights apply. Here, the Sámi also have the right to communicate with the authorities in a Sámi language. Though such measures are commendable, they have not yet succeeded in reversing the effects of assimilatory policies in the past, and speaker numbers continue to drop.

It is hard to estimate how many speakers of Sami languages there are, partly because information on which languages people speak is not collected in the national censuses, but also because it is difficult to define what constitutes a “speaker”. There are no monolingual speakers of Sámi languages remaining, and very few are fluent. Low proficiency levels pose a problem for language transmission to the next generation, and yet language transmission is essential for languages to survive.

In the Nordic Peoples Survey, participants were asked to report on which languages they speak, how often, and in which contexts. The maps in Figure 1 illustrate the location of the respondents, and the proportion of respondents with a Sámi background.

Figure 1: Maps of municipalities surveyed in the Nordic Peoples Survey, and proportion of respondents with Sámi ethnicity

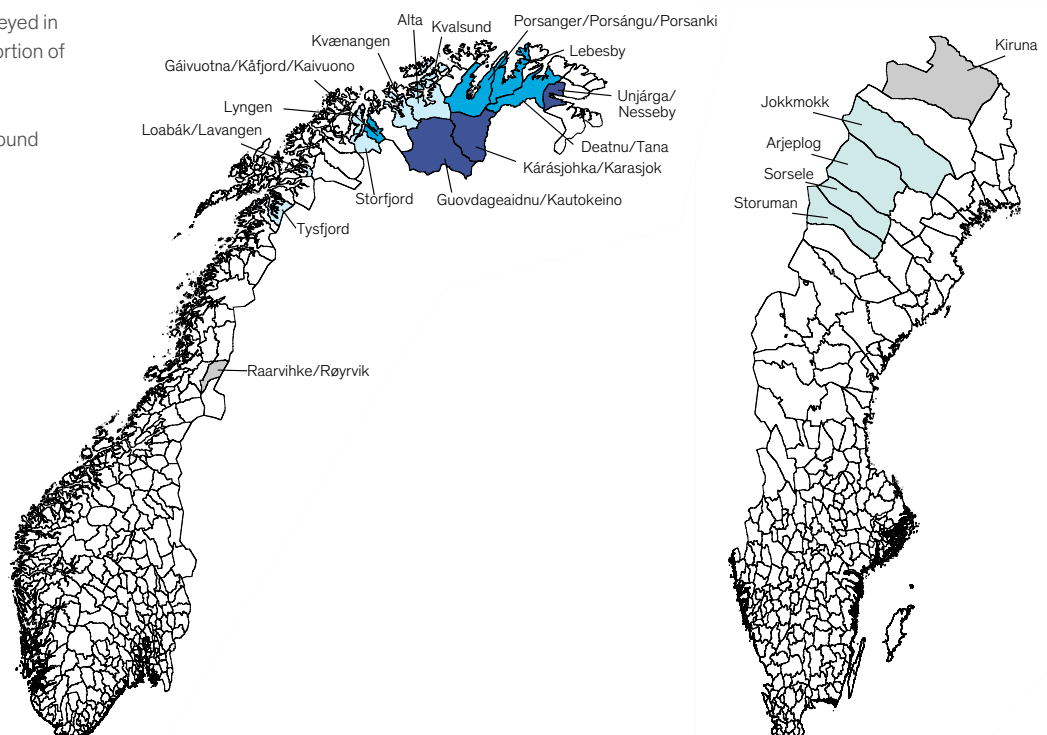
Respondents indicating Sámi background

Norway

- 0 to 25 %
- 25 to 50 %
- 50 to 75 %
- 75 to 100 %

Sweden

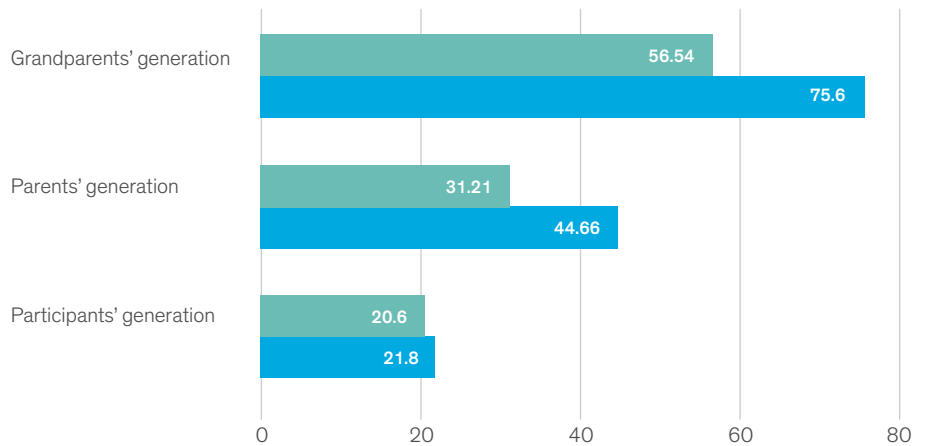
- 0 to 25 %
- 25 to 50 %
- 50 to 75 %
- 75 to 100 %



We also looked at language use across the generations (Figure 2), finding a dramatic drop in speaker numbers over the past three generations.⁴ While around 75 % of Sámi respondents' grandparents were Sámi users, just 20 % of today's adult generation uses a Sámi language at least occasionally.

Figure 2: Sámi language skills across generations. We asked the question "Do/did your grandparents/your parents/you yourself use a Sámi language at home?" (percentages)

● Sweden
● Norway



We further asked respondents to self-assess their language proficiency in a Sámi language, and were also interested in the responses of the majority (non-Sámi) population. As shown in Figure 3, less than one fifth (17 %) of ethnic Sámi respondents in Sweden and one quarter in Norway has a moderate proficiency or better, i.e., a level high enough to follow a conversation. Similar rates of proficiency were found in a study with Sámi school children in Sweden.⁵ In the majority population, only 5 % in Norway and 2 % in Sweden has enough Sámi knowledge to follow a conversation.

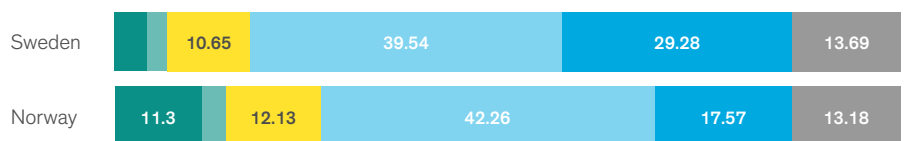
Figure 3: Sámi and non-Sámi responses to the question "How well can you understand a conversation in Sámi?" (percentages)

● Native-like
● Very well
● Moderately
● A few words
● Not at all
● No answer

a) Non-Sámi



b) Sámi



Today's low proportion of fluent speakers does not raise much hope, since high proficiencies are needed for language transmission. The number of non-Sámi respondents with Sámi knowledge is also alarmingly low, especially given the fact that Sámi is an officially-recognized national language, and suggests a lack of motivation in majority populations to engage with the language. On an encouraging note, our data both from the survey and from the qualitative study suggest that there has been a positive change in the attitudes of Sámi-speaking parents. Namely, speakers who are highly fluent generally indicate that they use a Sámi language with their own children. This constitutes a shift away from previous generations (the parents and grandparents shown in Figure 2), who mostly did not pass on their language. At the same time, the group of individuals who are fluent enough to speak with their children is only small—arguably too small to ensure the long-term stability of the language. To ensure stability, fluency in the existing community needs to be improved.

⁴ Lloyd-Smith, A., Bergmann, F., Hund, L., & Kupisch, T. (2023). Can policies change language vitality? *Frontiers in Psychology*.

⁵ Sapir, Y. (2020). Sveriges samiska språk: Revitalisering, utmaningar och möjliga lösningar. *Svenska landsmål och svenskt folkliv*, 143, 63–120.

When is a language endangered?

The Endangered Languages Project⁶ considers a language endangered when transmission to the next generation starts to decrease, meaning that it is not passed on to children as a first language. As older generations of speakers pass away, there are fewer people left who speak the language.

How do Sámi perceive their own status?

In the Nordic Peoples Survey, we find that when asked where people see each other on a ladder representing society—with those who are economically the best off at the top and those who are the worst off at the bottom—Swedish Sámi respondents place themselves at a significantly lower position than respondents from the majority population. But when inspecting actual income levels, we do not find significant differences between Sámi and non-Sámi respondents, suggesting that these perceptions are not related to wealth, but rather to perceived prestige.

We also asked where the Sámi as an ethnic group would be positioned on a ladder that reflects wider society's esteem and respect for this group. Again, Swedish Sámi respondents perceive their own group's position to be lower than what the majority perceives the Sámi to be in. In Norway, we do not find differences between the majority population and the Sámi with regards to their perceptions of their economic or socio-cultural situation.

Although we cannot claim any causal relationships, the differences we find between Sweden and Norway both for language proficiencies and for perceptions of inequality seem—at least in part—to reflect Norway's and Sweden's policies towards the Sámi. While both countries have taken measures to promote and protect the languages, the decreasing number of speakers shows that further efforts are needed. In this regard, Norway seems to act more resolutely. Only Norway has ratified the ILO 169 on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Its language policies give Norwegian and Sámi an equal status, at least in the aforementioned administrative areas. In Sweden, the Sámi languages are considered minority languages alongside Finnish, Meänkieli, Yiddish and Romani. There are also differences regarding access to school education through the medium of the Sámi languages, which is more readily available in Norway.⁷ Such observations may reflect the fact that a higher proportion of the Norwegian Sámi Parliament's budget is spent on language and cultural measures than in Sweden.

Overall, Norway's policy environment appears to confer a higher social status to the Sámi as a societal group. We thus presume that the Norwegian policy environment helps to create higher esteem for and awareness of Sámi issues, which in turn leads to more equal status perceptions. Nevertheless, as our next point shows, feelings of inequality remain an issue for both countries.

Who experiences discrimination?

In the Nordic Peoples Survey, we found in both countries that the likelihood of experiencing discrimination is positively associated with having a Sámi ethnic background. This relationship appears stronger for the Sámi than for other ethnic minorities. Household income also predicts the amount of discrimination experienced at the individual level, but there is no visible economic difference between the Sámi and the non-Sámi respondents in our sample. Thus, the inequalities that affect the Sámi are not fundamentally economic, and we must consider social and cultural explanations.

⁶ <https://www.endangeredlanguages.com/>

⁷ See also Tauli-Corpuz, V. (2016). Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples on the human rights situation of the Sami people in the Sápmi region of Norway, Sweden and Finland, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/847081>.

We also find a relationship between discrimination experience and three types of Sámi language measures: proficiency in a Sámi language, its use with family members, and its use beyond the family context. When we consider these separately, all three factors turn out to be significant predictors of discrimination experience. When we consider them together, the use of a Sámi language beyond family context is the most relevant aspect. In Figure 4, we summarise this relationship, which is particularly strong in Sweden.

Figure 4: Experience of discrimination with respect to Sámi language use (percentages)

Discrimination experience

Norway

no

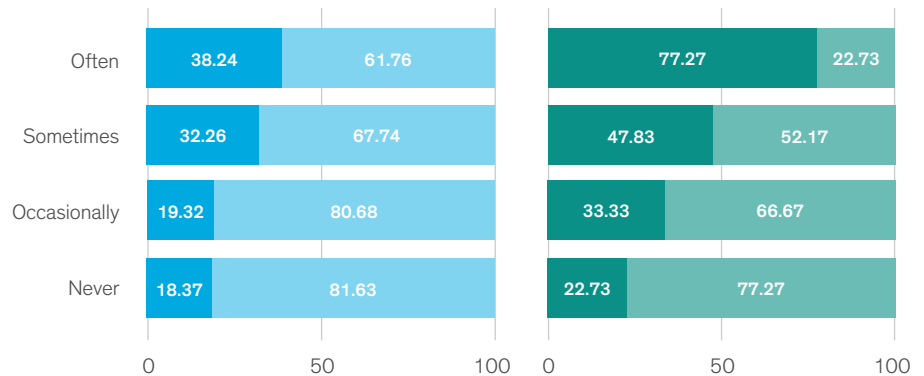
yes

Sweden

no

yes

Frequency of using a Sámi language



This finding indicates that Sámi who frequently use their language in the public sphere seem to experience more discrimination. To understand the link between language and discrimination, we consider three explanations: First, having proficiency in a minority language and using it frequently could make a person's ethnic background more noticeable, either due to using this minority language in public, or because frequent use of the minority language leads to a Sámi-sounding accent in the majority language. However, based on further data from the Nordic Peoples Survey, we know that our Swedish-Sámi participants did not have a Sámi-sounding accent when speaking Swedish.

A second explanation is that language proficiency and use correlate with the strength of ethnic identification: Those who have stronger ties with Sámi culture and identity could be more perceptive of ethnic discrimination. However, our data do not show a strong association between discrimination experience and the degree of attachment to the Sámi community.

Thirdly, it is possible that a lack of opportunities to use and develop a minority language constitutes a form of discrimination in itself. We think that this is the most plausible explanation. Although Sámi has become more visible in recent years—also thanks to political initiatives—many challenges remain that prevent these measures from being successful. These include the difficulties of providing high-quality learning conditions at schools, the demographic situation (with Sámi speakers almost always being a minority where they live), and administrative obstacles, such as implementation gaps of state policies on the ground. As a consequence, some Sámi in Sweden experience current language policies as depriving them from learning or reclaiming their home language, and thus as discriminatory (Footnote 4). In other words, the lack of resources and the absence of the language in the public sphere imply that the language is not equal to the majority language and does not have the same prestige.

Linguistic inequalities

Linguistic inequality refers to the idea that languages are often evaluated unequally from a social perspective. This leads to more resources being given to languages that are perceived as more important, and has consequences for speakers of smaller languages that may not receive appropriate support and treatment.

Policy implications

The case of the Sámi demonstrates that there are forms of social inequality that cannot be tackled with socioeconomic measures alone. Establishing material equality, which is typically the goal of governments' responses to inequality does not adequately target historically rooted inequalities between an Indigenous people and the majority population.

Our research shows that language-based inequality issues must be addressed by policies that aim at and go beyond revitalizing the language. In the Nordic Peoples Survey, we find in both countries that frequent use of a Sámi language is associated with experiencing more discrimination. Accordingly, those who have given up their language experience less discrimination. Similarly, people with Sámi ancestry but who do not self-identify as Sámi perceive less inequality. But the price they have paid is that they have given up their Indigenous identity. Of course, it is possible that—due to experienced discrimination over generations in the past and self-censorship—not all Indigenous people perceive this as a loss.

Conceding that minorities have to give up their languages and identities in order to avoid feelings of inequality cannot be a reasonable strategy for the pursuit of social equality. Instead, we argue that states can facilitate language revitalization and simultaneously reduce perceived inequalities. The research we have carried out indicates that the connection between discrimination and language is linked to a lack of esteem for Sámi culture and a lack of opportunities to develop and use Sámi languages. Ingraining the languages more assertively and more positively into the public sphere may contribute to dismantling discrimination.

Our findings suggest that the inequalities the Sámi still face should be remedied by policies that firmly appreciate Sámi language and culture. Tackling language-based inequality requires not only measures that promote the status of an Indigenous language within the Indigenous community but also in society at large. Research from other countries has shown that if the Indigenous culture is viewed as being an important part of the overall national identity, members of the majority population are more supportive of policies promoting Indigenous culture.⁸

A number of exciting revitalization projects have already been carried out in the Sami context. For example, the Elgå partial immersion preschool project for South Sami in Norway, as well as the CASLE project for Inari Sami in Finland. Both have remarkable results in creating new generations of Sami speakers. The Finnish CASLE project has succeeded in doubling the amount of Inari language speakers from about 300 to 600. These projects are promising and can serve as inspiration for similar projects in Sweden.

⁸ See e.g., Pehrson, S., Gonzalvez, R., & Brown, R. (2011). Indigenous rights in Chile: National identity and majority group support for multicultural policies, *Political Psychology*, 32(4), 667–690.

Recommendations

1. Sámi education is key to Sámi language revitalization. The legal situations in Norway and Sweden technically already allow for comprehensive tuition in and of Sámi. Yet, to deliver on this, it is necessary to spur high-quality teacher training and teaching material creation. Furthermore, a point needs to be made of ensuring schools' and municipalities' compliance with existing legislation.
2. The status of the Sámi languages should be strengthened to facilitate higher levels of Sámi use. For example, increasing the availability of media content and publications in Sámi, as well as Sámi-speaking staff at public authorities, can create more opportunities to use Sámi within and beyond the Sámi community. Sámi language and culture should constitute a prominent part of the overall Norwegian and Swedish cultural identities. To achieve this, Sámi issues need to be more visible in the mainstream culture and beyond the traditional Sámi areas. For example, mainstream syllabi should ensure that all school students receive comprehensive education about Sámi culture. Corporate initiatives, such as the decision of a Norwegian dairy company to have text in Norwegian and North Sámi on their milk cartons,⁹ should be encouraged and supported.
3. The state should be more involved in short and intensive projects aiming at language revitalization of the Sámi languages, even when these projects require a relatively considerable investment on the part of the state. Such efforts can potentially tip the scale from language decline to language growth.
4. The middle generation should be considered an important target group for revitalization, since intergenerational linguistic gaps are commonplace. This generation is then able to transmit the Sámi languages to the children's generation. Besides language skills, the middle generation should also be equipped with good meta-linguistic and writing skills. Sámi teacher education must be incentivized and ensure a high standard of training.

Though we have focused herein on the Sámi population, the linguistic inequality we have observed is exemplary of many other cases in the world where Indigenous peoples have been deprived of their languages.

Note: These recommendations are based on a scientific point of view and stem from the results of the authors' research. For their practical implementation, the consent of and close cooperation with the Sámi communities is, as a matter of course, indispensable.

⁹ Wormal, B. (2022, October 27). Melkekartonger får samisk tekst:—Bra at også andre kan få lære litt samisk, Norsk Riksringkasting, https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/melkekartonger-far-samisk-tekst__-bra-at-ogsaa-andre-kan-laere-litt-samisk-1.16153615

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The Politics of Inequality Perceptions, Participation and Policies

is an interdisciplinary Cluster of Excellence at the University of Konstanz within the framework of the Excellence Strategy of the federal and state governments. The gap separating the poor from the rich, the worldwide rise of populism, the division of burdens in the fight against climate change, unfairly distributed access to education—many current debates are as much about inequality as they are about other issues. These topics pose highly complex questions, yet scientifically grounded answers are still few and far between. This is where we come in to investigate “The Politics of Inequality”: the political causes and consequences of inequality.

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