



**S Á M I R Á Đ Đ I**  
SAAMELAISNEUVOSTO  
SAMERÅDET  
COЮ3 CAAMOB  
SAAMI COUNCIL

## **VÁHTJER DECLARATION**

### **Váhtjer 2022**

**We, the participants of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Saami Conference, gathered in Váhtjer 11.-14.08.22, declare:**

Since the first Saami Conference in Jokkmokk in 1953, the Saami Conferences have brought together organizations and representatives from Sápmi to work together towards a bright future for the Saami people.

This year, we are sorry that our sisters and brothers from the Russian side of the border are prevented by the war from joining us. This is the first time since 1992 that they have not been able to participate in the conference or in our other activities.

We are grateful for the foresight that our predecessors showed, and we will build on their work to **strengthen Sápmi**. We have faith that our descendants will continue working to ensure that Saami language and culture will flourish, delivering the future that our people need and deserve.

Over the years, the Saami Conferences have made declarations that remain important today. We, the participants of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Saami Conference, agree wholeheartedly with these previous Declarations, and wish to highlight these words from the Saami political work program adopted by the 13<sup>th</sup> Saami Conference in Åre in 1986:

*We, the Saami, constitute one people, and national borders shall not infringe on our national unity.*

This is our vision and our hope for the future.

We have lived in Sápmi since time immemorial, and we are still here. We have always managed the land and water with respect and care. We are the warm embrace of the Saami

community. Late Áillohaš, in Sámi eatnan duoddariid, our national joik, records how our tenacious strength has given us rest, even when strangers have made us lie on beds of cold, hard stone. We claim our right to be Saami, no more or less valuable than other peoples. And we claim our right to shape our own future.

As it is in the lyrics of Áillohaš.

*Sámi eatnan duoddariid,  
dan sámi máná ruovttu,  
galbma garra geađgegietskka,  
liegga litna salla.*

National borders became a real obstacle during the COVID-19 pandemic, separating families, friends, and communities, and making any contact and cooperation more difficult. It was a demanding time, during which we would have benefitted so much from one another's support. Although we are one people, we feel how our community is divided by borders, kept apart by the states of which we have become citizens. Our cross-border community is not prioritized by these states, and we cannot take anything for granted. Rights that we have won can be lost again in a moment if we do not vigilantly defend our gains and interests. This is why coming together is more important now than ever; we must strengthen Sápmi and ensure that the borders will never be closed to the Saami again.

*Vuoi dan guorba duoddara,  
dan galbma garra guovllu,  
davvi geađge-, borgamáilmmi  
sámi mánáid ruovttu.*

The 22<sup>nd</sup> Saami Conference recognizes our shared responsibility to care for those who cannot protect their own interests. **Our strength** can be measured by how we care for one another, especially our most vulnerable. We need more knowledge about the physical and mental health of our community. We need health workers who are educated and competent in Saami language and culture. Saami patients have the right to equality in health services, and access to cross-border services can bring us closer to that equality.

Our community must be a safe haven with a place and a purpose for all Saami people. Some have felt excluded or unwelcome in our community, where they most want to belong. Saami people with different gender identities and sexual orientations should also feel at home in the Saami embrace. Let us welcome our community's diversity; let us always show respect and tolerance.

Violence and abuse are a challenge in Saami societies. The policy of assimilation has eroded our trust in society at large, making us more likely to stay silent regarding violence and abuse in our community. Feeling secure in our identity will make it easier for us to break these damaging taboos and to welcome social criticism. By increasing each individual's sense of belonging and identity, we will **strengthen Sápmi**. To prevent and combat violence and abuse, we need measures that are tailored to our own community.

Saami face harassment and discrimination both online and “in real life”. This is particularly harmful to children and young people. Dissemination of knowledge about the Saami language and culture can break down prejudices about us. We expect that society will condemn and punish incitement and racism against Saami people and others, and we expect that our children will be safe and protected wherever they find themselves. The best shield that our young people can have against the wounds caused by hate speech and prejudice is a secure, robust Saami identity. A secure Saami identity can be developed not only at home, but also through school and nursery services that are rooted in Saami language and culture. Saami children with a secure, robust identity will strengthen Sápmi as a whole. The stronger their ties are to Sápmi, the more likely it is that they will choose to live in Sápmi as adults, or – if not – that they will nevertheless pass on Saami language and culture to their families.

*Biegga doalvu, bieggá buktá,  
duottar dat lea duottar,  
duoddar duohken duoddar askkis  
sámiid salla dorvu.*

Sápmi’s nature and resources are the foundation on which our culture, languages, and social life are built. We have the right and the duty to care for them so that they will continue to provide a strong, solid foundation for our descendants. Our inherited knowledge of how to harvest and survive in nature is an essential basis for natural resource management in a **strong Sápmi**. We must learn from our elders and ensure that we pass on what we know about nature and *birgejupmi* to our children. We respect our ancestors’ values, and their use of nature, and we will adapt them to our own times. We will supplement our inherited knowledge with science to **strengthen Sápmi**, while remaining always conscious of how science has developed – by whom, for whom, and based on what values.

Man-made climate change affects the natural world on which we depend. It is a global problem that, like all global problems, requires a global solution. Indigenous Peoples must be able to participate actively in the development and execution of these solutions. As Indigenous Peoples, we possess an understanding of resource use and the importance of the “circular economy” as part of our values and culture, and we know how to adapt to serious challenges. We can and must contribute this knowledge to the conversation about climate change. Together with technological development, these assets can **strengthen Sápmi**.

We distance ourselves from the resource rush and the overconsumption that have caused the climate challenges that the world faces today. A “green shift” is needed, but it must be just and fair, and it cannot be based on colonialist practices. We demand that Indigenous Peoples’ rights are respected when combatting and adapting to climate change. Climate change and human activity are also bringing new species to Sápmi, and we have the right to be part of any assessment about how to handle these new species. We have the right to

harvest them, and to participate in their management if they are to be managed as a resource.

*Vuoi dan golle duoddariid  
dáid jávrriid silba násttiid,  
sámi mánáid divrras ruovttu,  
eallin náhpečoalli*

As Indigenous Peoples, we have a special connection with, and rights to, the land that we live and survive on. For a **stronger Sápmi**, it is a prerequisite that authorities and other users of this land recognize our rights. Those who live in and use this land bear the rights to it, and they must be able to establish standards and practices for nature and resource use in line with the knowledge they hold. They have the right to give or withhold informed prior consent in the event of intervention and competing nature use. They are also entitled to profits from both renewable and non-renewable resources in the area.

Outmigration and population decline in Saami areas threaten Saami languages, culture, and ways of life. In cities, Saami cultural offerings and gathering-places are on the rise, and these are important for the Saami who have settled there, but we cannot impoverish Saami villages. Healthy, viable Saami local communities are a precondition for a **stronger Sápmi**.

Traditional industries – such as reindeer husbandry, fishing, agriculture, duodji, and harvesting – are carriers of language and culture. They are important for food production, value creation, and for enabling us to live in Sápmi. Renewable and sustainable businesses that are rooted in local communities can make Sápmi attractive to Saami youth.

Reindeer husbandry has a strong cultural and linguistic significance for Saami society, and it is a significant source of income for many families. Reindeer husbandry is vulnerable to disturbances and encroachments in grazing areas, and reindeer herders suffer heavy losses to predators. This affects Saami communities' ecological, economic, and cultural sustainability. We believe current land and predator management is not in line with the state's obligations under international law. The states must co-develop land and predator management policies and practices that are based on the grazing industries' experience-based knowledge.

In a **stronger Sápmi**, the regulation of natural resources must be sustainable and in line with indigenous rights. Local users and rights-holders must be prioritized in the event of resource scarcity in open field resources, inland fishing, and salmon fishing in rivers and seas.

*Beaivi Áhči gollerisku  
almmi allodagas  
coahkká váibmu Eanan eatni  
eallin eatnun šoavvá.*

The Saami languages are our precious heritage. They are like sinews that bind us with our forebears, connecting us to the values and knowledge that our ancestors built over thousands of years.

As a result of assimilation policy, several generations of Saami have been unable to learn the Saami language. This cannot continue; our children must be allowed to take part in the shared treasure of our language! All Saami children must learn the Saami language; this is their right. It is our duty to ensure that this right is fulfilled. This duty rests with the states we live in, but it is a responsibility that we ourselves share. In a **stronger Sápmi**, parents, family members, and others must work together to pass on Saami languages to Saami children.

Saami language use is continuously losing ground. Saami languages must therefore be deployed in new arenas, including digital arenas. Opportunities abound in the form of new tools and digital language training, but we need Saami language technology. Developing such technology will require cooperation between language communities, linguists, and technology communities.

*Mánu silbbat šelggonasat  
jietnja meara márra  
guovssahasat násteboagán  
lottit ráidarasas.*

We, the Saami, own our culture, and we must manage, convey and develop it ourselves. Saami artists, cultural workers, organizations, festivals, and institutions contribute to cultural communication, development, and renewal. Today, Saami artists and cultural workers are underrepresented on stage and at national and international gatherings. The institutions and funding mechanisms of Sápmi and society more broadly must support the artistic freedom of Saami artists. A living, thriving culture **strengthens Sápmi**.

Language and culture can provide a basis for new and growing Saami industries, such as creative industries and Saami tourism. They can contribute to value creation that strengthens Saami culture, identity, and our bond to Sápmi. We must continue to safeguard our uniqueness and protect our culture from misuse. Use and commercialization of Saami cultural expressions can only take place with our consent, on our terms, and with value for us. We will work to counteract all forms of appropriation of Saami cultural expressions. **Sápmi will be stronger** with arrangements that ensure this, in line with Saami legal opinion and national and international legislation.

Saami place names, cultural monuments, cultural landscapes, and sacred places show settlement are marked by evidence of millennia of Saami settlement and nature use. This physical and cultural heritage makes the presence and history of the Saami visible, and it must be documented and preserved. This is important for a **stronger Sápmi**, as it enables us to understand our past, plan our future, and explain and manage our present. It is also essential for the societies around us to recognize that we have rights and freedoms that must be respected.

Elements of our cultural heritage are in the hands of strangers. It is of little value that cultural heritage is preserved if we do not have access to it ourselves. We demand a return of these elements so that our cultural heritage can be documented, preserved, researched, and communicated to us – the Saami ourselves – with the proper context. In a **stronger Sápmi**, Saami institutions will have the competence, capacity, and physical infrastructure to do this. Objects of high cultural value, such as ceremonial objects, must be returned. They tell us about the Saami worldview, and they are strong symbols of reconciliation with the historical injustices that we have experienced.

The knowledge that many of our dead have not been allowed to rest in peace is among our darkest memories. The peace of many of our Saami ancestors has been disturbed; their remains have been taken out of Sápmi in the name of racial biological research. It would **strengthen Sápmi** if we knew that the peace of our departed ancestors had been respectfully restored.

*Vuoi dáid Dávvi duovdagiid  
dán viiddis almmi ravdda  
garra dálkkit juoiggadallet  
máná vuohtunluđiid.*

In a **stronger Sápmi**, each generation will simultaneously learn our cultural heritage as it is inherited and build upon it by adding their own experiences, thereby renewing our living traditions. The intangible cultural heritage of the Saami is contained in living traditions and knowledge that have been tested, practiced, and transmitted from generation to generation. Our intangible cultural heritage includes, among other things, duodji, joik, music, food culture, rituals, and stories. Today, we can no longer rest on oral transmission. In many areas, cultural continuity has weakened due to assimilation policies. **Sápmi will be stronger** with systems that document and preserve our intangible cultural heritage, ensure its management, and pass it on to new generations.

A joint Saami body elected by the Saami people is the long-term goal of a **stronger Sápmi**. A joint Saami democracy presupposes a shared public and social debate. Freedom of speech and the press are universal human rights to which we subscribe. If these rights and freedoms are to be felt across the whole of Saami society, then the media must cover all parts of Sápmi, operate in Saami languages, and provide services tailored to different age groups. Remaining ever-mindful of the special ethical considerations that must underlie journalism in indigenous communities is vital. In a **stronger Sápmi**, improved media offerings in Saami languages will facilitate inclusive and open social debates.

*Vuoi dáid fávrrus eatnamiid  
vuoi jávrriid čuovgi čalmmiid  
liegga litna eatni salla  
gievvudeaddji gietkka.*

For fifty years, we – the Saami people – have worked internationally to promote the rights and freedoms of Indigenous Peoples everywhere. We have collaborated in these efforts with other Indigenous Peoples and allies. We are proud of these efforts; they have helped to **strengthen Sápmi**. It is also a work of solidarity, as not all Indigenous Peoples have the opportunities that we do. We must ensure the continuity of these efforts by training new generations and conveying information about the results we have achieved.

Processes for truth and reconciliation have been initiated in the Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish areas of Sápmi. (We assume that such a process is also underway in the Russian area.) If these processes are to end the states' brutal assimilation policies, then they must lead to settlements that are more than symbolic. Genuine reconciliation presupposes good faith, sincerity, recognition of the truth, and repair of the consequences; and only genuine reconciliation can establish a new and better relationship between the Saami as a people and the majority.

We ourselves bear the responsibility for our present and our future. It is our right and our duty to our ancestors, to the Saami community of today, and to our descendants. We need increased trust and better interaction between different Saami industries, areas, and communities. We also want to treat our neighbours from other cultures with the same kindness and respect that we expect from them. This requires a **stronger Sápmi** with greater authority and resources for our elected bodies; greater capacity within our institutions and civil society; and better protections for our culture and our natural environment.

With the scarce resources at our disposal today, we Saami cannot alone organize ourselves towards self-determination. Stronger measures are needed to build – or to repair – a strong foundation for our culture to survive in the future. In this conference declaration, we have expressed what we believe needs to be done to **strengthen Sápmi**.

We will represent ourselves in decision-making processes that concern us. We will define what competence Saami children need, and we will develop the knowledge that we need. We will develop our own culture and cultural heritage. We will work to build and promote arrangements for the effective collection and transfer of experience-based knowledge from generation to generation. We must have access to knowledge about ourselves, and this helps to ensure that Saami culture is developed and nurtured in a sustainable way.

We will manage the resources where we live, and demand that no natural degradation be allowed to occur without our consent. A **stronger Sápmi** requires access to land, water, and resources for those of us who live here.

*Sámieatnan duoddariid  
daid sámi mánáid ruovttu  
šearrat gearrá šealggáhallá  
sámi mánáid ruoktu*

This Declaration expresses the will of the participants in the 22<sup>nd</sup> Saami Conference, and we ask that the member organizations of the Saami Council confirm their membership in the Saami Council by ratifying this declaration in their highest decision-making bodies.