

UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – Consultation on the right to health and Indigenous Peoples

Reply by the Government of Finland

Finnish municipalities have the duty to provide social welfare and health care services for their residents. This duty also applies to the Sámi population. Social welfare and health care services of an equally high standard must be provided for Sámi speakers and the majority population.

In addition to general central government transfers to municipalities, a separate discretionary transfer has been granted since 2002 for one budget year at a time to safeguard the availability of Sámi-language social welfare and health care services that complement the municipal services in the Sámi homeland. The Sámi homeland comprises the areas of Enontekiö, Inari and Utsjoki municipalities as well as the area of the reindeer owners' association of Lapland (Vuotso) in Sodankylä. The purpose of the discretionary government transfer is to cover the costs of social welfare and health care services provided in all the Sámi languages (North Sámi, Inari Sámi and Skolt Sámi) spoken in Finland. In 2016, the discretionary transfer for Sámi-language social welfare and health care services will amount to some EUR 480,000.

This appropriation, which will be paid out through the Sámi Parliament, is a discretionary transfer intended for safeguarding the availability of Sámi-language social welfare and health care services in the Sámi homeland municipalities referred to in Section 4 of the Act on the Sámi Parliament (974/1995). The government aid authority responsible for administering the transfer is the State Regional Administrative Agency of Lapland. The Sámi Parliament prepares an annual plan for spending the appropriation, which in practice is binding the municipalities.

In 2016, priority areas of the appropriation were services for older people and health care. The discretionary government transfer is a key channel through which the Sámi people can influence the provision, organisation methods and contents of services arranged for them and thus steer the way their language and culture are maintained and developed in their homeland. The services are mainly provided by the municipalities.

Sámi children, similarly to all other children living in a municipality, are entitled to child health clinic services and school health care, on which provisions are contained in the Health Care Act (1326/2010; Sections 15 and 16).

The tasks of the Sámi unit at the Centre of Expertise on Social Welfare of Northern Finland (Poske) concern developing social welfare expertise, basic, further and continuing education in the social welfare sector, and research, trial and development activities in this sector (Act on Centres of Excellence on Social Welfare (laki osaamiskeskustoiminnasta, 1230/2001)). The special national task of the centre is developing services based on the Sámi language and culture. The Sámi unit operates in conjunction with the Sámi Parliament.

Of the discretionary government transfer granted to the Centre of Excellence on Social Welfare, 1.5% is earmarked as a special grant for responding to the service needs of the Sámi-speaking population.

The current social welfare and health care sector reform is likely to change the role of municipalities as service providers. The Sámi Parliament will be informed as the reform progresses, and it will have a possibility to participate in the reform processes. The Sámi Parliament will be consulted separately once the proposals concerning the reform have been developed further.