

12th Session of the Forum on Minority Issues
Education, Language and the Human Rights of Minorities
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Intervention of Finland

Madame Chairperson,

Finland is a multilingual country with two official languages and four other languages whose users' rights are laid down in legislation. Approximately 90 per cent of Finns speak Finnish as their first language and some 5 per cent speak Swedish. In addition, Finland has other domestic minority languages. About 10 000 Sami people speak Sami languages and some 5000 people speak Karelian. Romani language is also spoken in Finland, and we have our own sign language.

Let me briefly focus on our experiences in education in the Sami languages, since they are at the risk of disappearing.

Language nest approach has proven to be efficient and effective way to maintain and promote learning and usage of Sami languages. In a language nest, older speakers of the language take part in the education of children through intergenerational language transference. Language nests are similar to day care centers, and their purpose is to familiarize small children to language and culture. We have increased language nest activities considerably in cooperation with the Sámi Parliament.

There is one group in particular that is crucial in efforts to maintain minority languages – children and young people. In the case of Sami people, it is essential that Sami children learn their own languages at school and receive their education through the medium of those languages. A challenge for us in Finland has been the fact that a majority of Sámi children live outside the Sámi homeland. We are currently further strengthening Sami language education outside of the Sami homeland. First Sami language primary education class started in Helsinki last year to complement already existing distance education services.

I thank you!