

SUMMARY

The Experience of the Sami People in Norway following the Chernobyl Accident

The Norwegian Sami people in the Southern Sami areas is a small population group of around 1000 people. We are mainly reindeer herders. It is a traditional way of living, where we follow the reindeer herd between summer, fall, winter and spring pastures. Reindeer husbandry is also industry, the main income source is meat production, but it is also the only industry that is defined as Sami by the Norwegian government. The year around pasture out in the wild, make the reindeer herd vulnerable to disasters like the Chernobyl accident. But reindeer husbandry is not only industry; it is also a cultural heritage. According to the Norwegian anthropologist and writer Eriksen, the definition of *culture* as term can be (my translation):

A term without objective criteria, but can be explained as the thoughts, knowledge and skills people acquires as members of a society.

(Eriksen & Sørheim 1994).

For the Sami people reindeer herding is not a job, but a way of living. It involves the whole family, and the learning begins early, often before the age of seven. It is a traditional-based learning - "*Learning through participation and own experiences*" is the only way you can become a reindeer herder. After the Chernobyl accident, the people got anxious and distressed. Not having control over the situation, and not having any knowledge about nuclear disasters, was something that greatly concerned the Sami people. Suddenly we had to trust that the information we received was correct. Governmental help to manage the new situation was not only necessary, but also fundamental. New solutions were enforced, that was **not** based on traditional knowledge and past experience. For instance, we have to fence and feed the animals instead of using the natural pasture.

After the accident we were moving into a new reality, "a new way of living". Suddenly the slaughter had to be scheduled after the level of radioactive waste in reindeer. So we were no longer allowed to slaughter the animals in winter time when the calves are largest and the quality of the meat is the best. Now we had to slaughter in autumn instead. Traditionally, we would use every part of the reindeer for food, clothes, hand crafts and arts. But now the animals are fed with industry produced animal feed and the skin and the intestines can no longer be used because the industry feed makes it too fragile. The food that was located out in the wild was no longer "available". The traditional summer diet of freshwater fish, berries and mushrooms was no longer recommended. Almost all of the basic food had to be obtained from the store instead of being gathered by ourselves.

All this had a great impact on the traditional knowledge and understanding of taking care of the animals and of the consumption of meat and entrails. My generation has lost much of the inheritance the elderly people possessed. It is more than 25 years since the Chernobyl accident affected us, and we have still not been able to return to a normal, pre-accident situation. The cost of such a disaster has long term economic and human aspects that in the current situation are carried by the reindeer owners and their families...

Some examples: change of diet, additional work in the form of feeding with industry produced animal food, buy reindeer meat for consumption from less contaminated areas, the fear of consequences for future generations and the loss of traditional knowledge and language. Some of these examples are temporary others are irreversible.

This is our earth and the ground that give us the food. If the worst would happen, if we have to abolish reindeer herding totally, it will be almost impossible to maintain the Southern Sami culture and language. The question many of the reindeer herders ask is: “If the Sami people experience another disaster like Chernobyl, will reindeer farming as a cultural tradition continue to exist in southern Sapmi - also in the future?”