

The Norwegian TRC

Truth, Reconciliation, and Public Engagement

1 Introduction

In 2018, the Norwegian Parliament appointed a commission to investigate the Norwegianisation policy and injustice against the Sámi and Kven/Norwegian Finnish peoples (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission) (Norwegian Parliament, 2018). This Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), as we call it here, is set to finalise their work by 1 June 2023 and establish the basis of recognition of the collective and individual experiences of the Indigenous Sámi and the National Minorities – the Kven/Norwegian Finns and the Forest Finns¹ – caused by the enforcement of the Norwegian assimilation policy by the state authorities. We focus on the first three years of the commission’s public engagement as defined by the mandate, and on the methods applied. By public engagement we understand the efforts of the commission directed towards the Indigenous Sámi, including their representative political institution and organisations; the National Minorities, including their organisations; and the more indefinable wider public which is referred to in the TRC mandate as the ‘majority population’. We have emphasised the Sámi and Kven/Norwegian Finns’ perceptions and expectations in relation to these efforts. How does the TRC public engagement correspond with the expectations arising from the TRC’s mandate?

TRCs were originally established to facilitate reconciliation and build long-lasting peace in countries transitioning to democracies from human rights abuses by violent regimes. In these cases, the majority of citizens pursued these truth-seeking processes. The Norwegian TRC, however, belongs to a new cluster of TRCs created not because of regime change, but established

¹ While the traditional living area of the indigenous Sámi stretches from the north all the way down to the northern part of southern Norway, the Kven/Norwegian Finns settled originally in the north of Norway (mostly in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). The Kven/Norwegian Finns are descendants of Finnish immigrants from around the Gulf of Bothnia who began to settle in Finnmark from the late Middle Ages. Regular migration took place from the early eighteenth century to the two northernmost counties in Norway, Troms and Finnmark (Minde, 2005). The Forest Finns immigrated from Finland and settled during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the eastern part of southern Norway in the border area between Norway and Sweden.

in old and stable democracies. In these states the abuses have been inflicted on Indigenous peoples and minority groups by the democratic state itself, and it is the groups themselves that have voiced a claim for a TRC (Stanton, 2011). The 12 members of the Norwegian commission appointed by the Norwegian Parliament were suggested by the Sámi Parliament² and several organisations. By virtue of their own expertise, the commissioners represent only themselves (Høybråten, 2021). In this sense, they exemplify what Holst and Molander (2017, p. 235) point out: contemporary societies depend on many forms of expertise, and modern democracies host a plethora of expert bodies.

The Canadian TRC is often mentioned as a model for the Norwegian TRC. It was also referred to by the members of the Norwegian Parliament in their motion for the TRC (Motion (2016–2017)): “As an example of truth commissions that can serve as a model for the commission proposed here, the proponents will highlight the Canadian Truth Commission, even though it had a more limited mandate, namely the residential schools, and even if conditions in Canada and Norway – despite overlapping features – were quite different” (Norwegian Parliament, 2017).

We shall refrain from fully fledged comparisons between the Canadian and Norwegian truth commissions, but will identify aspects we regard as relevant for our assessment of the Norwegian TRC’s approach to public engagement. In 2008–2015, the Canadian TRC investigated the abuses towards indigenous children in residential schools. The Norwegian TRC’s mandate is to “map the consequences of the Norwegianisation policy regarding the opportunities for the Sámi and Kven/Norwegian Finns³ to use and practise their own language, culture, and traditional trade.” The mandate describes three tasks of the TRC: 1) to perform a historical survey to map the Norwegian authorities’ policy and activities towards the Sámi and Kven/Norwegian Finns; 2) to carry out an investigation of the effects of the Norwegianisation policy, how the policy has affected the majority population’s attitudes to the Sámi and Kven/Norwegian Finns, and the present-day consequences, and 3) to propose measures to contribute to further reconciliation. The purpose of the Norwegian TRC is twofold: to lay the groundwork for

² The Sámi Parliament, or the Sámediggi in Sámi language, is a democratically elected body by and among Sámi in Norway. There are Sámi Parliaments in Sweden and Finland, too, but the legal foundation and the scope of political power differs (Mörkenstam, Josefsen, & Nilsson). None of the parliaments have legislative or tax authority.

³ The mandate mentions the Sámi and the Kven/Norwegian Finns. The Forest Finns were included by the TRC in May 2020.

recognition of assimilation experiences and to establish a common understanding of how Norwegian authorities and the society treated entire or parts of the indigenous Sámi and national minority populations and their cultures (Norwegian Parliament, 2018). As a main goal is to establish a common understanding of the past and broader knowledge about the common history, the mandate also tasks the commission with producing a final report and finding adequate tools to convey this knowledge. This can be done on digital media, through cooperation with traditional mass media, and other channels regarded as appropriate.

Therefore, we argue that scrutinising the public engagement of the commission will illustrate how the TRC proposes to lay the ground for a common understanding of the assimilation policy and process and what measures have been taken to reach this goal. As for the methods, the TRC was expected to engage in systematic and close cooperation with the relevant environments and organisations to ensure that they were involved and consulted during the work. In analysing the TRC's operationalisation of this part of the mandate, we draw on Kim Stanton (2011, p. 8; 2022), who maintains that "one of the most important things a truth commission can do is to engage the wider public with its work." Calling attention to the role of previous public inquiries in Canada in respect to indigenous issues, Stanton makes a point that in addition to investigating the subject, these commissions have also "performed a social function by educating a broader audience in the process" (Stanton, 2012, p. 82). Ravi de Costa speaks of TRCs as discursive institutions exemplified by the Canadian TRC, which in their "... gathering, analysis and recirculation of oral and textual records" of the Indigenous Residential School (IRS) system came to rely on the expansive power of the discourse (de Costa, 2017, p. 188). Thus, the TRC is mandated to fulfil a societal function of education by influencing attitudes and opinions of policymakers and citizens, "whereas whether a public inquiry does so will depend on its leadership and the processes adopted" (Stanton, 2012, p. 87). This important role of the TRCs' public engagement justifies our focus on this commission's efforts of being involved with 'its own' publics.

There is extensive literature on truth and reconciliation commissions in relation to a state's forced assimilation policies towards Indigenous peoples, and scholarly attention to these processes in the Nordic and the Norwegian context is increasing further (Haugen, 2022; Kuokkanen, 2020; Saugestad, 2019; Szpak and Bunikowski, 2021; Skogerbø and Vranic, 2022).

A great deal less has been written about the Nordic TRCs' strategies of public engagement. An exception is the master's thesis by Anette Ballari Nilssen (2021), focusing on the open meetings of the TRC. Her analysis leans on Sidsel Saugestad's (2019) application of the concepts of redistribution and recognition in her discussion of the Norwegian TRC in a broader context of Norwegian Sámi relations. She shows that the TRC emphasises recognition, compassion, unity, and agreement/equality rather than redistributive problems and power relations. Another exception is Tore Johnsen's discussion of the Norwegian TRC as a truth and reconciliation commission, which includes a "discussion of the public dimension of the Commission's process beyond that of gathering testimonies" (Johnsen, 2021, p. 20). Johnsen concludes that there are "... few signs that the Norwegian TRC embraces a public dimension beyond this purpose" (p. 40). By 'this purpose' he refers to the gathering of personal narratives as significant in the commission's methodology.

The point of departure is the mandate's goal of establishing a common understanding of the past and broader knowledge about our common history, and the insight of Stanton about the importance of engaging the wider public as illuminated by the Canadian TRC experience with public engagement. We therefore ask *whether and how the Norwegian commission has adopted the scope of action for public engagement provided by the mandate's outward-facing content*. As the commission is mandated to fulfil a social function of public engagement, we discuss their choice of selecting a more secluded working strategy and their priorities of outreach efforts, that is, their methods of public interaction, who they target and how they do it. We draw on Vivien A. Schmidt's (2008) distinction between the policy and political spheres – between the interactive processes of coordinating among policy actors and communication between political actors in the different publics. The commission underlines that they are appointed by the National Parliament on whose behalf they work, and that the findings will not be published until the final report is handed over to the parliament. The TRC used open meetings and personal narratives as the main tools of public engagement to investigate the truth of the Norwegianisation policy. As pointed out by Rosemary Nagy (2012, p. 356), this implies methodological and epistemological challenges, as a truth commission "faces the delicate task of balancing between what Chapman and Ball refer to as 'micro-truth', which refers to the details of specific events and human rights violations, typically voiced in victim testimony, and 'macro-truth', which "provides a framework for understanding the structural causes of violence" (Nagy, 2012, p. 356).

We make use of this distinction between ‘micro-truth’ as personal narratives and ‘macro-truth’ as a framework for public structures, as these two levels of truth are inherently linked (Nagy, 2012, p. 356). We contend that the TRC’s choices on transparency versus a secluded strategy and the way they handle the interconnectedness between personal narratives and ‘macro-truth’ frameworks in the process of investigation affect the utilisation of that scope of action in terms of public engagement.

Our research is based on document studies, attendance at open meetings, the study of recorded open meetings, interviews with Sámi and Kven/Norwegian Finns stakeholders, local organisers of open meetings, media interviews with the leadership of the commission and the TRC public journals, as they may reveal the contact pattern of the TRC. Interviews of the members of the commission could further have enriched the data basis. However, early on in our research in the TRUCOM project, the TRC leadership made it known that interviews with the commission members were regarded as inappropriate, and the TRC chair and the secretariat lead were to answer questions on behalf of the commission⁴ (Norwegian TRC, 2020).

In the next section we will briefly address the Norwegian policy of assimilation as the cause of the establishment of the TRC. In the third section we introduce the theoretical framing of the discussion of the TRC’s public engagement and their methods, which draw on the analytical distinction between the policy and political spheres, and micro-truths versus macro-truths. In part four, casting a glance on the Canadian TRC’s public engagement, we describe core actors’ comprehension of the outreach efforts anchored in the mandate, the expectations related to the TRC’s public engagement, and the interviews and open meetings as the most significant method of TRC contact with the publics. In part five, we discuss these three aspects – the commission’s perceived role of public engagement; the expectations presented to the TRC of core actors in the publics of the Sámi and Kven/Norwegian Finns; and the TRC’s methods –the means of public engagement as a balance between the ‘micro-truth’ and the ‘macro-truth’. In part six, we conclude.

⁴ Letter to TRUCOM, dated 24. August 2020: “Kommissjonen har bedt om at det er kommisjonsleder og sekretariatsleder som svarer på kommisjonens vegne. Forespørsler om intervju kan rettes til sekretariatet” [The commission has asked the commission and the secretariat leaders to respond on behalf of the commission. Interview requests can be forwarded to the secretariat (our translation).]

2 Background: Why a Norwegian TRC?

Inspired by TRC processes in other indigenous areas of the world investigating state assimilating policies and following abuses, the question of a Norwegian TRC was first raised as a Sámi initiative in 2015 (Saugestad, 2019). A year later, the Norwegian Kven organisation called attention to the need to include the Kven in such a process (Association of Norwegian Kvens, 2016). Thus, unlike the Canadian TRC, which was established to investigate abuses of Indigenous children, the mandate of the Norwegian TRC covered both the Indigenous Sámi and two National Minorities groups.

The formal state assimilation policy, labelled as Norwegianisation, was adopted in the 1850s and was practised well into the second half of the twentieth century (Minde 2005, pp. 6–7), targeting the Indigenous Sámi and the Kven/Norwegian Finn population. The success or failure of this policy was measured by the adoption or non-adoption of the Norwegian language by these populations instead of their native language (Minde, 2003, p. 122). State repression of the Sámi and Kven/Norwegian Finns infiltrated all areas of society, such as language, education, and the deprivation of Sámi land rights. As a result of Norwegianisation and repressive policies, many Sámi and Kven individuals – even entire communities – lost their languages and the connection to their cultures. Assimilation was justified through, among others, the argument of increased inclusion of Sámis and Kven in the Norwegian welfare state (Nilsen, 2013). The prevailing view was that the Sámi were of less value compared to Norwegians and that Sámi culture was doomed in the meeting with other, more developed cultures (Andresen, 2016, p. 406). By contrast, the Kven were regarded as a cultured people. They had a status as an immigrant group from Finland, but due to Norwegian security policy considerations, they had to be Norwegianised (Minde, 2005).

While the assimilation policy targeted both Sámi and Kven/Norwegian Finns, the mobilisation of the two groups against this policy differs. The Kven/Norwegian Finns mobilised late and formed their first national organisations in the 1980es. Most of their “efforts were centred on language: they wanted to be recognised as having linguistic rights” (Lane, 2011, p. 61). The Sámi mobilised, for example, politically against Norwegian authorities from the start of

twentieth century, organising themselves both nationally and cross-borderly,⁵ making rights claims. In their attempts of mobilising against the Norwegianisation policy, the Sámi referred to their rights as the country's indigenous inhabitants.

Although an initial change of the Norwegian assimilation policy towards the Sámis started almost 60 years ago with the work of the Sámi Committee and the 1963 discussion in the national parliament (Andresen, 2016), the lingering effects on contemporary political, social, and societal structures remain (Eythórsson, 2003). A landmark of change in Norwegian state policy was the conflict in the late 1970s and early 1980s over the building of a hydro-electric power station on the Alta River in the county of Finnmark. In this conflict, the Sámi movement and the environmental movement joined forces. Demonstrations, civil disobedience, and a hunger strike cast the national and international spotlight on how Norway dealt with its Indigenous peoples. The Sámi presence became impossible to ignore.

The continuous Sámi opposition made headway after the Alta conflict. The Sámi were formally recognised as an Indigenous people protected by international law. Their political rights were acknowledged through the Sámi Act of 1987 and the establishment of the Sámi Parliament, which opened in 1989. In 1988 the constitution was amended to include a separate section on the state's duty to protect and secure Sámi culture, language, and social life. Moreover, the International Labour Organization Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (ILO 169) was ratified by Norway in 1990. As groups with a long-standing history in Norway, the Kven/Norwegian Finns, the Jews, the Forest Finns, as well as the Rom and the Romani peoples were formally recognised as national minorities. As such, they are covered by the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, ratified by Norway in 1998. This and the European Charter for Regional or Minority languages,⁶ ratified by Norway in 1993 and effective as of 1998, had according to Pia Lane (2011, p. 61) a “particularly strong impact on the situation of the Kven language”, given that “they had no linguistic rights prior to the ratification of the Charter.”

Yet, despite the last decades of legal and political development, it is perceived that assimilation processes are still at work, as was acknowledged by the chair of the TRC in an

⁵ The Sámi traditional land is divided between Finland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden.

⁶ In Norway, the Sámi, Kven, Romanes, and Romani language are protected by the Charter (Lane, 2011, p. 58).

interview with a national newspaper (Høybråten, 2023). The gap between formal rights and actual implementation was pointed out, among others, by the Sámi Parliament in 2016: “In the past, the public reluctance towards Sami culture was ideologically and value-based and justified. Now we are faced with arguments about development, limited financial budget resources, consideration of the needs and interests of society at large, and other technical and administrative matters. However, the consequences are exactly the same: Sami interests usually have to give way”⁷ (Sámi Parliament, 2016) (our translation).

3 Discursive Interactive Processes

The Norwegian TRC works in a non-transitional society. We examine the scope of action and possible features of the discursive efforts of the Norwegian TRC, that is, the ways in which the commission is visible in the public discourse it operates within. We draw on Schmidt’s discourse institutionalism (2008, pp. 305–306), which implies a focus on the interactive processes of discourse, addressing “the representation of ideas (how agents say what they are thinking and doing) and the discursive interactions through which actors generate and communicate ideas (to whom they say it) within given institutional contexts (where and when they say it).”

Like its Canadian counterpart, the Norwegian TRC has no legal authority, or ability to directly introduce legislation, and has no redistributive power. Its institutional power and legitimacy depend on public awareness and respect for its work (de Costa 2017, p. 188). Thus, its ability to engage and initiate conversations with, within, and across the different publics is vital in meeting the goal of establishing a common understanding of the past and broader knowledge about the common history, in addition to facilitating future social change. We use the plural form ‘publics’, because publics can have distinct compositions and characters (Niezen, 2017, p. 12). According to Nancy Fraser (1990, p. 77), a multiplicity of publics is preferable to a single public sphere both in stratified societies and egalitarian societies. A public sphere “... is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of

⁷ “Tidligere var den offentlige motviljen mot samisk kultur ideologisk og verdimelessig forankret og begrunnet. Nå møtes vi med argumenter om utvikling, begrensede økonomiske budsjettmidler, hensynet til storsamfunnets behov og interesser og andre tekniske og administrative forhold. Konsekvensene er imidlertid nøyaktig det samme: samiske interesser må som regel vike.”

discursive interaction. This arena is conceptually distinct from the state; it [is] a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state” (Fraser, 1990, p. 57).

Schmidt (2008, p. 308) distinguishes between the policy and political spheres. In the policy sphere, “the coordinative discourse consists of the individuals and groups at the center of policy construction who are involved in the creation, elaboration, and justification of policy and programmatic ideas,” while the political sphere is made up of “individuals and groups involved in the presentation, deliberation, and legitimation of political ideas to the general public.” The coordinative discourse in the policy sphere can be top down mediated by political elites while the communicative discourse in the political sphere can be bottom up or remain at the level of civil society, in ‘public conversations’ (Benhabib, 1996 in Schmidt, 2008, p. 311). In our discussion of the TRC’s public engagement and discursive efforts, this distinction between the interactive processes of coordinating among policy actors and communication between political actors in the different publics can turn out useful.

Discursive contestation has been a significant strategy of the Sámi political movement. The groundbreaking changes in the state–Sámi relationship in the 1980s were the outcome of the Alta conflict, but also a result of Sámi organisational efforts to create dialogue with the authorities, and public inquiries. Through discursive contestation, the Sámi have challenged the authorities of the need of setting a new agenda, securing Sámi political participation, and political and legal innovations. As Oskal (2003) has recognised, it became difficult to reject the arguments on normative grounds. The arguments were heeded among those in the Norwegian political public that were universally oriented. The Norwegianisation policies gained national and international attention, a national and international public served as a third part, and the argumentative burden was put on public authorities. Given the significant social function of a TRC to educate and influence attitudes and opinions, such experiences of attracting attention and support from a wider public was also illuminated by the Canadian TRC who “had to use its power to gather and recirculate historical knowledge to produce better relations between people of different cultures” (de Costa 2017, p. 189). Furthermore, according to Ronald Niezen (2017, p. 20), “it is a fallacy to assume that a commission of this kind is simply and straightforwardly receiving, recording and preserving narratives from witnesses ... (rather) it is actively cultivating

them at the same time ... through conditions of affirmation and encouragement.” Or to speak with Stanton (2011, p. 11): “How well a truth commission educates the public about its work will determine its ability to garner public support. A high level of public support can bolster a commission’s credibility and thus its reputation, which can in turn smooth the way for the commission to access information and address the needs of victims. Also, important to maintain its own credibility is a truth commission’s management of public expectations about its work.”

A central question is how the commission ‘cultivates’ its different publics in terms of educative efforts and knowledge sharing, to prepare these for what is to come in terms of the commission’s final report. In our attempt to scrutinise the commission’s strategies of public engagement, we draw up a framework for analysis of the discursivity of the Norwegian TRC. Nagy (2012, p. 356) calls this the balance between the ‘micro-truth’, which refers to the details of specific events and human rights violations, and the ‘macro-truth’, which “provides a framework for understanding the structural causes of violence”. ‘Macro-truths’ are “the assessment of context, causes, and patterns of human rights violations. ...” (Chapman & Ball, 2001, p. 41). Collecting a range of micro-truths does not necessarily imply structural change and reconciliation. According to Nagy (2012, p. 356), these two levels are inherently linked.

How does the Norwegian TRC communicate ‘micro-truth’ and ‘macro-truth’? Societal change depends on the discursive power of the commissions, as these do not reflect the reality, but rather produce it and make it appear true and plausible (Renner (2013) in de Costa, 2017, p. 189). Discussing whether micro-truths contribute to more than re-narrations, and work as a catalyst for increased knowledge building and structural changes, adds to the problematisation of the Norwegian TRC’s strategies on how to contribute to reconciliation.

4 TRCs in Old Democratic States

The Canadian and Norwegian TRCs differ from TRCs established as part of democratic transition and peace agreements. They belong to a group of commissions established in non-transitional states where forced assimilation was carried out by the state within the political framework of old and well-established democracies. The targeted assimilation policy has ended both in Canada and

Norway, but assimilation processes are still at work in these constitutional states with a long history of abuse. The TRCs not only map past injuries but are also expected to address the ongoing effects of assimilation of the targeted minorities. As Skaar (2023a, pp. 6–8) argues, the Canadian and Norwegian TRCs were instituted in well-established democracies – as opposed to TRCs in authoritarian regimes or resulting from violent conflicts – and focus solely on the historical repression of Indigenous people and minority groups. The violations were instigated and legitimised by public policy and legal decisions, infusing the societal structures with a condescending perception of ‘the others’. And finally, the recommendations reflect the current oppressive structures, and address the democratic states’ need for a structural and societal transformation of their assimilationist policies.

The Canadian and Norwegian TRCs have a shared focus on engaging the non-indigenous population. According to Stanton (2012, p. 93), “... a failure to engage the non-indigenous public in that process will impede the TRC’s ability to fulfil this social function.” This concern also applies to the Norwegian TRC.

The presentation of the empirical data is structured into two sections. Whereas the point of departure is a juxtaposition of the two TRCs, the emphasis lies on the Norwegian TRC. The first section presents aspects of how the outreach efforts anchored in the mandates has been comprehended by what we define as core actors and their expectations of public engagement. In the second section, we discuss the open meetings, including the attendees’ views on these.

4.1 Comprehending the Mandate and Expectations of Public Engagement

Despite the differences between Canada and Norway in history and in state policies towards Indigenous peoples, assimilation became a main strategy of their nation-building processes. In contrast to typical British settler states with historic disenfranchisement and exclusion of Indigenous peoples from political participation (Murphy, 2008), the Sámi were not denied the right to vote, but were still exposed to harsh state assimilation policies. The mandate of the Canadian TRC⁸ was to identify sources and create a complete record of the Indigenous

⁸ https://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/SCHEDULE_N.pdf

Residential School (IRS) system and legacy, acknowledge Residential School experiences, impacts, and consequences over several generations. The Canadian TRC was established as a result of court claims by IRS survivors, which led to the IRS Settlement Agreement between former students of IRS, the Assembly of First Nations, the legal counsel of the churches, and the federal government. The mandate specified the task of the TRC as creating awareness and public education about the IRS system among Canadians. The detailed mandate was envisaged to facilitate truth and reconciliation events and public meetings at both national and community levels, as well as carry out consultations and give public statements. The mandate included a separate Indian Residential School Survivor Committee to assist the TRC with ten Indigenous peoples' representatives from Indigenous organisations and survivors' groups.

The Norwegian commission's mandate had a separate subchapter on methods; the work was to build on a systematic and close partnership with affected communities and organisations. The commission should also consider establishing one or multiple reference groups or equivalent collaboration forums with community and organisation representatives, as had been voiced by, among others, South Sámi communities.⁹ The Sámi Parliament similarly identified the value of reference groups in terms of the diversity of impact on Sámi societal sectors by the policies of Norwegianisation (Sámi Parliament, 2018). Such reference groups were likewise recommended by the Association of Norwegian Kvens (Norwegian Parliament, 2018, p. 26). Thus, the TRC was offered means to engage with core groups and organisations, and to address different public audiences, but no such means were adopted. The TRC's communication plan could have provided an insight into the rationale of this strategy, but according to the TRC's secretariat this plan was regarded an internal document.¹⁰ In Canada, the TRC mandate secured a separate committee to assist the TRC. Another way of dialogue with those whom the work concerns is by forwarding findings from ongoing work. The Norwegian TRC mandate made provision for progress reports, but unlike in Canada, preliminary reports were not produced.

TRCs in general have several missions, such as reporting to the public on the ongoing work and to increase public awareness. They should not just document wrongdoings and identify victims but should establish a common understanding of the consequences of public authorities'

⁹ See Sámi Parliament's representative Nora Bransfjell at the Sámediggi webinar on TRC work: <https://sametinget.kommunetv.no/archive/161>

¹⁰ Information by e-mail from the Secretariat leader dated 31. January 2022.

assimilation policy towards Indigenous peoples and minorities. In Canada, the first TRC withdrew less than a year after starting its work due to differences of opinion on the purpose of the TRC, as they could not agree whether the commission was to merely document ‘the truth’ or have an outward approach by including reconciliation in the ongoing work (Stanton, 2022). The Canadian TRC became, according to de Costa, a discursive institution due to the bulk of energy and resources “expended in gathering and the circulation a history of the IRS system, recording everything as it went” (de Costa, 2017, p. 190). The establishing of a common understanding as mandated for the Norwegian TRC will according to the TRC’s chair be published when the final report is presented.

In 2018, the newly appointed TRC member Per Oskar Kjølaas voiced an expectation in a newspaper article that the TRC work should be open: “The political violence that has been perpetrated has been public, and therefore publicity is required in a work that is to lead to healing. There must be some symmetry here”¹¹ (Wersland, 2018) (our translation). In connection with the establishment of the TRC in 2018, Aili Keskitalo, the then president of the Sámi Parliament, stated: “This can be the boost for both public enlightenment and reconciliation where we can improve relations between the Sámi and Norwegians”¹² (Solaas, 2018) (our translation).

During the Norwegian Parliament’s work with the mandate, the Sámi Parliament gave several inputs, among others the need for an engaged TRC, contributing to the public debate: “Commitment must be created for the commission also outside Kven and Sámi environments. The majority population must be made aware of the Commission’s work. The Commission should contribute to the societal debate. An information/information strategy on the part of the Commission should be considered in connection with the mandate.”¹³ (meeting between the Norwegian Parliament and the Sámi Parliament 27 February 2018, our translation).

The same expectation to the commission was forwarded by the Association of Norwegian Kvens in a meeting with the Norwegian Parliament: “Dissemination of the commission’s work to

¹¹ “Den politiske volden som har vært utøvd har vært offentlig, og derfor kreves det offentlighet i et arbeide som skal føre til helbredelse. Det må være en viss symmetri her.”

¹² “Dette kan bli det løftet for både folkeopplysning og forsoning som kan forbedre forhold mellom samer og nordmenn.”

¹³ “Det må skapes engasjement for kommisjonen også utenfor kvenske og samiske miljøer. Majoritetsbefolkningen må gjøres kjent med kommisjonens arbeid. Kommisjonen bør bidra til samfunnsdebatten. Informasjon/informasjonsstrategi fra kommisjonens side bør overveies i forbindelse med mandatet.”

the population is important. An information strategy must be drawn up”¹⁴ (Norwegian Parliament) (our translation). And in 2021, the Norwegian Sami Association issued a statement: “The NSR has an expectation that the commission will place itself in the public conversation, because the dissemination of the truth is as important as the documentation”¹⁵ (Norwegian Sámi Association, 2021) (our translation).

In 2020 and 2021, Lill Tove Fredriksen (2020a–f; 2021), a Sámi academic, wrote seven letters to the editor (op-eds), addressing what she called a silent TRC. She called for TRC participation in the public sphere and their vision on how peoples’ experiences will be followed by reconciliation and how the connection between truth and reconciliation could be handled. She called for a more visible TRC and asked for updates on their work and how this could contribute to the reconciliation process by looking into the consequences of the Norwegianisation policy on the majority population. In her last letter to the editor, Fredriksen asks if the silence is an effort of domination or if it is an ideal of ‘scientific distance.’ Expectations of a commission being part of public discourses resonate with the mandate which states that the TRC shall find suitable means to convey the knowledge gained by using both digital and traditional media and other channels.

The TRC chair Dagfinn Høybråten posted a letter to the editor two days after Fredriksen’s first letter with the heading “TRCs work between trust and silence.” He did not address Fredriksen directly but explained the TRC work and mandate. “The Norwegian Parliament had asked for a knowledge base that can lead to a common understanding of the Norwegianisation policy and proposals for measures to bring about further reconciliation”¹⁶ (Høybråten, 2020). He gave a thorough introduction of the stories and experiences that the commission were collecting and stated: “We recognise that being listened to can reconcile.”¹⁷ He also commented on expectations on openness:

“The commission works as openly as possible during its investigation. We have our own website with an open meeting calendar. There we have published the commission’s plan for obtaining sources and the interview guides. We have a public record. We use Facebook. We are responsive to the media. We also follow societal debates related to the

¹⁴ “Formidling av kommisjonens arbeid til befolkningen er viktig. Det må legges opp til en informasjonsstrategi.”

¹⁵ “NSR har en forventning til at kommisjonen skal ta plass i den offentlige samtalen, fordi formidlingen av sannheten er like viktig som dokumentasjonen.”

¹⁶ “Stortinget har bedt om et kunnskapsgrunnlag som kan føre til felles forståelse av fornorskningen, og forslag til tiltak for å få til ytterlig forsoning.”

¹⁷ “Vi anerkjenner at det å bli lyttet til kan være forsonende, (...) ”

issues in our mandate. And we have a YouTube channel where we stream selected open meetings”¹⁸ (Høybråten, 2020; our translation).

Høybråten has underlined on many occasions that the commission is working on behalf of the Norwegian Parliament, and nothing of the ongoing work will be published before the final report is handed over to the parliament. He justifies this by referring to the TRC as a commission of inquiry (see, for example, the TRC chair at open meetings in Trondheim in 2019 and in Lakselv in 2020). In their investigation, the commission cooperates with Sámi, Kven/Norwegian Finns’, and Forest Finns’ institutions and organisations, and municipalities in conjunction with meetings, events, and gathering of personal stories. The open meetings were promoted by the Norwegian TRC as the most significant method for contact between the TRC and the publics.

4.2 Interviews and Open Meetings as a Method of Public Engagement

The commission should according to the mandate gather stories related to the Norwegianisation policy from individuals and groups by arranging meetings and/or interviews. Individuals should be encouraged to tell their stories in writing, through sound or a video recording, or by applying another suitable format.

When promoting the meetings, the TRC urged the attendees to share their stories with the commission, either at the meeting or in private interviews. By the end of 2022, the TRC had collected more than 700 personal stories. These stories are withheld from the public¹⁹ for 100 years in accordance with a special law adopted for this purpose (Act on Access to Information, 2020).

At the open meetings, participants raised a range of challenging issues, such as language loss, lack of Sámi language teachers, and how children could maintain the Sámi language after they start education in primary schools. Other topics were the situation of native speakers of Sámi

¹⁸ “Kommissjonen jobber så åpent som det er anledning til under et granskingsarbeid. Vi har en egen nettside med åpen møtekalender. Der har vi også offentliggjort kommisjonens plan for innhenting av kilder og intervjuguidene. Vi har en offentlig journal. Vi benytter Facebook. Vi er imøtekommende overfor media. Vi følger også samfunnsdebatter knyttet til de problemstillinger som ligger i vårt mandat. Og vi har en YouTube-kanal der vi streamer utvalgte åpne møter.”

¹⁹ Whether stories will be published or not is up to the individual to decide.

and their relationship to the Sámi who did not speak the language, the lack of knowledge about Sámi culture and societies among the majority population and politicians in general, land rights, land use and management, and area encroachment and reindeer herding. The meetings have varied from one area to another, but general issues of language loss, culture, and livelihoods have been addressed. Already at the start of the meetings, indigenous land rights were raised as a topical concern. Most of the 39 open meetings were initiated and organised by local organisations or individuals with an active role in the communities. In addition, the members of the commission attended festivals and other public events to inform about the ongoing work.

Open meetings were also important for the Canadian TRC. However, there are significant differences between these meetings. In Canada, the national meetings or events lasted several days, and in practice there were no limitations on how long each contributor could speak. On the community level, the “communities themselves would design the community events” (Stanton 2022, p. 112). Also, the Canadian meetings were broadcast.

In contrast, about half of the Norwegian open meetings were published on the TRC YouTube channel.²⁰ Only one of the meetings has had more than 1000 streamings. These open meetings were limited to approximately two hours and followed fairly closely the template issued by the TRC. This template consisted of a cultural item (a song or traditional Sámi music of joik, a poem, a reading); welcoming words by a municipal representative, often the mayor; and a presentation of the TRC mandate and work, including how people could share their stories. Shorter stories were then presented by a couple of invitees (mostly Sámi and Kven/Norwegian Finns), before audience members could ask for the floor. The majority who gave statements were Sámi or Kven/Norwegian Finns, parallel to Canada where Indigenous people took the floor. Our interviewees report low media coverage of the open meetings. They also found the structured meetings informative but less communicative and conversational. They had expected conversations between the commission and attendees, as well as more discussions between the members of the commission.²¹

²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/@sannhets-ogforsoningskommi36>

²¹ Interviews carried out up till October 2022.

5 Discussion: Norwegian TRC Efforts of Public Engagement

In this article we ask how the Norwegian TRC has made use of the scope of action provided by its mandate's outreach elements. The TRC has not publicly informed about their interpretation and prioritisation of the mandate, and reference groups and preliminary reports have been turned down. The final report will constitute the knowledge base which should lead to a common understanding of the Norwegianisation policy with measures of reconciliation. However, the Sámi and Kven/Norwegian Finns expected that the TRC would contribute to the societal debate during its work. A similar point was made by our informants who stated that the open meetings as the main venue of public contact were informative on general aspects of the TRC work, but less communicative and conversational regarding the content of their findings. An explanation to this more secluded working strategy is that the commission has viewed itself as an investigative or inquiring body with the end report as the main means of communication.

We have sought to understand the commission's position on their role of public engagement in discussing the institutional context of the discourse of the different publics. This builds on Schmidt's distinction between the interactive processes of coordination among policy actors and communication between political actors in the different publics. We further draw on the distinction between 'micro' and 'macro' truths to accentuate the specific experiences of individuals and groups versus the structural and institutional context in which the TRC discursive approach to public engagement has taken place.

5.1 How to Understand the TRC Public Engagement

The Norwegian TRC has been reluctant to take a more active role towards the publics. Statements by members of the commission at seminars and open meetings have indicated a view on reconciliation as finding and documenting the truth. The chair of the TRC has emphasised that they are an investigative commission, "which should not send out pilot balloons and preliminary

conclusions which could create more debate and attention”²² (Lanes, 2021) (our translation). This point of departure, being an “investigative commission and not a travelling seminar” was also mentioned at the open meeting in Karasjok (13 October 2021). Their task is to report to the mandator, “but also communicate with people about the job we are doing so that many can be part of painting the picture we are painting for our mandator”²³ (Open meeting, Karasjok 13 October 2021, our translation). Furthermore, the commission stresses that their work should contribute to reconciliation. Still, based on what the core TRC actors say, it appears that this should happen without the commission’s communicating on, for example, the understanding of the mandate during their work.

While the Norwegian TRC has taken a more insulated position, the quotations and statements from stakeholders in the process of the TRC’s work indicate expectations of a more open and extrovert commission conveying knowledge to the publics, spurring debates on perspectives and how reconciliation can take place at different levels and in different contexts. Our empirical review shows that the Sámi and Kven expected the TRC to have a clearer public engagement. Instead of viewing reconciliation as starting from the publication of the report, there were expectations of the process itself as an educative effort impacting the relationship between truth and reconciliation.

The mandate’s formulation of a common understanding of the past and a broader knowledge of the common history creates the discursive foundation for truth and reconciliation, and can be framed as a representation of ideas. The way in which the commission defines itself as an investigative body and how they consider the final report to be the starting point of the actual reconciliation, partly constitutes the commission’s representation of ideas – what arguments are made and how the commission understands the interactive processes by which the ideas are conveyed (Schmidt, 2008, p. 305). The institutional context of the discourse of the different publics can through the lenses of Schmidt be distinguished between the interactive processes of coordinating among policy actors and communication between political actors in the different publics. The TRC has emphasised their role as an expert commission which answers to the

²² “Vi er en granskningskommisjon og kan ikke drive og sende ut prøveballonger og foreløpige konklusjoner som kunne skapt mer debatt og oppmerksomhet.”

²³ “..., men også kommunisere med folk om den jobben vi gjør slik at mange kan være med å tegne det bildet som vi skal tegne overfor vår oppdragsgiver.”

mandator, the National Parliament. While they have informed about their work at the open meetings, the Norwegian TRC has not prioritised the social function of conversation and dialogue with broader public audiences.

At the outset of its work, the Norwegian TRC compared its mandate with the task of commissions investigating major accidents or other serious single incidents, such as the Scandinavian Star Ferry disaster.²⁴ This partly explains the position of the commission: the parliament appointed the commission as an investigative body in accordance with parliamentary rules of procedure (Høybråten, 2021). Still, there is an obvious difference between investigations of major accidents and the inquiries of the TRC. Investigations of severe accidents can turn out to involve serious crime and violation of the laws. Concerns of privacy and the rule of law lead to closed investigations and a norm of restrictions. But these are not the investigations the TRC deals with. They do not inquire into a possible crime or disaster. They investigate the long-lasting assimilation policy by the state itself, a policy that had the clear aim to wipe out the languages, culture, land rights, and way of life of the indigenous Sámi and the national minorities by using acts, regulations, and public structures, in addition to promoting the superiority of Norwegian culture. Stanton (2012, p. 82) argues that the public inquiry model should not be rejected as a means for addressing historical injustices in established democracies, but also emphasises the social function of public inquiries and cites the chair of a Royal Commission Gerald Le Dain: “[O]ne of the most important roles of large-scale public inquiries is their social function. Part of this social function is to ... influence the attitudes and opinions of both policy-makers and citizens.”²⁵ Referring to Priscilla Hayner, Tore Johnsen distinguishes (Hayner 2011 in Johnsen, 2021, p. 31), between established parliamentary commissions and TRCs where the TRCs engage directly and broadly with the affected population. The affected in our case expected dissemination and a public conversation.

The mandate gave the TRC the means to be more publicly active and to address different public audiences. As already mentioned, they could, for instance, establish reference groups or equivalent collaboration forums, as voiced by, among others, South Sámi communities. The Sámi Parliament and the Association of Norwegian Kvens (Norwegian Parliament, 2018, p. 11, 26)

²⁴ <https://www.lifeinnorway.net/new-scandinavian-star-investigation/>

²⁵ Le Dain chaired the Royal Commission on the Non-medicinal Use of Drugs a few years prior to the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry issued in 1977 (Stanton, 2012, pp. 82–83).

also pointed out the significance of reference groups as actors in the institutional context, expecting broader public conversations. Facilitating debate and dialogue, reference groups and interim reports are tools to establish rapport with the publics. This was recognised in the mandate, but the approach was not utilised by the commission. The commission did however engage with relevant organisations and institutions, as was also indicated by the chair of the TRC. This engagement can promote joint discourses including different approaches to how reconciliation can be achieved. These meetings were usually not open for the public, unlike the open meetings arranged by the commission. Neither was insight available through public minutes or media coverage. Closeness as a mechanism for rational exchange of views can sometimes be justified for promoting debates undisturbed by strategic action, but closeness must be combined with openness (Eriksen & Weigård, 1999, pp. 290–292).

The Norwegian TRC's secluded position contrasts with the Canadian TRC's outward-looking approach. The departure point in Canada was a majority public that was unaware of the residential school policies and the wide-ranging consequences (Niezen, 2017, p. 146). In Norway there is little or no knowledge on the Norwegianisation policy and the consequences of it among the majority population. In Canada there was a parallel effort on increasing awareness in that the commission "embarked on a mission of public education and persuasion, of gathering evidence for future use in research, and informing the unenlightened along the way, mostly through the survivor-centred events it sponsored and the media activity surrounding them" (Niezen, 2017, p. 147). The Canadian TRC "assumed a task of public education and of reforming the dominant historical narrative of the state" (Niezen, 2016, p. 921). In Norway, data from two surveys (May 2021, October 2022) indicate that knowledge about the TRC's work has increased among the general nationwide population. But on questions about the importance of mapping the assimilation policy and the TRC's contribution to reconciliation, the response is equivocal. The importance of mapping seems to be reduced in the category 'imperative' while 'pretty important' shows the opposite. The ambiguity also applies to the response to the TRC's contribution to reconciliation (Skaar & Monstad, 2023).²⁶ Beyond these surveys, however, we lack data on the expectations of the majority population regarding the TRC work. We also do not know how the

²⁶ The TRUCOM project on Expectations, Truth, and Reconciliation is responsible for five surveys – one in 2021, two in 2022, and two in 2023. The data of the surveys are gathered through the Norsk medborgerpanel (Norwegian citizens' panel) in close cooperation with DIGSSCORE, an infrastructure for advanced social science data collection and multidisciplinary research, University of Bergen (Skaar, 2023b).

TRC has assessed how to deal with the majority population in their work. The commission has not publicly shared their thoughts on objectives and means of public engagement either in general or with the non-indigenous public.

5.2 Managing ‘Micro-Truth’ and ‘Macro-Truth’

The way the open meetings were organised with a fixed agenda, strict structure, and a limit on minutes available to raise issues and questions, made them less rigged for dialogue. Important questions and individual narratives were nevertheless presented at the open meetings, which can be understood at a level of ‘micro-truth.’ While the members of the TRC commented on these questions and narratives, our impression is that the dialogic potential remained unutilised. Our review of the open meetings showed that the information presented by the commission referred to how the commission worked; standardised and less ‘new’ or ‘macro-truth’ information was shared at the meetings. Another approach by the commission could have motivated and provoked debates between the participants on how to understand forced assimilation in terms of state politics and power structures, and what could be useful and relevant remedies of reconciliation. The standardised information and the limited time frame indicate that the purpose for the meetings (the why and how) has been to motivate people to tell their stories in confined settings, not to educate or deliberate the publics.

What Nagy (2012, p. 356) calls the balance between the ‘micro-truth’ and the ‘macro-truth’ can be applied to accentuate the specific experiences of individuals and groups versus the structural and institutional context in which experiences concerning the TRC discursive approach to public engagement have taken place. As mentioned, the individuals’ and groups’ stories related to the effects of the Norwegianisation policy can out of concern for the individual be withheld from the public in accordance with designated legislation. According to Nagy (2012, p. 351), truth commissions are responsible for producing official records of contextualised explanations “of the causes, nature, extent, impact and legacy of violence. Overarching explanations are produced and performed in public hearings and the written report.” While acknowledging the necessity of exemption from public disclosure due to privacy protection, a topical question is whether the commission could have been open about the analytical questions generated from

individual testimonies and archival studies. The most significant similarity between the Norwegian and Canadian TRCs are the testimonies. As we have seen, the Norwegian TRC differs from the Canadian commission in terms of knowledge sharing. Information on the Canadian TRC's work was conveyed both in community and national events. Showing caution in communicating 'micro-truth' is understandable and necessary out of ethical concerns. Individuals have a right to privacy protection. Generated 'macro-truth' on the structural and institutional levels could, however, provide significant insights throughout the TRC work as a basis for understanding the structural causes and impacts of the assimilation processes. Generated 'macro-truths' could contribute to increased public awareness and knowledge on the assimilation policy and might help to understand how the shared narratives constitute parts of shared collective experiences. The significance and need of better insights in collective communal experiences was raised from the audience at the open meeting in Karasjok (13 October 2021). Similar concerns were voiced by our interviewees: the form of open meetings did not allow for joint, collective narratives.

Not least, a public discussion on collective experiences and 'macro-truths' could promote a joint discussion on how the different epochs of the state-sponsored assimilation policy can be interpreted, for instance, the comprehension of core concepts like colonisation and decolonisation. These aspects have not been publicly problematised by the commission. The commission did, however, in their presentation of how reconciliation can be understood, highlight four components of reconciliation – emotions, knowledge, attitudes, and actions. The TRC also stressed the necessity of the majority population to acknowledge the experiences of those who have faced assimilation (cf. open meetings, Hattfjelldal on 27 August 2021, Karasjok on 13 October 2021), but there are few traces of how the TRC facilitated for the majority to be part of the process. This again links to the point already made, namely the role of the different publics and how the debate within these could have helped to shed light on power asymmetries within state structures and general social structures.

While we expect a mature debate when the commission presents the final report with recommendations, we believe that a continuous debate about the relationship between 'micro- and macro-truths' could have enriched the debate to come. Here we lean on the insight by Holst and Molander (2017, p. 244) that democratised expertise may enrich expert contributions

epistemically. In a TRC context it would imply being more publicly engaged and creating more awareness and discussion, fostering a broader public engagement also during the work of the commission.

6 Summary and Conclusion

We have discussed the question of *whether and how the commission has adopted the scope of action for public engagement provided by the mandate's outward-facing content*. To shed light on this part of the TRC mission, we have explored the outreach efforts of the TRC and its methods of public engagement, who it targeted and how it did it. In doing so, we have applied the conceptual distinctions between the coordinating representation of ideas and the discursive interactions through which actors generate and communicate ideas; discourse in the policy sphere; and the communication between political actors in the different publics. By discussing the TRC's managing of 'micro-truth' versus 'macro-truth' further helps to illuminate the TRC adoption of the scope of action. We conclude that there is a discrepancy between the expectations arising from the mandate and the actual public engagement of the commission.

The open meetings arranged by the commission were venues providing for individuals sharing their stories related to the Norwegianisation policy. We assume the commission's meetings with organisations and institutions have been significant for mutual information.²⁷ However, our investigation of the TRC's public engagement and discursiveness also shows that the potential of 'cultivating' different publics to establish broader knowledge of the common history of assimilation in Norway, could have been utilised more progressively. In the open meetings, the commission did not deviate from the general information about their work, nor did they provide a framework of content that could have guided the discussions on reconciliation efforts.

We do not have data on how the absence of such targeted public education on the TRC work could have affected public support, or if Stanton's (2011) claim is valid that the TRC's credibility is dependent on its "management of public expectations about its work." What we assert is that the Norwegian TRC did not sufficiently utilise the working period to enhance public

²⁷ Only a few separate meetings with municipalities were initiated by the TRC.

engagement as an open ongoing process and a foundation for reconciliation. On the contrary, the TRC chair underlined that the final report is where the actual reconciliation begins.

The TRC referred to itself as an investigative body working on behalf of the Norwegian Parliament in line with other parliamentary commissions investigating accidents or possible criminal acts and offences. Such commissions have been subject to requirements of confidentiality. Our claim is that this can serve as an explanation for the role taken by the TRC. This assumption is further strengthened by the fact that the TRC did not discuss either their interpretation of the mandate or the scope of action, or their working mode in public. It remains to be seen how this strategy may affect support to and trust in the TRC but also the final report, which according to the TRC will present the truth about the Norwegianisation policy and serve as a tool for reconciliation work. Can the truth(s) about the Norwegianisation policy and its effects be mapped without involving those who experienced the consequences of the policy in processing and interpreting the historic material and the stories told? The ‘truth’ is not something that the TRC unilaterally should investigate and conclude upon. To quote Stanton (2011, p. 11): “it is a fallacy to assume that a commission of this kind is simply and straightforwardly receiving, recording, and preserving narratives from witnesses (..)(rather) it is actively cultivating them at the same time (...) through conditions of affirmation and encouragement.”

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