

Check against delivery.

Opening address by Minister for Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, Audun Lysbakken, at the examination of Norway's 4th Periodic report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Genève, 21 January 2010

Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Norwegian Government, I would like to thank the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child for the valuable work you are doing to promote the rights of children throughout the world. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a vital instrument for safeguarding children's rights at local, national and international level. The Committee acts as an important corrective for *all* nations that have ratified the Convention. We are pleased that Mr Krappmann, the Committee Rapporteur, found time to visit Norway last autumn to meet children and young people. And I am delighted that we today will have a dialogue with the Committee on Norway's follow-up of the Convention.

We have just celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Over these 20 years, the Convention has played an important part in raising awareness about children's living conditions and rights in Norway. It has set the agenda for our children and family policy. It has encouraged our efforts to realise the right of children to be heard. It also underpins our policy on day-care centres and schools, child welfare services and the inclusion of children from minority groups. Norway has made good progress in safeguarding children's rights. Nevertheless, the Convention poses a number of challenges for the Norwegian authorities.

I would like to take this opportunity to describe steps that have been taken to meet some of the Committee's concerns with regard to Norway. I will also highlight some of the Government's main priorities in the field of children's rights.

One of the Committee's observations on our third periodic report was that Norway should continue its efforts to ensure that national legislation is in full conformity with the Convention. In 2008, an external, independent legal assessment was initiated to follow up this recommendation. The report was completed in 2009. It concludes that our legislation is generally in line with the objectives and principles of the Convention. Certain areas, however, should be improved. The author of the report suggests, for example, that statutory rights should be introduced under the Child Welfare Act. The Government has a comprehensive follow-up plan for the findings in the report.

The Committee has, on several occasions, expressed concern that welfare services for children may vary according to where in the country they live. Local self government is an important principle for local democracy in Norway. The local authorities need to be able to adjust their services to local needs. This can result in certain differences between the services. Our understanding is that the Convention does not require services to be *identical* in all parts of the country, as long as they comply with the requirements that follow from it. Differences between services may however pose a challenge, and we aim to avoid a situation where this represents a problem for parents.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that in 2009, Troms county took an initiative to promote local implementation of the Convention. The County Governor requested the municipalities in the county to quality assure their services for children, with particular focus on seven basic rights set out in the Convention, and to report on their work. The project is called "Sjumilssteget", which is freely translated as "The Giant Leap". This initiative has been welcomed by other regional and local authorities, and I consider it to be an important contribution to strengthening children's rights in Norway.

Members of the committee,

The protection of children is a key objective for the Government. The Government recognises the need for strengthening the child welfare services, and has provided local

authorities with additional funding in 2010 to make it possible to establish 400 new positions for this work.

Many children find themselves in a situation where their parents no longer live together. It is important to provide a framework that helps parents to care for their children both before and after a separation. Conflicts between parents can be so serious that they affect the children. We therefore need to help parents to resolve such conflicts in the best possible way. It is particularly important to facilitate settlement of disputes out of court, as reaching an agreement at an early stage is in the best interests of the children concerned. As of 2010, counselling groups will be started for children who are affected by the break-up of their families. We will continue to attach importance to the right of children to be heard, and I am pleased to report that almost all children over the age of seven are heard in custody cases.

Some children experience domestic violence, either directly or as witnesses. New legislation requires local authorities to provide shelters for those who are affected by domestic violence. Large numbers of children have to stay in shelters each year, and this was taken into consideration when the legislation was drafted. The act therefore requires that children are treated in a way that is suited to their particular needs, and that their rights under other legislation are respected.

Six children's houses designed to help children who have been subject to violence or abuse have been established in a short period of time. The seventh will be opened this year. Here, children who have been subject to violence and/or abuse are interviewed by specially trained staff. Medical examinations are also carried out. Children involved in an abuse case who need follow-up are offered a short course of treatment at the children's house. The aim is to ensure that legal proceedings do not put unnecessary pressure on children, and that they are helped to recover from their trauma.

The Committee has, on several occasions, drawn attention to the situation for unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in Norway. In 2007, it was decided that the child welfare authorities should take over responsibility for caring for unaccompanied minors below the age of 15. Good progress has been made with this reform, and seven care centres have been established for this group. In addition, services are purchased from voluntary organisations and municipal bodies.

It is the Government's goal to ensure that all unaccompanied minor asylum seekers aged between 15 and 18 are under the care of the child welfare authorities, but the current resource situation indicates that it might be difficult to achieve this goal in the next four-year period. Norway is among the countries in Europe that receive most unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. It has been difficult to deal with such high numbers. The child welfare authorities would require substantial additional resources if they were to take over responsibility for all unaccompanied asylum seekers aged 15–18 at present. However, I am determined that we will not give up our political goal of transferring care for this group to the child welfare authorities.

Most of those declaring themselves to be unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are boys aged 16–18. As a result of their experiences and the lives they have led in their country of origin, they resemble young adults in many ways. The Government has stated its intention to provide people in this group with services that meet their particular needs. A certain differentiation is therefore intentional. Many of these young people have a great deal of potential and need a stimulating environment. The Government has therefore decided to give priority to providing more adult contact persons and reception centre staff who can meet the needs of this group, and to providing a greater range of activities. It is important to provide services that are appropriate for young people in this age range and to provide opportunities for them to make use of their potential.

Although the services provided for the over 15-year-olds are different from those for the younger children, I believe them to be fully adequate and in accordance with the

requirements of the Convention. All unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are provided with care, educational opportunities, health services and the opportunity to take part in various activities. In my view, the difference in the services provided does not, therefore, entail a breach of Article 2 of the Convention.

The Committee has been concerned about children's right to be heard. It is the Government's goal to ensure that children and young people are able to exert greater influence in local and central decision processes. A recent research report shows that 82% of the municipalities in Norway now have a mechanism for the participation of children and young people in local issues. However, there is great variation between municipalities in terms of how successful this initiative is. We will continue to follow the work in this area closely, and ensure that all the local authorities have up-to-date information on the benefits of this kind of participation and in particular which factors promote and prevent children and young people from being able to exert a real influence.

In 2011, a pilot project will be started that will allow young people from the age of 16 to vote in local elections in certain municipalities. Twenty municipalities and Svalbard will take part. Interest in the project has been overwhelming, and 143 municipalities originally applied. The involvement of young people is vital if we are to keep local democracy alive in the future. I hope that the opportunity to vote will encourage these young people to become active members of their local community sooner than they might have done otherwise.

The right of children to be heard is also important in asylum cases. From the beginning of this year new immigration legislation entered into force. The rights of children were extensively discussed during the preparation of this legislation. This has resulted in statutory requirements for children to be heard in all cases that affect them, and for their best interests and vulnerability to be taken into account and reflected in decisions. The new legislation will highlight the importance of ensuring that children's rights under the Convention are respected in all cases.

Members of the committee,

The Convention sets out that children have a right to an adequate standard of living. The proportion of children living in poverty in Norway is low in an international context, but the proportion of children in low-income families has increased in the period 2000–2007. The Government wishes to provide a framework that gives all children and young people the opportunity to develop and participate in the community, regardless of their parents' economic and social situation. The best way of achieving this goal is to increase efforts to enable as many people as possible to support themselves. Ensuring that as many people as possible are in work is the best insurance against poverty. Efforts to help members of minority groups to acquire qualifications and find jobs will be decisive for lifting a large group of children out of poverty.

It is the government's goal to ensure good day-care facilities for all children. As of 2009, all children are entitled to a place in a day-care centre, and the goal of full day-care coverage has been achieved. Day-care centres are designed to provide opportunities for play and learning in addition to care. The Government attaches importance to improving the quality of the services provided in day-care centres, and will continue to regard day-care centres as an element in an integrated approach to child-care and learning. Day-care centres give children secure provision of care and good opportunities for language development. They also even out social differences.

Members of the committee,

Turning now to the international arena, Norway is strongly committed to the follow-up of the UN studies on children affected by armed conflict and the study on violence against children. We actively support – also financially – the recently established mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on violence against children.

Norway is one of the three largest donors to UNICEF, with particular focus on basic education programmes for girls. We also continue our longstanding support to Norwegian and international NGOs in their invaluable work to promote children's rights.

Norway is especially committed to the UN Millennium Development Goals, where we have taken the lead in international efforts to reach Goal no. 4 on reducing child mortality and Goal no. 5 on improving maternal health. The Norwegian Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg, has taken the initiative to the Government's substantial funding to the vaccination program GAVI Alliance.

We highly appreciate the statement made by the Committee about the devastating effect on children of the earthquake that struck Haiti. We are deeply concerned about the extremely difficult situation which is now unfolding there. Norway has responded to the UN appeal for support to the humanitarian operation in Haiti by pledging a contribution of 100 million NOK (approx 17 million USD). The Norwegian support will be partly channelled through UNICEF in order to target the large number of children who are faced with this disaster.

It is the Government's goal to safeguard and strengthen children's rights in Norway and internationally. The Committee's observations are an important basis for our further efforts. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is being implemented within the Ministries, and we are promoting its implementation in central and local authorities. Information is disseminated to civil society, and we are promoting awareness among children and young people of their rights. There is close cooperation between the authorities, the Ombudsman for Children and relevant NGOs. Both NGOs and the Ombudsman for Children have submitted critical reports on matters relating to children in Norway. The Government regards these reports as a valuable corrective in our work in this field.

I am confident that we will have a good, constructive dialogue today on how we can strengthen the rights of children in Norway even further.