

From our point of view

A Greenlandic children and youth panel's supplementary report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to the Danish government's 5th periodic report

November 2016



Foreword

This report was prepared during a five-day panel meeting in late September 2015 by the Children and Youth Panel members Birthe Rosa Jakobsen, Sikkerninguaq Olsen, Tony Mølgaard Hansen, Maannguaq Berthelsen, Clara Nielsen, Rune Lennert, Hans Jørgen Lange, Isak Chemnitz, Ditte Poulsen, Nauja Jacobsen and Henriette Johansen. The members on the panel represent 10 different towns and settlements across Greenland. The members defined their mission as follows: “Which areas do we believe that the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child should recommend that Greenland should do something about in order for Greenland to live up to the articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child?”



Arnavaraq Jørgensen, who works at UNICEF Denmark, has collected the children’s text and arranged for their translation into English. Aki-Mathilda Høegh-Dam, a former panel member, has selected the illustrations contained herein.

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Who are we?



NAKUUSA (Let us be strong together) is a collaboration project between UNICEF Denmark and the Greenlandic Self-Government which has the aim of improving conditions for Greenland's children and young people.

In 2011, NAKUUSA held Greenland's first children and young people's summit with 39 participating children from the country's towns and settlements. They had gathered to improve conditions for children and young people in Greenland and to speak in a single, clear voice to adults. All of Greenland followed the summit, which ended with the formation of a panel for Greenland's youth. Everyone who wanted to participate was welcome to put their name forward for a seat on the panel. 10 children from Greenland's towns and settlements were elected to sit on the panel - us. We are the ones writing this report. We are also the ones who dubbed it the Children and Youth Panel - Meeqqat Isummersorfiat (MI). We, the members of MI, have held a meeting each year since its formation.

In 2012, we discussed parents' responsibility for their children, and we wrote a list of 10 helpful pieces of advice for parents. NAKUUSA launched a nationwide campaign based on our list called "'Suli aanamik, suli ataamik" ("More mom and dad!"). In 2013, we gave our recommendations on how all adults can help take responsibility for children and young people. NAKUUSA launched another campaign based on our work that year called "Qaamanerup qinngoqqavaatit" ("The light shines on you"). In 2014, we worked together with NAKUUSA to make a lot more children here in Greenland aware of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, recording the campaign "YES! Rights make you strong".

And this autumn in 2015, we have gathered to write you, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, to give you our status report on the conditions for children in this country.



Just as every other country, Greenland has its problems when it comes to the lives of children. We have a different kind of knowledge, or another perspective, than most adults have. We are Greenland's children, and we know what it means to be a child. We are an expert panel in this area because we have experienced it on a daily basis. **We ARE children.** We have been fighting since 2011, and we have succeeded with a great many things, but we still think there are things that can improve! We are the members of a children and youth panel, the purpose of which is to improve the rights and conditions of children in our country. We work for what we believe in. We feel that it is only natural that children should be able to live a safe and secure life in this country. We have chosen to write about some areas that we know a great many children in Greenland struggle with. We have agreed that the most important issues we would like to write to you about are the following:

- Suicide
- Sexual abuse
- Education
- Health, rest and recreational activities
- Upbringing
- Identity
- What are our rights?

We think it is important writing to you, in the hopes that you can give recommendations to our country that will ensure more children having the opportunity to live a better life.

Suicide

We have heard that 25% of children and young people in Greenland have attempted suicide at some point in their lives, and ALL of the members of MI know someone who either committed suicide or attempted to commit suicide. Even among us, there are two who have attempted to commit suicide. Sexual abuse, domestic violence, bullying and physical as well as mental violence can lead a person to commit suicide or attempt to commit suicide.

We know that children and young people in this country who have committed suicide or tried to take their own lives have done so on the basis of such experiences. When someone commits suicide, you may be tempted to follow suit, and as their friend or family member, you get depressed and drop your plans for the future. In school or at the after-school centre, people rarely explain to us how suicide affects us.

There are some groups, called NGOs, who have launched some initiatives on this. We know that there is an initiative in this country called “Inuunera Iggoraarsuk”, which is a high-profile campaign aimed at making people considering suicide to realise that life is precious, but we do not know whether it is working. Nor do we know whether there are any initiatives aimed specifically at children, or if there is a joint effort which also involves adults.



Suicidal children and young people, or friends and relatives of people who have committed suicide, can call the emergency telephone number 146 between the hours of 7pm - 9pm. But you could also suffer from suicidal thoughts at night or some other time outside those hours. It is seldom that anyone visits our schools or after-school centres to talk about the emergency phone number 146. Only one of us

on this panel knew that the telephone number 146 even existed. Sometimes there will be awareness-raising campaigns in the larger towns, but never in the outer districts or the smaller towns and settlements. It very much depends on where in the country you live and how much you know about suicide.

The Children and Youth Panel would like to propose that it should be possible for people to talk to someone who is trained and experienced in suicide prevention. When you are a child or young person, it is difficult to talk to adults you do not know, and there are sometimes limitations to an adult's understanding of what a child is going through. In that regard, we are more used to talking with people our own age. We feel most understood when talking to someone of our own gender and with a similar age.

We believe the child's inherent right to life, as stated in article 6 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is not ensured in light of the high number of suicides and attempted suicides annually. We would like to propose that the bodies that have to do with children could take up the topic of suicide. In the past, information was passed out to schools, but now we hardly see anything to do with suicide, even though it is a huge problem. If article 6 is to be observed, more should be done to include schools in this, as many children with potential problems go there and might need help. The majority of children and young people who commit suicide in our country do so while under the influence of alcohol. We believe that means you have reached a point where you have lost control of your problems, or that you do not see how you can overcome them.

In Greenland, it is difficult to regain your self-respect and respect from others. Some of those we know who have tried to take their own lives have not been helped to regain respect, and we have never heard about anyone who has been given help. For example, we know of three young people living in a boarding school and who attempted to commit suicide. They were just sent home without being able to get any help, which put an end to their schooling, even though article 28 states that a child has the right to an education.

Sexual abuse

We children have the right to protection from sexual abuse. In spite of this article and the laws that should prevent this from happening, sexual abuse is still prevalent in Greenland. In Greenland, 34% of girls and 11% of boys under the age of 15 have experienced unwanted sexual contact. The figures speak for themselves and show that a third of all girls and one-tenth of all boys need protection. Protection that parents, the State and all of us are jointly responsible for.

It is accepted that children under the age of consent (15) have sexual experiences. Every second woman in Greenland has had a sexual experience before they turned 15. Such acceptance among the population can contribute to sexual experiences occurring much too early and at an age where the child is not ready. In our social circles, we know there are many who are sexually active despite not feeling ready. What is forbidden instead becomes normal, which may be part of the reason why sexual abuse is so common or even considered somewhat acceptable among some people.

Children who have just started school and are most in need of protection are let down and sexually abused instead. 7% of all children in Greenland have been sexually abused before turning 7 (we read about these figures from a number of sources, including the report "Det svære ungdomsliv" ("Difficult youth"), which we found here: <http://www.si-folkesundhed.dk/Udgivelser/B%C3%B8ger%20og%20rapporter/2013/Det%20sv%C3%A6re%20ungdomsliv.aspx>)

Not only are the figures for sexual abuse so high and so widespread, but it is also our impression that action is only taken in a very small number of cases. Young people struggle to talk to adults about their problems. It is hard for them to share personal details with strangers, even if they are there to help. It is also understandable that a child whose most intimate boundaries have been violated struggles to develop a relationship of trust with other adults. Sexual problems are already a topic people are very uncomfortable talking about in Greenland. Young people's sex lives are not talked about openly, but only in their close social circles. Children and young people do not know who to turn to if they have been victims of something. As they struggle to talk to anyone about their problems, they begin to close themselves off more and more as time passes, without anyone to discuss their traumas with. This makes them more and more difficult to reach out to, which becomes a vicious cycle.

In a society where one's connection to others is so important, trust is a key factor. In Greenland, the bond between people is what matters the most. A child who loses the ability to connect to another person and closes themselves off to society closes themselves off to the whole world. The child becomes excluded from their community, which in Greenland has always been hugely important. It is in our culture to be together with one another. There are very few who can make it on their own. An adult may succeed, of course, but children who become a burden in the eyes of others, even though they are in fact victims, struggle to revert back to a normal life. Being the victim of sexual abuse as a child can lead to the child or young person suffering from depression, anxiety or a related condition. The child may be afraid of other people and may even shy away from physical contact. The child lives in a solitary world. It can destroy his or her future. The child may also be in complete

denial about what happened, while still living with a fear within; being afraid but not really understanding why. Most victims of abuse end up struggling in school and in after-school activities, which may lead to a lack of education, and that is when people begin to see them as a burden to society. In many cases, the abuse makes the child think there is no other way out besides taking their own life. In a country which already has a high suicide rate, it is not easy for a child who has been the victim of abuse to move on with their life and build a future for themselves.

Because there are so many cases of abuse that are never really brought to light, Greenland has a large group of adults who live with the consequences of having been abused as children. They never got the help they should have been given. The Ministry of Family, Gender Equality, Social Affairs and Justice has created a mobile unit whose task it is to travel around the country to various towns, supporting adults who need help to deal with the traumas they live with as a result of having been abused as children. The mobile unit organises public meetings, information sessions and counsels people across Greenland's towns. This mobile unit is sorely needed, and it is said that they have been contacted by so many people that they do not have time to help them all. However, this mobile unit is only for adults - not children. In 2011, a nationwide centre, called Saafik, was set up to treat children up to the age of 18 who have been victims of sexual abuse. The centre is located in the capital Nuuk, and has a psychologist, doctor and police officer whose job it is to help and treat children who have been victims of sexual abuse. Saafik offers help to children who have been sexually abused, but even though it is called a nationwide centre, it only exists in Nuuk - which is simply unacceptable! Greenland is a massive country, and the outer districts are far from Nuuk. This means that children who live far away from the capital struggle to get the help they need. A child who has been sexually abused by his or her father in a small settlement would never be able to get the help that they need and which they are entitled to. Saafik also does not work very hard to spread awareness about its existence. If the children do not know the institution exists, how will they ever know Saafik can help them? This is also true of many other organisations and institutions. The places that can help children and young people need to raise awareness about their existence and how they can help. Saafik is only for children under the age of 18, so when you turn 18, you are on your own and left to fend for yourself. If a person only finds the courage to tell anyone about the sexual abuse they went through as a child (and have been so ashamed of) at the age of 19, Saafik cannot help them. However, as they are now an adult, they can contact the ministry's mobile unit - but as mentioned earlier, they are too busy to help. We have struggled to find out what other options exist to get help. The State has not wanted to provide a direct answer to what happens when a child has been sexually abused. We know that there are procedures and protocols to be followed, but more information needs to exist on some basic things, such as where to turn. Children who struggle to share their problems with others and tell someone about what they are going through do not know what to do, and they think that it may be wiser to just keep quiet. Because what has happened to them is probably normal - after all, everyone else seems to think so. We know that children are able to get help somewhere, but telling us where, how and what happens is apparently not information that we need, which is simply unacceptable. Children need to be

informed about their opportunities to get help when they have no one in their environment protecting them.

The State and the Greenlandic people, including us, have to change the current attitude towards sexual contact or intercourse. We have to speak out against children having sexual experiences at a very young age, and as a society, we need to change the existing perception that there is nothing wrong with that. Doing nothing is the same as allowing it to happen, which makes us part of the problem.

We also propose that a much greater focus on sexual abuse is needed, including what you can do if you have been the victim of sexual abuse. It is important for children and young people to have this information so that they know what options they have. It is our perception that the institutions that exist to help with such issues are unknown among abused children and young people, and that they therefore do not make use of the opportunities they have to get help and thus have a future.

To support this, we should also set up a system where public authorities offer young victims of abuse the chance to talk with another young person about it, as young people are more comfortable opening up to people their own age than to adults.

This scheme should not be at the expense of the treatment methods that already exist, however, but an additional scheme offered by the municipality/State.

We also think that children should be given the opportunity to talk to others who have gone through a similar experience.



Education

It is important that children follow through with their education, as it paves the way for a lot of future opportunities. Today, 47% of those who graduate from public school do not progress any further with their education (figure from Statistics Greenland). We, the members of the Children and Youth Panel, all know a lot of young people living in our towns and settlements who do not pursue education or remain unemployed. We also know some people who have started on a new educational programme, but fall behind with their studies because they were not adequately prepared to study in a foreign language (Danish and/or English), due to not learning to understand and communicate in these languages well enough in public school. This could be helped by improving the quality of foreign language lessons in the public school system. Many of them also struggle with finding enough time for their studies and have to drop out.

A lot of young people study far away from home as there are few educational opportunities in Greenland. Many get homesick and do not get the support and encouragement they need to complete their studies.



Today, the following initiatives exist to address these issues: Either Piareersarfiit, which offers guidance and training courses, is made available at some schools, or students are invited by Piareersarfiit to an information session about their options. Some school guidance counsellors also arrange individual meetings with students.

There ought to be information campaigns about educational opportunities aimed at not only educators and support workers, but anyone who interacts with children. It

is important reaching out to parents as well so that they become better at encouraging their children to get an education. It would also be helpful for school guidance counsellors to better prepare students for further studies while they are still in public school.

Health, rest and recreational activities

It is a problem that recreational opportunities for children and young people are only available in certain parts of the country. For example, those of us who live in settlements and small towns have only found it possible to pursue a few of our interests. The fact that a greater effort is made for children who live in cities and larger towns is noticeable.

The same applies with regard to food. The outer districts run out of healthy food over the winter, and they have to wait until summer before they can get new supplies. In the smaller settlements and towns, there is hardly any food from January to May. Every year, we experience a limited supply of food until a ship arrives again in the summer. It is difficult to make a living in the settlements and outer districts, which are generally fishing and hunting areas. Some children from low-income families go to bed hungry, but the issue is also that the local shops simply do not have enough food for sale.

We are not aware of any on-going initiatives to improve these conditions. We are committed to protecting children from the outer areas and ensuring that they have a variety of food to eat. There are several types of food products one could transport by ship, such as baby food and other food children need. The fact that healthy food stores are exhausted over the course of the year is something that the authorities should do more to address.



A healthy home is one where you do not go to bed hungry and where you have something to eat when you wake up. Yet there are also many homes where it is not the lack of food which is the issue, but the quality of the food. In schools and higher educational institutions, we have also been served unhealthy food.

A possible improvement in this area would be for parents to make a greater effort to ensure that their children eat a healthy breakfast before school and get a good night's sleep.

Most children try smoking in order to push boundaries. Smoking is visible everywhere. You will find the majority of children smoking in places such as education and training institutions, upper-secondary schools and even public schools. It is not only smoking, but also drug use outside schools which has become an increasingly common sight.

A major problem in Greenland is also that there are too many young people with drinking problems. Most young people begin drinking alcohol before the age of 15. Society has come to accept minors drinking alcohol as normal. Sometimes parents, in situations where they have been drinking, will let their children try alcohol, even if they are under the age of 18. We believe that such a lifestyle is unacceptable and that it amounts to neglect.

Parents and other adults are also responsible for ensuring that children do not start drinking or doing drugs. For example, when a child asks an adult to buy them alcohol or cigarettes, the responsibility falls on the adult to say no. Failing to do so makes the adult part of the problem.

People must take more responsibility and be more willing to say no to children asking for their help to buy alcohol and cigarettes.



We also need more sports activities in Greenland's towns and settlements. A lack of recreational activities contributes to children and young people committing vandalism out of boredom. Their respect for others also diminishes, for example, when they are simply left to their own devices.

As a way of creating recreational activities for young people, some towns have built activity centres and small football fields. There are also some towns which have established sports clubs, which also provide more recreational opportunities. It would be helpful if these activity centres were open during off-peak hours and if the staff working there were better trained to work with young people.



Upbringing

Allowing their children to do whatever they want is a big problem among parents in this country. So much so that it constitutes neglect. Parents who do not set limits for their children and say yes to anything they ask for is a common sight. For example, when parents do not have the time or energy to deal with their child, either due to work or a dependency on drugs or alcohol, they just give the child games, money or something similar to keep them occupied.

Children, even very young children, can often be seen playing outside, with no one having told them what time they have to be home by. Instead, they only come home when or if their parents finally tell them to. They should be going to bed at a reasonable hour in order to make sure they are ready for school in the morning. It shows how disinterested the parents are in their children's schooling. We in MI have experienced this ourselves, and most of us have had classmates who were misbehaving in school or had not eaten breakfast. This went on for years without anyone setting limits for them.

Limits are among the most basic things a child needs in their upbringing. We have noticed that in our country, far too many children are not given adequate boundaries. They live without limits. The responsibility for a good upbringing has always been a big issue in our meetings as well as a recurring problem that we view as a matter of concern. We believe that while the primary responsibility lies with the parents, the community, meaning other adults, also shares some part of the responsibility. As does the State. We still see children who are neglected by parents who were not adequately prepared for the responsibility of raising a child. The children are let down because they are permitted to play outside until late at night. We have seen so many times that our classmates come to school too tired to learn. School is hugely important for a child's future, not just in terms of work opportunities, but also in terms of life in general. School teaches you about life. Yet there are still many parents here in Greenland who do not view school as being particularly important. Very few parents help their children do their homework, for example, or simply teach their children to be punctual. We have the right to go to school, yet we do not fully take advantage of the gift that is our free education system because parents are either too busy getting drunk or simply do not know how to help their children learn - because no one ever taught them either. It is a negative social legacy we must put an end to; a vicious cycle where children do not get a proper upbringing and therefore are not capable of raising their own children in the future. Parents who set rules and limits for things such as bedtimes, games or how much unhealthy food a child may eat are sadly very rare in this country. Too many parents are not capable of setting proper limits for a child, and our society as a whole does not have much help to offer. It has become acceptable for children who have school in the morning to continue playing outside late into the night.

A child needs their physical needs to be met, such as a good night's sleep and a good dinner. This is non-existent in some families. The child also needs care and attention. All of us in MI know that one boy or girl in the class who bullies everyone else. The child who no one else likes or understands. But we never consider the story behind the child. It often turns out that he or she is from a bad home, and is not given the attention or support every child needs, such as a word of praise about their drawing from their father or a goodnight kiss from their mother before bedtime - assuming he or she even has a bedtime and is not out playing until 2am. At the age of 10.



Even the child's basic needs are not being met, because most of the money is spent on their parents' alcohol abuse. The child therefore tries to get attention elsewhere, and because he or she also has not learned to treat others politely, ends up bullying others.

We need an increased focus on upbringing, and our society as a whole needs to change its passive attitude to parenting where, for example, children get to do whatever they want. We also propose that the State should offer courses that prepare expecting couples for the massive responsibility that it is to raise a child.

Identity

The right to speak your own language, which is a key part of your identity, is often violated in this country. Many Greenlanders move from settlements to towns or from one town to another. When they do, they may experience negative remarks about the way they speak or look. For example, we from the Children and Youth Panel know of a person who moved from one town to another to study, and they were criticised for their dialect. The person was told, among other things, to speak 'proper Greenlandic', even though the person simply spoke a different dialect (there are many different dialects in Greenland). We know of many young people who move to another town for their studies and who face negative treatment (such as violence) due to their dialect. In some cases, they have had to drop out and move home.



We believe a greater effort is needed in this area (e.g. through an increased focus in school on respecting differences between people). If preventive action is taken in this area, it will result in greater respect between Greenlanders.

We have the right to fall in love with people of the same sex and have relationships with them, but we have seen people, not least young people, express disgust for homosexuals and bully them. For example, we in the Children and Youth Panel know of a young man who lived a normal life and had other male friends, all of whom he lost after confiding in them that he was gay.

We believe that homosexuality should be accepted, as everyone in our society should be treated equally. We need a more positive view on minorities! Compared to other countries, we are behind in this area. Greenland could set up hotlines for homosexuals who have not come out of the closet yet as a way of helping them gain more self-confidence about who they are.

What are our rights?

What are we entitled to? Legally? Many children and young people in Greenland are not familiar with the Children's Act, and it is also unclear whether the Convention on the Rights of the Child is known or used by people, and not least the State. How can we ever demand what our rights entitle us to if we do not know what our rights are? Given the fact that there are so many children in our country experiencing neglect, this is critical! We children are rarely given a voice in issues that involve us. We believe there is missing a clear policy for children and young people in our country, where so many children's rights are being violated. We do not expect children to have the power to decide what should happen, but it is hugely important that children are **heard**. In that regard, the State must improve its efforts to involve children and young people on both a municipal and national level.



We believe it is necessary for schools in Greenland to be better at teaching students what rights both children and adults have. Some children get off to a bad start and do not know what rights they have. They have been wronged their whole lives, which gets them off to a bad start as they enter adulthood. Schools must make a greater effort to include children's rights and human rights in the curriculum.