

## **Combating child poverty through measures promoting the socio-cultural participation of clients of the Public Centres of Social Action/Welfare (Brussels, 20-21 September 2012)**

### **Comment paper Norway<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **1. A brief assessment of the possible relevance and the learning value of the Belgian policy to Norway**

##### **On child poverty in Norway**

Norway enjoys low levels of child poverty, compared to most other countries in Europe. By 2010, 14.6% of children in Norway were at risk of poverty and social exclusion (Eurostat 2012), which was the third lowest national rate among the countries compared. Moreover, Norway is one in relatively few countries in this study where children have a lower risk of poverty than the population at large. Also when measuring child deprivation, that is, the number of children lacking access to central goods – living in poor housing, wearing second-hand clothes, not celebrating special occasions – the proportion is very low in Norway (de Neubourg et al. 2012).

Although Norway is a relatively equitable society, the economic disparities have risen somewhat over the past decades, and the number of children in low-income households has risen. Children in families with immigrant background are especially at risk. Rather than being an issue of deep material deprivation, child poverty in Norway is about inequalities touching issues like belonging, participation, and identity. Promoting socio-cultural participation is therefore an important topic in Norway, no less than in other countries where children experience poverty.

Poverty has been relatively high on the political agenda in Norway for more than 10 years. In 2002, the centre-right coalition government launched the first action plan against poverty, in 2006; the centre-left coalition government launched the second.<sup>2</sup> It highlights three main goals: (1) opportunities for all to participate in the labour market, (2) opportunities for participation and development for children and young people, and (3) improved living conditions for the most disadvantaged groups. The current centre-left government, in its political platform for 2009-2013, declared "In order to reduce inequalities in levels of living this government will decrease economic and social inequalities and combat poverty". The Government launched a white paper in the autumn of 2011 on income distribution policies

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<sup>2</sup> The Action Plan is available in English at <http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/ad/tema/velferdspolitik/midtspalte/action-plan-against-poverty---status-200.html?id=557729>



(Meld. St. 30 [2010-2011]), emphasising a broad-based and preventive approach, including investments in early childhood education and care.

### **Legal and organisational framework**

Belgium is unusual in the European Union in that it has codified the right to socio-cultural participation. In Norway, the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention of the Rights of the Child are both included in national law, and have preference over other laws if they are not in accordance. The Convention of the Rights of the Child (article 27.1) states that "States Parties recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development." The right to socio-cultural participation is not codified in the wording of the relevant Act in Norway (Law on Social Services in the Labour and Welfare Administration, 2009), but the comments on the law state that expenses related to normal leisure activities are to be considered as a part of a persons' ordinary living expenses. The children's right to participate in leisure and school activities which are normal for their age group is especially emphasised.

The Public Centre for Social Action/Welfare (PCSA/W) in Belgium appears to have many of the same functions as the former municipal social service offices in Norway. Through an organisational reform that started in 2006 and was finalised in 2011, the services rendered by these offices have been administratively merged with social security offices and the labour market services into joint Labour and Welfare offices (NAV-offices). Local NAV-offices (a total of 457) have been established in each municipality. The local NAV-offices manage social security and labour market services, in addition, the offices are responsible for the services that are codified in the Law on Social Services in the Labour and Welfare Administration: means-tested social assistance, temporary accommodation, and the qualification programme (see below).

### **State grants for targeted efforts to promote social inclusion**

The Belgian report describes three interlinked subsidy measures available to the PCSA/Ws that are ear-marked for measures to promote inclusion: the general Socio-Cultural Participation Measure, the PC recuperation measure, and the Measure for combatting child poverty among children of clients. Similar state grants are implemented in Norway as a part of the action plans against poverty. The two most relevant grant schemes are:

- Grants for children and youth in larger urban areas;
- Grants to prevent and reduce poverty among children, youth and families with children which are in contact with the social services in the NAV-offices.

*The grant for children and youth in larger urban areas* is financed and managed by the Ministry of Children, Families and Social Inclusion. This grant scheme has been in effect since 2003. In 2012, 63 million NOK (app. 8 mill. EUR) were allocated to 23 cities and urban areas with accumulated social problems. Two thirds of the grant allowances (40.5 million NOK, app. 5 mill. EUR) were targeted at measures for children, youth and families experiencing poverty. Typical measures financed by the grants are holiday activities and leisure activities, designed to promote inclusion (Nuland et al. 2009).

*The grant to prevent and reduce poverty among children, youth and families who are in contact with the social services in the NAV-offices* is funded by the Ministry of Labour and managed by the Directorate of Labour and Welfare. The grant scheme has been in effect since 2005. In 2012, 25 million NOK (app. 3 mill. EUR) were



allocated to 81 (out of a total of 430) municipalities. The intention of the grants is competence-building in the social services, better cooperation and coordination between the social services and other parts of local public services and local stakeholders, and to stimulate the development of local measures to prevent and reduce poverty and social exclusion among children and youth. In 2011, 43% of funds went to activities, including holidays, for children and families, 25% was used for direct financial support, including support for school-related activities, and 14% was targeted at skill enhancement among social workers (Strand 2012).

### **Norwegian and Belgian schemes compared**

Overall, there are several similarities between the Norwegian grant schemes described, and the three Belgian schemes available to the PCSA/Ws. Looking particularly at the schemes targeted at children and youth, it is striking – seen with Norwegian eyes – how the money in Belgium mainly has been used for individual measures. In the guidelines for the grant for children and youth in larger urban areas, it is explicitly stated that the grant shall not be used on individual support. It is emphasised that activities funded shall be open and available for all children and youth, not only the disadvantaged, in order to avoid stigmatisation. The other grant, targeted at children and families which are in contact with the social services in the NAV-offices, are both given to system-oriented measures and individual support. Most of the measures, such as equipment pools where children can borrow equipment for leisure activities, are designed to be open to all children. The Norwegian grants appear to be more explicitly community- and activity oriented than the grant scheme available to the PCSA/W, where the evaluation estimates that only 6% of the funds are used for social programmes.

It is also worth noting that considerable funds in Belgium appear to go to preschool and afterschool care. Norway has introduced a legal right to kindergarten and a maximum fare, and all schools are mandated to provide after-school care. In targeted areas, with high proportions of immigrant families, kindergartens provide free core time for 4-5-year olds. This makes preschool care and education available to most people. It seems likely that a proposal to use state grants to pay for public services would be controversial in Norway, given the emphasis on making these services universal and low-cost. The state grants are intended as a supplement to welfare services provided by law and financed by block grants to the municipalities.

According to de Neubourg et al (2012), 5.4% of children in Belgium lack access to the internet. In Norway, the proportion is 0.7. This may be the background for why a scheme like the PC recuperation scheme has never been on the agenda in Norway.

There are some striking similarities between the Belgian and Norwegian experiences. First, the Host country report highlights the need for exchange of information and experiences between the centres. A Norwegian evaluation found a thirst for information and inspiration among local grant administrators, who were simultaneously looking for ideas for good practice, and craving feedback on the work they were doing themselves (Grødem 2012). Second, the Host Country Report indicates that users of the grants found the funding scheme unnecessary complex and inflexible. This was also a concern in Norway, where there are several grant schemes with slight differences in targeting, and where municipalities need to apply and report annually on each scheme.



## Potential for learning

Norway and Belgium face many of the same challenges when it comes to reducing poverty and social exclusion among children and youth. Both countries approach the issue with an emphasis on social participation. The fact that Belgium has codified the right to participation is thought-provoking, and a debate about a similar codification in Norway would, at the very least, increase awareness of the issue.

There may be a potential for policy learning in the administration of the grant scheme. The Belgian scheme, channelled through PCSA/Ws, is considerably simpler than the Norwegian schemes which are based on announcement of grants, annual applications from municipalities and a rather extensive grant management and allocation procedure by central governments bodies. On this background, it is interesting to note that also Belgian administrators call for a simplification. Two evaluation reports (Nuland et al. 2009, Grødem 2012) have suggested that all the Norwegian grant schemes against poverty and social exclusion could be merged: this would simplify the application- and reporting regime, and also give more power to the local level. Experiences from Belgium are interesting in this respect.

The Belgian schemes allow for more support to be given directly to clients, covering needs such as membership fees for associations (adults) and school meals (children). In Norway, it appears to be a consensus that the exclusion of children primarily should be tackled by universal services and schemes free of charge, or priced at a level that was surmountable for all. For adults, the approach is thought-provoking: generally, the Norwegian approach to activation and inclusion is highly employment-oriented, and measures to include adults on different arenas (with a partial exception for immigrant women) receive little attention. On this background, Belgian experiences with activation of adults through making it easier to participate in organisations and on social arenas are interesting.

## 2. How to overcome possible barriers to children's socio-cultural participation?

The first challenge in overcoming barriers will be to identify the relevant barriers. Based on available research, at least four main barriers can be identified: financial, cultural, spatial and technological.

*Financial barriers* are those most obviously dealt with in the literature on child poverty: children and youth are excluded from participation because they cannot afford membership fees, equipment, travel to arrangements etc. The "equipment pools" where children can borrow leisure equipment etc. have explicitly been aimed at overcoming a part of this problem, and are reported to be successful at least in some communities. Another angle has been to make social workers in NAV-offices more aware of the issue. Locally, varieties have been tried where well-funded organisations, have intervened and covered membership fees for children in low-income families. Also, some sport associations and children and youth organisations have flexible arrangements on membership fees for children from economically disadvantaged families. Interventions like this should be done carefully, as children are wary of stigma. The overall aim should be to keep costs on activities and membership as low as possible, making it affordable for everyone.

*Cultural barriers* to participation can be an issue especially among immigrants and ethnic minorities. Sometimes, these barriers are related to language difficulties or lack of information: newly arrived immigrants, and minority families who are isolated, may not be aware of the possibilities for participation that exist. Targeted efforts to reach the families can have considerable success in such cases. In other



cases, there is more direct resistance: families may resist letting children participate in majority organisations out of fear that children will be offered “unclean” food, or be encouraged to interact with persons of the other sex in ways that are culturally unacceptable. Such barriers are obviously not easily overcome, but awareness of the issue makes it easier to find solutions that are acceptable to all.

*Spatial barriers* are made by lack of access to transport. In rural areas, this is linked to long distances and limited public transport, in urban areas; it can be linked to unaffordable or unsafe public transport. The problem of unaffordable public transport can be overcome by giving children and young people in low-income families free passes, while in rural areas, the problem is more structural. If more public transport is not an option, organisers of leisure activities can initiate car pools, so that the parents who drive their children to activities anyway also pick up the children in a low-income family. Again, awareness is key.

*Technological barriers* may arise when many children and young people spend several hours daily on social networking sites, online gaming, messaging each other etc. Children and youth who do not have access to a computer, and/or access to reasonably high-speed internet, will be excluded from these arenas. The Belgian scheme, helping low-income families to acquire a computer, will help to address this problem. Access to high-quality computers in public libraries also gives children access, at least for some periods of time.

### **3. What policy domains and levels are relevant and how can an integrated and coordinated approach be achieved?**

Within the debate on child poverty, a distinction is often made between measures that aim at increasing family incomes on the one hand, and measures to improve children’s quality of life outside the realms of the family on the other. Both approaches will be necessary, both in the short and in the longer run, to improve children’s participation and avoid the intergenerational transfer of disadvantage.

In order to improve the financial situation of the family, a continued emphasis on parental employment seems necessary. Employment is the best way to increase incomes, and parent’s employment also secures the family a link to the wider society. Clearly, not any job will lift the family above the poverty line, and working times that are incompatible with family life may deplete family resources further. Employment policies are therefore crucial, emphasising decent working conditions and above-poverty-level wages for full-time workers. Services to the family, most obviously parental leaves and child-care policies, are needed to achieve an acceptable work-life balance also for families at risk of poverty.

Children of immigrant parents are disproportionately affected by poverty in most European countries, so also in Norway. These children may be extra hard hit by poverty, because their parents, besides often having a weak affiliation to the labour market, may lack language and cultural skills, and not know how to use services that are available to them. A continued emphasis on both employment and integration policies is therefore also important as part of a consolidated effort to abolish child poverty.

Housing policies are an undercommunicated issue in Norwegian policies, where rates of home ownership are high and housing decisions are mainly left to the market. In order to promote participation, it is necessary to create diverse communities, both in terms of financial situation and ethnic background.



Norway has a universal welfare system with universal child benefit, afterschool care, subsidies for childcare etc. The grant schemes to prevent and reduce child poverty must be seen as top-ups to the universal schemes and public services. Nevertheless, the grant schemes have an added value. An external evaluation of the grant scheme to prevent and reduce child poverty (Nuland et al., 2009) has shown that one of the most important achievements of the state grant has been to enhance municipalities' awareness about poverty issues amongst children and youth.

The evaluation further points out that measures financed by state grants have created *opportunities* for children and youth to participate in activities and social life, but does not eliminate or break the cycle of poverty as such. The evaluation called out for a need for a more holistic approach to improve the situation for the children, the parents and families as a whole. As a follow up of the evaluations results, priority of grants is given to municipalities who organise inclusion measures for children in families where the parents participate in an employment-oriented qualification programme.

It is a condition for receiving some of the grants that the measures are anchored in local plans, so that the activity is sufficiently rooted in the general activity of the municipality. Municipalities which draw up action plans to prevent and reduce poverty among children and youth are given priority when grants are awarded. Increased emphasis is also put on dissemination on good results and experiences learned between municipalities.

In terms of policy design, combating child poverty is an example of a national political plan devised by the ministry to be implemented locally through the cooperation of several disciplines of the local administration. The effort to combat poverty among children is a good example of social policy where the central government allows for subsidiarity in refining the details of programs locally. Municipalities have a large degree of freedom in designing granted projects fitted to local needs and priorities (Nuland, 2009).

It has been important to make this effort multi-disciplinary both locally and centrally, and to give incentives for developing improved collaboration structures not only between local authorities (for instance between the child welfare services and the social welfare offices) but also between the local authorities and local NGOs (Nuland, 2009). Involving the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector can also be a way of creating a more coordinated approach. 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organisations are less bureaucratic than public bodies, and may offer creative approaches to old problems. Cultural and leisure activities can be important areas for inclusion, and this can be promoted with or without the involvement of public bodies.

A stronger emphasis on user involvement can be a means for promoting integrated and coordinated approaches. Placing the user at the centre, and listening to what the user has to say, facilitates better cooperation between different agencies, and also increases the chances of designing interventions that are relevant for the client. Marginalised users however often have little capacity to be actively involved, and often articulate few needs that go beyond the immediate situation. User involvement is thus no short-cut around solid professional social work.



#### 4. Literature

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