

National Plans of Action for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights – Noruega Norway

Focus on Human Dignity

Some aspects of the Norwegian Plan of Action for Human Rights, White Paper No. 21 (1999-2000)

Human rights: one of the main pillars of the Government's policy

Human dignity is a central component in the policies of the Norwegian Government. Thus the promotion of human rights is a mainstay in the Government's efforts. In keeping with this, the Government has submitted White Paper No. 21 (1999-2000) to the Storting (the Norwegian parliament). The White Paper is entitled Focus on Human Dignity, Plan of Action for Human Rights. It was approved in the Council of State on 17 December 1999.

The Norwegian Minister for International Development and Human Rights, Hilde F. Johnson, has the responsibility for ensuring that the Government pursues a holistic policy on human rights both at and abroad. In her statement to the Storting on 22 January 1998, she called for a broad commitment on the part of the entire Norwegian society to a Plan of Action for Human Rights. The Plan of Action is a follow-up to the Government's political platform (Voksenåsen Declaration), the Official Norwegian Report 1993:18 Human Rights Legislation, and the Government's Human Rights Bill (Proposition No. 3 (1998-1999) to the Odelsting), which was adopted by the Storting on 21 May 1999. The Plan is also a follow-up to the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, which called on the governments of all states to develop national plans of action.

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New review of Norwegian human rights policy

The Government examines ways in which Norwegian authorities can provide the best possible protection of human rights in Norway and internationally. A Plan of Action is an important tool in efforts to create a more effective, consistent and coordinated policy in the field of human rights. This will help to focus greater attention on human rights and to intensify overall efforts. The Government also intends to encourage discussion and debate on the efforts of the Norwegian authorities in this field.

The Plan of Action for Human Rights outlines the challenges the Norwegian authorities are facing both nationally and internationally. It sets out more than 300 measures and initiatives which the Government intends to implement in the human rights field during the five-year period covered by the plan. Ten of the most important measures are presented below. Some of them can be realized relatively quickly and easily, while others will require sustained effort over a longer period of time. Those interested in following the progress of the implementation of the Plan of Action are referred to the Annual Report on Norwegian Efforts to Promote Human Rights and the Government's website www.humanrights.dep.no.

A holistic approach to human rights

The primary objective of the Norwegian Government's human rights efforts is to ensure respect for and protection of human dignity. The traditional Western approach to human rights has been to focus on civil and political rights rather than economic, social and cultural rights. We need to recognize the fact that human rights constitute an indivisible, interdependent whole. Only when all rights are respected are human rights being fully protected.

The Government bases its policy on this holistic approach to human rights. The focus is on factors that can help to further enhance the protection of the full range of human rights. Therefore, the Government's human rights efforts include measures in fields as diverse as health care and freedom of expression, adult education and remand issues, forced marriage and procedures for dealing with social welfare matters in Norway. A correspondingly broad approach is taken in international efforts.

The concept of human rights

The concept of human rights is based on the assumption that there are certain basic norms that are meant to protect the individual, irrespective of the legal system.

Human rights are meant to protect the individual against arbitrary abuses on the part of the authorities, ensure respect for human dignity, the integrity of the individual, freedom, safety and full participation in all aspects of their lives, and ensure peace, security and social and economic justice in society.

Human rights govern the rights of the individual in relation to the state, and the state's obligations to the individual. These rights are inviolable and universal.

At the international level, human rights are enshrined in the UN Charter and further elaborated in conventions, protocols and declarations. National protection of human rights is generally set out in a country's constitution and other legislation. The international bodies that are charged with monitoring that states comply with their obligations play an important role in the protection of human rights.

The protection of human rights in Norway

The Government will examine all key aspects of the Norwegian legal and administrative system that are relevant to the protection of human rights in Norway. There are a large number of administrative, legislative, economic and educational measures that can be implemented to improve the human rights situation in Norway. This applies particularly to matters related to the development of legislation, administrative procedures and control mechanisms, such as courts and ombud schemes.

The Government has examined the way in which information on human rights is disseminated in schools and other relevant sectors. The Plan of Action proposes several measures for improving the way this is done and for raising the level of knowledge in this key area. In the view of the Government, it is also important that research forms part of the basis for building knowledge and expertise on human rights.

Special priority areas for human rights efforts in Norway Human rights affect a great many aspects of the legal and administrative system. The Government has identified a number of special priority areas for human rights promotion in Norway in which efforts will be stepped up and intensified: adult education, asylum and immigration law, biotechnology issues, children, the disabled, discrimination and racism, family life, freedom of expression, freedom of religion and belief, homosexuals and lesbians, national minorities, remand and the length of time spent dealing with criminal cases, Sami policy, the status of victims of crime, social welfare and health care, and women.

Connection between national and international efforts

Efforts to promote respect for human rights must be made both in Norway and internationally. Some aspects of international human rights efforts directly affect the situation in Norway. The development of new, strengthened international rules have a bearing upon the Storting as the legislative body. International monitoring mechanisms provide input and guiding principles for Norwegian courts. Decisions and statements made internationally are taken into account by the Norwegian public administration and the domestic political community.

Similarly, human rights efforts in Norway may have some significance for international efforts. The Norwegian system of government, Norwegian courts and the Norwegian public administration could serve as a source of inspiration for other states, and increased expertise in Norway could be of use to countries in which the human rights situation is problematic. Moreover, Norway's international efforts will always be viewed in the light of the way in which the Norwegian authorities protect the human rights of their own citizens. If we fail to put our own house in order, Norway's international commitment to the promotion of human rights efforts will lose its credibility.

An active human rights policy at international level Today the major human rights challenges are to be found on the international arena. There we find examples of human rights situations that are far more serious than is the case in Norway. The poverty issue is a key factor in this picture. Violent conflicts and social disintegration further impede efforts to promote human rights.

Norway's international efforts are taking a new direction

The Government intends to pursue a proactive human rights policy, both in international fora and in direct cooperation with states on a bilateral basis. Our focus on human rights reflects the priority we give to respect for human dignity. It also demonstrates a will to accept any ramifications of pursuing such a policy. The nature of and justification for Norway's international involvement have gradually changed. Human rights as such, have become a more weighty argument in foreign policy. They have also become more influential and visible in traditional foreign policy fields such as security and trade policy. A more open and frank approach is being taken in human rights efforts in international fora. At the same time we have a greater range of positive measures at our disposal through more direct involvement in cooperation with other countries.

Norway's international efforts are based on the universality of human rights, i.e. the fact that all human rights apply to all individuals in all countries. This principle of universality provides an ethical and legal platform on which the Norwegian authorities base their global efforts to protect human rights, while at the same time insisting that the entire range of human rights be taken equally seriously. Norway cannot, of course, employ the same direct measures abroad as at home. The choice of means and measures for the promotion and protection of human rights abroad is as difficult as it is decisive. Experience shows that the measures we employ can have a considerable impact. The Government will primarily make use of positive measures and incentives, such as technical or financial assistance, cultural cooperation projects, human rights dialogues, etc. Negative measures such as giving less priority to or suspending political, cultural or economic relations may, however, be unavoidable in certain situations. The measures must be viewed in connection with what is being done by the various partners in international human rights efforts.

An important part of Norwegian efforts to promote human rights is - and will continue to be - linked to efforts to strengthen and secure the implementation of international obligations. The Government views this work in conjunction with measures to increase the unconditional support for existing human rights obligations. A key role is played in international human rights efforts by the UN Commission on Human Rights, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the treaty-based monitoring mechanisms. As far as Norway is concerned, regional mechanisms and organisations, such as the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the Barents Cooperation, are also important.

The Government values very highly our human rights dialogues with selected countries. These dialogues offer the opportunity to adopt a structured, in-depth approach which has good potential in the long run, but which requires substantial resources and a long-term commitment on Norway's part as well as that of our dialogue partners. The Government will take steps to strengthen these dialogues, while making them more effective. The countries we engage as dialogue partners are those where there are human rights problems, but where there is also potential for improvement through dialogue and contact. The Government is currently conducting human rights dialogues with China, Turkey and Cuba, and aims to establish similar dialogues with Vietnam and Indonesia.

The role of human rights in development cooperation is an important topic with regard to Norway's promotion of human rights. Our point of departure is the premise that development cooperation must be grounded in respect for human rights. This places new demands on our development cooperation, which in turn may influence our forms of cooperation as well as types of support. Increased emphasis is being placed on a number of areas, such as good governance and efforts to promote the rule of law, education and research, freedom of expression and differentiated media, the rights of women, the rights of the child, the disabled, indigenous peoples, employment and labour standards and the right to food.

Humanitarian assistance based on respect for human rights is a key aspect of the Government's international efforts. A central principle is that all victims of crises, disturbances and armed conflicts should have equal rights to assistance and protection. The victims have a legitimate right to international protection and aid. They must not be treated as passive recipients of our assistance, but as persons who have rights. The starting point for rebuilding a normal existence for the victims of crises should be the human rights of each individual. This focus on human rights

serves as the basis for the way the Government organizes the practical aspects of Norwegian humanitarian assistance.

More and more attention is being focused on the relationship between business and industry and human rights. Increasing globalization will make this topic even more relevant in the years ahead. It is important to make a distinction between the obligations under international law on the State and the ethical obligations on business and industry. At the same time, the potential for synergy effects and opportunities for cooperation must be emphasized. In this respect, the Government intends to facilitate the development of standards and systems for reporting, monitoring and verification when it comes to the role of business and industry in relation to respect for human rights.

Special priority areas for international efforts to promote human rights

The Government's efforts to promote human rights internationally include a broad range of measures with special focus on a number of topics. These include the protection of particular groups such as children, the disabled, human rights defenders, internally displaced persons, lesbians and homosexuals, minorities and indigenous peoples and women, and the promotion of specific human rights, including the prohibition of capital punishment, the right to development, the right to education, freedom of expression, fundamental standards of humanity, labour standards, elimination of racism and discrimination, promotion of freedom of religion and belief, the promotion of the rule of law and the prohibition of torture.

Translating words into action

The Plan of Action for Human Rights comprises over 300 initiatives and measures. Ten of the more important ones are described below:

1. The Government will present proposals regarding the further implementation of four core human rights conventions into Norwegian law

The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights were incorporated into Norwegian law by the Human Rights Act of 21 May 1999. The Government will follow up this work by presenting proposals to further implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

2. The Government will review the public administration's procedures for following up the recommendations of international monitoring mechanisms with a view to strengthening the protection of human rights in Norway.

International monitoring mechanisms play an important role in ensuring implementation of human rights at the national level. Great emphasis is placed on their recommendations, even though they are not binding under international law. The Government will therefore review the public administration's practices with a view to improving follow-up of the criticism and recommendations of these mechanisms in respect of Norway. Should the review reveal that such practices are unsatisfactory, they will be improved. This applies, for example, to remand issues.

3. The Government will present proposals for an Act prohibiting ethnic discrimination.

At present, there is no separate statute in Norwegian law prohibiting ethnic discrimination, merely a number of separate provisions that apply to specific areas. These provisions are seldom applied in a court of law. In the Government's view, it is important to adopt a separate statute as a means of strengthening the prevention of ethnic discrimination in Norway. This must be seen in conjunction with other recently implemented measures, such as the establishment of a Centre for Combating Ethnic Discrimination.

4. The Government will establish a national institution for human rights in Norway.

Since 1993, the UN General Assembly has recommended that Member States establish national institutions for human rights. The main purpose of these institutions is to assist public agencies, non-governmental organizations and individuals with advice, research and information related to areas or individual cases involving human rights aspects. The Government will make resources available to the Norwegian Institute for Human Rights so that the institute can be granted status as a national institution.

5. The Government will carry out a large-scale campaign to provide information, instruction and education in the field of human rights in Norway.

Information, instruction and education are important means of protecting and promoting human rights in Norway. In the years ahead, the Government will therefore seek to ensure that instruction in human rights is improved in public educational institutions at all levels, and will strengthen research on human rights in Norway. Central government activities aimed at disseminating information on human rights will be intensified, and the Government will support the efforts of non-governmental organizations and the media. The Government also aims to promote greater awareness and knowledge of human rights within the central government administration.

6. The Government will establish a resource centre for the rights of indigenous peoples.

The Government intends to support the development of expertise on the rights of indigenous peoples, and will therefore establish a resource centre in northern Norway, which should deal with national and international issues relating to indigenous peoples. It is natural to link this new centre to existing groups of Sami experts in Finnmark or Tromsø, so that it can serve as a specialized supplement to larger human rights circles. One of the main tasks of the centre will be to provide information to schools and other institutions and organizations in society which require specially adapted materials on topics relating to indigenous peoples.

7. The Government will strengthen its human rights dialogues with China, Turkey and Cuba, and seek to establish a dialogue with Vietnam and Indonesia.

Human rights dialogues are a means of focusing long-term, international efforts to promote human rights. Such dialogues offer a particular advantage in that they build networks between partners on different levels, such as politicians, academics, non-governmental organizations and the judicial system. Within these networks, information is exchanged, human rights issues are addressed and critical assessments are presented - all within a framework that makes it possible to exert influence and achieve positive changes over time. The Government wishes to strengthen the dialogues currently being conducted with China, Turkey and Cuba, and will seek to establish a dialogue with Vietnam and Indonesia.

8. The Government will establish a pilot project for the development of new standards and systems for reporting, monitoring and verification with regard to the role of business and industry in relation to respect for human rights.

There has been heavy focus on the involvement of Norwegian business and industry in other countries in relation to respect for human rights. The business community can play an important role in the realization of human rights at the international level. The Government wishes to support these efforts by establishing a pilot project to facilitate the development of standards and systems for reporting, monitoring and verification when it comes to the role of business and industry in relation to respect for human rights. The Government will focus primarily on the development of voluntary arrangements. The pilot project will be carried out in close cooperation with business and industry and the social partners.

9. The Government will, through cooperation with writers' organizations, support the scheme to provide refuge for writers who are victims of persecution.

Norwegian writers' organizations have devised a scheme under which municipalities in Norway may offer to provide refuge for writers from other countries who are being persecuted. These "writers' havens" established in Stavanger and Kristiansand have functioned very satisfactorily. The Government wishes to support this work by establishing an annual grant scheme funded by the State.

10. The Government will strengthen the human rights dimension in development cooperation.

One of the objectives of the Government's development policy is to strengthen the recipient's capacity to observe its human rights obligations. This objective is based on the fundamental principle that it is the authorities of the countries concerned who are responsible for the human rights situation in their own country, while the international community, non-governmental organizations and individuals can support the implementation of efforts to promote human rights. As far as Norwegian development policy is concerned, this means that cooperation will be based on an analysis of the human rights situation in the partner country concerned and will help to improve the situation. In this way the Government will seek to ensure that development cooperation is based on respect for human rights.

Human rights conventions to which Norway has acceded

There are a large number of conventions governing human rights issues. The following is a list of some of the central human rights conventions to which Norway is a party.

United Nations:

- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 16 December 1966
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights with additional protocols of 16 December 1966
- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination of 7 March 1966
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women of 18 December 1979
- Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment of 10 December 1984
- Convention on the Rights of the Child of 20 November 1989

Council of Europe:

- Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of 4 November 1950 with additional protocols
- European Social Charter of 18 October 1961 with additional protocols
- European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment of 26 November 1987
- European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages of 5 November 1992
- Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities of 1 February 1995

International Labour Organization (ILO):

- Convention 29 concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour of 28 June 1930
- Convention 87 on the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize of 9 July 1948
- Convention 98 on the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining of 1 July 1949
- Convention 100 concerning Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value of 29 June 1951
- Convention 105 concerning the Abolition of Forced Labour of 25 June 1957
- Convention 111 concerning Discrimination in respect of Employment and Occupation of 25 June 1958
- Convention 138 concerning the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment of 26 June 1973
- Convention 154 concerning the Promotion of Collective Bargaining of 19 June 1981
- Convention 169 concerning Indigenous Peoples and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries of 27 June 1989