

# Strategy to Implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The objective of Government child policy is that children and young people are to be respected and to have opportunities for development and security and also for participation and influence. This policy area is mainly concerned with action to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (the CRC) in Sweden. Child policy is based on a national strategy that has recently been updated and presented to the Riksdag (the Swedish Parliament).

## Child policy

Child policy is a cross-sectoral policy area mainly concerned with action to implement the CRC in Sweden. The role of the policy area is to initiate, press forward and coordinate processes aimed at ensuring that the intentions and spirit of the CRC permeate all aspects of Government policy and all public actions that affect to children and young people. Here children refers to girls and boys under 18 years of age. This means that child policy is not a traditional sectoral policy area, even though there are some purely sectoral issues in the area.

## The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Sweden ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child following a decision of Parliament on 21 June 1990, and did so without registering any reservations at all (Govt Bill 1980/90:107). This means that Sweden has pledged to follow the provisions of the Convention.

### *Children must be respected*

The message of the CRC can be summarised by saying that *children must be respected*. Implementing the CRC and rooting its perspective is a long-term process that must continue all the time.

The CRC is intended to be a tool in work to gradually improve the conditions of children. If the child perspective is to permeate all issues that affect children and young people it is crucial to change attitudes, approaches and practices in a range of activities at various levels of society. It is also crucial to develop knowledge and methods in order to raise the awareness of decision-makers and adults working with children and also of children and young people themselves.

On certain points changes are also needed in laws, regulations and practice.

### *Child perspectives*

The purpose of child policy and work on the CRC is to ensure that a child perspective is adopted in all decisions and other actions that affect children.

The child perspective is based on respect for the integrity and full human dignity of children. All people – old and young – are of equal value.

Adopting a child perspective means being able to see things from the child's point of view. The child perspective includes a certain amount of empathy and insight as well as the ability to identify with the situation of the child or young person. It also involves the awareness that children, as they get older and more mature, are increasingly entitled to influence matters that affect them. The child perspective involves focusing on the child and making careful analyses of what consequences a decision can have for an individual child or teenager or for children and young people as a group.

Another dimension of the child perspective is the intrinsic value of childhood. Children are not accessories to their parents or passive recipients of parental influence. They are individuals in their own right with their own needs and rights. This means that childhood is not seen solely as preparation for adult life but is seen as a part of life with a value of its own.

### *Different kinds of rights*

The CRC contains different kinds of rights, both civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights.

The Convention also pays special attention to the exposed and vulnerable situation of children, and this is manifested in the rights intended to give the child protection from exploitation and abuse. The CRC must be seen as a single unified document and the various rights it sets out are equally important. While some rights are absolute and must be implemented by all states immediately irrespective of the state's level of development (civil and political rights), other rights are more like goals and are dependent on the resources of the individual state (the economic, social and cultural rights).

The CRC focuses on the individual – the individual boy or girl – and its substantive articles deal with the right of the child to have his or her fundamental rights and needs met.

### *Four fundamental principles*

The CRC contains four fundamental principles. They are intended to govern the interpretation of the other articles, but they are also significant in their own right:

- No child may be discriminated on grounds of origin, sex, religion, disability or on other similar grounds (Article 2).
- The best interest of the child shall guide all decisions and actions concerning children and young people (Article 3).
- Children and young people must be allowed to develop at their own pace and based on their own individual circumstances.
- Children and young people must be given the opportunity to express their opinions on matters that affect them and to have them respected (Article 12).

### *A binding agreement*

The CRC is a binding agreement between the states that have joined it. These states are obliged to take suitable action to implement the Convention. It is the state, in Sweden the Government, that is responsible for fulfilling the obligations under the Convention. This means that it is the Government that will be called on to account for any shortcomings. Each state decides how it lives up to its commitments, as long as implementation is in line with the principles of the Convention. The internal administrative structure of a state is of no importance.

A combination of measures is needed to secure the rights of the child: *legislation, opinion formation and information.*

### **The CRC in the Government Offices**

In the Government Offices a coordination function for CRC issues has been placed in the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. One role of this function is to work at a general level to press forward, support and coordinate processes so that the child perspective is reflected in all parts of Government policy and in public actions that affect children and young people.

### **Strategy to implement the CRC**

In 1999 the Riksdagen adopted a national strategy for the implementation of the CRC (see Govt Bill 1997/98:182). This strategy forms the basis for Government child policy.

The strategy contains the following points:

- The Convention must be an active instrument and permeate all decision-making in the Government Offices affecting children.
- A child perspective must be included, where appropriate, in the terms of reference of inquiries.
- The Convention should be raised in various ways in education programmes for the professional groups that are to work with children.
- National government employees whose work impacts on children and young people must be offered in-service training to strengthen their child-related skills and their knowledge of the Convention.

- Similarly, municipalities and county councils should offer their staff in-service training.
- Municipalities and county councils should establish systems to follow up implementation of the best interests of the child in local government work.
- Child impact assessments must be carried out in connection with state decisions affecting children.
- The influence and participation of children and young people in community and traffic planning must be improved.
- The activities and organisation of the Children's Ombudsman must be reviewed in order to strengthen role of the Ombudsman in the implementation of the CRC in Sweden.
- Child statistics must be improved.

### ***Who is the strategy aimed at?***

Most services that affect children directly are provided by municipalities and county councils. These include schools and preschools, social services, clubs at recreation centres, sports grounds and playgrounds, child health centres and youth guidance centres, as well as buses and other means of transport. Municipal decisions on traffic, building and planning also affect the everyday lives of children and young people, as do many decisions taken by government agencies and also, to a great extent, decisions taken by the courts.

Given the autonomy of local government in Sweden, the main instruments available to the Government are legislation, especially the legislation covering specific services provided by local governments, the allocation of state grants and special financial incentives. But policy action, methods development, the provision of knowledge and professional development are also important instruments.

The main actors with key roles in the implementation of the Convention are public bodies – the Government, the Riksdag, administrative agencies, local authorities (i.e. municipalities and county councils).

But the courts also have an important role to play in implementing the Convention. They have to interpret the new or amended legislation resulting from the incorporation of the CRC in Swedish law.

There are also a number of other actors that have important roles to play in implementing the CRC and ensuring that it has practical results for children and young people. These are NGOs, popular movements, the sports movement, industry, the media, the research community, families and, not least, children and young people themselves.

### **The Children's Ombudsman**

The Children's Ombudsman is a key actor in work to implement the CRC. The Children's Ombudsman has special responsibility to press forward implementation of the CRC and monitor compliance at all levels of society, as well as to represent the rights and interests of children and young people. The activities of the Children's Ombudsman cover all areas of society that affect children.

## A developed strategy

In January 2004 the Government set out the direction of continued strategic work to implement the CRC on the basis of experience gained since the strategy was adopted. It did so in a Communication to the Riksdag (*Comm. 2003/04:47 Development of the National Strategy to Implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*). The main thrust of the 1998 strategy is still relevant, but strategic work must be developed further, methods must be deepened and new tools must be provided to actors responsible for the implementation of the CRC.

### Work in the Government Offices

**The 1998 strategy:** "The Convention must be an active instrument and permeate all decision-making in the Government Offices affecting children.

A children's perspective must be included, where appropriate, in committee terms of reference."

### The developed strategy:

- Work on information and training actions for staff in the Government Offices, both officials and political appointees, will be intensified and developed.
- Guidelines will be drafted for child impact analyses in government inquiries, etc.
- In addition, the training of staff on government inquiries will be supplemented with courses on child impact analyses.
- The child perspective will be expressed more clearly in the Government Budget. In the spring of 2004 the Government intends to present a Communication to the Riksdag reviewing the 2004 Government Budget in a child perspective.

### Government agencies

**The 1998 strategy:** "Child impact assessments must be carried out in connection with state decisions affecting children. National government employees whose work impacts on children and young people must be offered in-service training to strengthen their child-related skills and their knowledge of the Convention".

### The developed strategy:

- It is important for the state to set a good example in integrating a child perspective into public decision-making. The Government therefore intends to follow up the progress of work in various agency sectors and to consider, on this basis, what action may be needed to improve the system of management by objectives and results as well as support for agencies.
- The county administrative boards have been commissioned in their appropriation directions for 2004 to report how a child perspective can be developed and improved in their activities. In addition, the Government intends to invite representatives of the county administrative boards to a dialogue on how to develop the role of the county administrative boards in implementing the CRC.

## Higher education

**The 1998 strategy:** "The Convention should be raised in various ways in education programmes for the professional groups that are to work with children".

### The developed strategy:

- A follow-up will be made of the commission that the National Agency for Higher Education has had to stimulate institutions of higher education to integrate the CRC in various professional training programmes. The 2004 appropriation directions for universities and other higher education institutions require them to report action to incorporate knowledge of the CRC in a range of programmes where it is considered important.
- During 2004 the Government intends to hold regional conferences in cooperation with the National Agency for Higher Education to provide inspiration and highlight good examples of work being done to integrate the CRC in various education programmes.

### The Children's Ombudsman

**The 1998 strategy:** "The activities and organisation of the Children's Ombudsman must be reviewed in order to strengthen the role of the Ombudsman in the implementation of the CRC in Sweden."

### The developed strategy:

- The Children's Ombudsman is now considered to be well equipped to work to ensure that the rights and interests of children and young people are respected and satisfied and to continue pressing development work forward, especially in municipalities, county councils and government agencies. The Children's Ombudsman's continued action to press forward the implementation of the Convention and to monitor compliance plays a key role in future work to implement the CRC.

## Statistics

**The 1998 strategy:** "Child statistics must be improved."

### The developed strategy:

- In a number of areas there has been a reliable and positive development of statistics concerning children and young people. This work will continue and be further developed. Work on using children and young people as a source in statistical contexts should be developed further, and the Government's intention is that Statistics Sweden's annual surveys of living conditions will continue to include the age group 10-18 years.

### The local government level

**The 1998 strategy:** "Municipalities and county councils should establish systems to follow up implementation of the best interests of the child in local government work. Municipalities and county councils should offer their staff in-service training in order to strengthen their child-related skills and their knowledge of the CRC"

### **The developed strategy:**

- The Government intends to closely follow what effect the clarification of the mandate and powers of the Children's Ombudsman has on the development of CRC work in municipalities and county councils.
- In addition, the Government intends to commission the Children's Ombudsman to hold regional conferences in order to encourage and spread successful practices in local work on the CRC.

### **Influence and participation in community and traffic planning**

**The 1998 strategy:** "The influence and participation of children and young people in community and traffic planning must be improved."

### **The developed strategy:**

- The Commission to the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning and other agencies will be followed up. The Government intends to invite the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, the Children's Ombudsman, the National Board for Youth Affairs and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities to take part in a discussion on municipal trials in line with the proposals previously presented by the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning.
- The Government intends to commission the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning to produce an advisory document for municipal planners.

### **Development areas based on the 1998 strategy**

#### **Follow-up**

- A system should be put in place to follow up what impact the actions taken have on the achievement of the objectives of child policy. The Government therefore intends to appoint a working group tasked to develop indicators to measure and follow up child policy actions.

#### **Participation and influence**

- It is important to follow developments concerning the opportunities available to young people for participation and influence. The Government intends to invite the Children's Ombudsman and the National Board of Youth Affairs together with the Swedish Association of local Authorities to a discussion of how to further develop influence and participation for children and young people in local government services and decision-making.

- The Government intends to further develop the forms for contacts and dialogue with the Minister for Children's reference group.

### **Information – Article 42**

- Children and young people are an important target group for the dissemination of information on the CRC. The Children's Ombudsman has had a commission from the Government to produce information material on the CRC aimed at children and young people. Two publications, one aimed at 5-9 year-olds and one aimed at 9-13 year olds, have been presented so far, along with a teacher's guide. Another publication, aimed at teenagers, is being planned.

### **Research and statistics**

- Knowledge about both girls and boys and about their living conditions should be improved by developing statistics and research.

### **Children's rights centre and "Implementation Handbook"**

- The need to bring together and spread knowledge about the CRC and the rights of children has been raised in several quarters. The Government therefore intends to carry out a preliminary study of setting up a knowledge centre for issues related to the CRC.
- The meaning of the various articles in the CRC and what commitment they actually entail for Sweden is a question that comes up all the time. The Government therefore intends to commission a project to produce a Swedish handbook on implementing the CRC.

### **International cooperation**

- International cooperation based on the CRC should be further developed. The Government intends to intensify work to develop cross-sectoral cooperation on issues concerning children and young people – based on the CRC – in the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Council of Europe. In EU cooperation the Government will continue to work for the adoption of a child perspective on all relevant decisions and programmes. The work being done in the Permanent Group l'Europe de l'enfance is valuable source for exchanges of experience and the development of the rights of children and young people.



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