

# Child rights in Sweden

Whenever measures of social progress or human development are published, it is usual to find Sweden – along with its Nordic neighbours, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway – close to the top. All five nations rank among the top 15 in the United Nations Development Programme's *Human Development Index 2008* (based on 2006 data), with Sweden in seventh place. The country ranked first in the Economist Intelligence Unit's *Democracy Index 2008* and third best in Transparency International's *Corruption Perceptions Index* for the same year.

Sweden's high level of social development reflects a democratic and stable political system and high standards of living. In 2006, GDP per capita, in purchasing power parity terms, stood at US\$34,000. A sound health-care system has reduced mortality rates at all levels to low rates. The latest UN inter-agency estimates show the under-five mortality rate for 2007 at 3 deaths per 1,000 live births and the lifetime risk of maternal mortality at 1 in 17,400. Education is universal at both the primary and secondary levels.

A strong supporter of the Convention while it was being drafted, Sweden was one of the first countries to ratify the treaty, on 29 June 1990, and has also ratified its two Optional Protocols. The country's focus on meeting children's needs and fulfilling their rights predates the Convention, however. Since the early 1970s, it has been actively committed to providing children with necessary care and support, especially in health and education, through innovative, well-resourced government policies and programmes. Abroad, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency has a long history of engagement and investment in child rights across the developing world.

Among the 30 member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Sweden spends the most on the preschool child. And it was the only country of 25 with comparable data to achieve all 10 benchmarks for early childhood care and education in a 2008 study by UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre.

One example of this attentiveness to child rights is the Swedish Government's Early Childhood Education and Care programme, which has been given high priority during recent decades and forms a cornerstone of family policy. Research has consistently shown the benefits of early childhood care, which is strongly advocated in General Comment No. 7 to the Convention. Pedagogic activities and stimulation form a strong foundation for development and learning and contribute to better educational outcomes in primary, secondary and tertiary levels – which in turn support higher average earnings and better living standards. To encourage such early childhood development, parents in Sweden have a right to take more than two years of temporary leave to care for infants and young children. In addition, the Early Childhood Education and Care programme helps working parents balance parenthood with work and studies.

This programme and other child-friendly initiatives are the responsibility of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, one of whose functions is to ensure that child rights are considered in all areas of government policy and public affairs affecting children and young people. To this end, in 1999 the Swedish Parliament adopted a national strategy for the implementation of the Convention. The objective of this approach is to foster respect for the principles that underpin the Convention; provide essential services, protection

and opportunities for development; protect children against harm and neglect; and encourage their participation in the community and throughout society.

To further protect child rights, the Government of Sweden has appointed a children's ombudsperson to represent the interests of children and young people and monitor compliance with the Convention at all levels of society. Each year, the ombudsperson submits a report to the Government on the situation of the country's children and young people, highlighting the opportunities and obstacles encountered in fulfilling their rights.

This firm framework for child rights is not without its challenges. Like other industrialized countries, Sweden is experiencing an increase in the number of children and young people who suffer from psychological distress and obesity. In its concluding observations to the country's fourth periodic report, presented in 2007, the Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern at the broad disparities among municipalities, counties and regions in the implementation of the Convention, and recommended that the Government strengthen measures to guarantee equal access and availability of services for all children, regardless of where they live. Sweden has also experienced significant immigration during recent decades and faces the task of ensuring that the rights of immigrant children are met. Strengthening mechanisms to address the rights of children belonging to vulnerable groups – including unaccompanied, refugee and asylum-seeking children – is a relatively new challenge, one that Sweden is well placed to confront, given its legacy of respect for and commitment to child rights.

*See References, pages 90–92.*