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Child Poverty in the Nordic countries International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW)

*Documentation from an ICSW conference of experts on
child poverty in Stockholm the 20-21 November 2009.*

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Introduction

The Nordic welfare states have by general and selective policies in areas as housing, education, health and social affairs aimed at giving all citizens a basic economic security and access to public service and reduce poverty. In this traditional Scandinavian model the state is the main deliver of welfare services. By transfer payment to different groups, where families with children are included, good living conditions should be created with equal opportunities to education and future life. The welfare policy has been questioned during the last years and the political agenda has changed towards a more restricted welfare policy. Different statistics point at rising gaps between social groups in the Nordic societies. To get an understanding of the situation today ICSW decided to make a conference on child poverty in the Nordic countries as a starting point to investigate the situation of today and formulate a policy to counteract child poverty. Professor Tapio Salonen, Växjö University, Sweden, was moderator and researchers from the different Nordic countries presented findings from their respective country.

The conference was opened by the chairwoman of ICSW in Europe, Mrs Eva Holmberg-Herrström. The member of the Swedish Riksdag Mrs Emma Henriksson representing one of the governing parties, KD¹ made a short introduction on the theme child poverty. She mentioned poverty in families during special phases of life as young families, when parents are students with small income. The definition of child poverty she used was income below the limit to get need-assessed benefit. As causes for poverty she pointed at unemployment, insufficient education and immigration. She pointed at the government policy aiming to protect children by general child allowances, and need-assessed social benefit. Education was highlighted as the protective measure against poverty, giving possibilities to get a job and be self-sustained. Immigrants' situation was harder and for them special support to get a job could be needed. Finally she called attention to the fact that poverty in Sweden was small in comparison with poverty on global level.

The Norwegian researcher Tone Flötten² opened the discussions by a presentation of different definitions of child poverty and their implications. Participants from the different countries³, gave presentations on child poverty in their respective country. The focus in the presentations varied from definitions of child poverty, social benefits and conditions for living, experienced situations of poverty and interventions towards child poverty. It gave a many folded picture of how to look at child poverty in different countries. The conference worked in international groups to develop and formulate suggestions on poverty reduction.

¹ Christian Democratic Coalition

² Tone Flötten, Managing Director, Norwegian Research Foundation (Fafo).

³ Denmark, Finland, Greenland, Norway and Sweden. Iceland did not take part in the conference. No figures are included.

Definitions of child poverty

In the discussions of child poverty there was a multitude of suggestions on how to define poverty, pointing at different dimensions. Tone Flötten pointed at the choice of definition of child poverty plays a crucial role on what measures are chosen as indicators of poverty. Different definitions were introduced and discussed during the conference. Measured prevalence of poverty varied depending on chosen indicators. To investigate child poverty you need to stipulate what is needed in a specific society for children to survive and grow. The prevalence and understanding of child poverty as a social problem is fundamental for suggestions on what support is needed to reduce or eliminate poverty and also to define the responsibility of the state. Using different definitions in different countries and contexts implies a risk that comparability will be diminished.

There are different ways of looking at child poverty as

- absolute or relative poverty,
- objective or subjective poverty,
- economic or social poverty.

Absolute poverty is about the level of scarcity of fundamental means to survive and grow, while relative poverty is about comparisons in the society – poor people are those having less than everyone else in the same society. Relative child poverty means that children do not have access to what is considered as normal and necessary goods in the specific society. Objective poverty is measured as an “objective fact” defined by people from outside, e.g. researchers or politicians with power to define. As a measure income or other information on material consumption is used. Subjective poverty is about the own experience of oneself as poor. Many measures of poverty account economic facts as income, disposable income etcetera, while measures on social poverty also take into consideration social contacts, friends and conditions to be able to take part in social contexts, health and so on. Aspects from the different ways of looking upon poverty were compared during the conference.

Definitions related to income and material standard

Comparing the Nordic countries we could see that not in any country there was a definition of an absolute poverty line as a mean to set a minimum level for children to survive. The most common measures of poverty were relative, objective and economic. Figures on children’s standard of living in the Nordic countries show a relative low level of poverty compared to the other countries in the world, including the USA, Great Britain and Canada. These comparisons were built on definitions of income. In international comparisons as in statistics from OECD or the EU the definition of poverty is stipulated as all households with a disposable family income less than 50% of the median income of all households in the country during one year. This is an equivalised measure taking in account the number of family members living on the income. It relates poverty to the income in the country, but it is not telling anything about the costs of living. It is not taking into account differences in public service between countries as subventions in public service as e.g. free health care or day care. In many international comparisons from the EU the poverty limit is measured as the number of households having a disposable income less than 60% of the median income in the country. These measures of income are shifting between 50 and 60% of the median income.

Other measures on economic and material standard are built on a minimum level of consumption, e.g. number of families getting need-assessed benefit from the society or families without housing/ getting support from voluntary organisations.

Save the Children in Sweden is using a definition of child poverty in their annual reports, by making a combination of families with a low income standard and families getting need-assessed benefit at least once during a year. Low income standard is a measure relating disposable income per family member to a norm on living costs (used as the level to get need-assessed benefit) plus a norm on costs for housing⁴. The poverty limit is below 1,0 and implies that the family does not have income enough to pay expenses for a minimal basic consumption and housing. This measure gives comparability on economic conditions over time and between different types of families, with and without children. It is also possible to measure the distribution between different types of families⁵. The argument for using this combined measure is that it catches different parts of the population with different kinds of economic vulnerability. The overlapping between the two categories is determined and considered in the measure.

A criticism against using income and need-assessed benefits as measures for poverty is that it does not give the true picture. People with low income entitled to benefit, but not asking for it, are then supposed to have other sources for income. For example there are self-employed people using their firm, not to maximise salary, but using the assets of the firms to raise the standard of living. The economic situations of children, who live in turn with separated parents, are difficult to estimate. Elis Envall, investigator at the National Board of Health and Welfare, Sweden, laid down that there is nothing pointing at income as an uncertain measure. It is well usable.

Subjective poverty

Another way of stipulating a norm of relative poverty is to ask the public opinion about their view on which items are necessary and normal for children to have access to. What is included in this norm is of course depending on the specific society and the standard of living. It varies between societies and time. Is a mobile phone and own room necessities in the Nordic societies today? This measure on what “the society considers as necessary and normal standard” can also differ from what children or their parents consider as “necessary and normal standard”. So the definition is bound to who is asked. Benefit of a definition built on public opinion is its empirical basis and a democratic legitimacy. A disadvantage of such list is that it gives a limited measure on life conditions. It is also difficult to decide when children are looked upon as deprived of good things (50 %?). Is it depending on the reason why a child does not have access to the good things if it should be counted as poor (economic reason?)⁶.

Another way of measuring poverty is to ask people about how they look upon their own situation. The informants themselves declare if they look upon themselves as poor or close to the limit of poverty. Tone Flötten showed in her presentation that the percentage of people

⁴ Elis Envall introduced this measure. It is described in detail in Tapio Salonen (2009): Barns ekonomiska utsatthet i Sverige, årsrapport 2008. Save the children, Sweden.

⁵ Salonen *ibid.*, p 17

⁶ Tone Flötten's presentation at the conference

declaring themselves as poor exceeded the numbers compared to other measures as need-assessed benefits, or 50 respectively 60% of the median income. The experience of feeling poor seems to exceed the objective measures.

Questions to children of their view and experience of poverty can be used to get a deeper understanding of what poverty means to children. In one report from Greenland⁷ interviews with children show that poor children in Greenland experience hunger and have concerns for their siblings not getting food enough. Those interviews point at consequences of economic poverty as bad housing, mobbing in schools and difficulties to take part in leisure time activities.

A definition on poverty emanating from the Convention of the Right of the Child

The Swedish investigator, Elis Envall, supported a definition built on CRC as it is a way of measuring poverty taking also social and democratic dimensions in account. UNICEF's has a working definition of child poverty, presented in *The State of the Worlds' Children 2005*:

Children living in poverty [are those who] experience deprivation of the material, spiritual and emotional resources needed to survive, develop and thrive, leaving them unable to enjoy their rights, achieve their full potential or participate as full and equal members of society.

This definition points at different rights of both economic and other types. The rights are connected to different paragraphs in the convention. This measure implies a way of comparing the situation of children with the rights in the CRC⁸ and the dimensions of poverty is then connected to shortage on rights.

- Economic rights include material support as food, clothing and housing on a standard of living necessary for the development of the child. One dimension of poverty, economic resources, is measured as disposable income, long-time dependency on need-assessed benefits, low living standard and difficulties to pay daily expenses (§27).
- Another dimension is social rights implying social security for the child, including qualitative relations to parents, resources in the family, housing and social environment, secure social relations in school and leisure time (§5,8,9,19,23,26,31 & 34).
- Right to health and life includes quality of food, lack of physical respectively psychological health, access to social and health service (§6 &24).
- The dimension right to knowledge and education is suggested to be measured as drop out from school, lack of knowledge, lacking knowledge in Swedish language, lack of knowledge on the own rights (§ 28 & 29).
- Right to democratic rights is measuring influence and equality, discrimination of different kind (§ 2, 12, 13, 14, 15 & 23)

What definition to use?

It is evident that different definitions of poverty give various measures and also different numbers of children in poverty. They are pointing at different dimensions of importance for

⁷ Nielsen, S.L., Schnohr, C.W & Wulff, S: Children's standard of living in Greenland. Centre for Knowledge of Children, (MIPI)

⁸ Presentation of Elis Envall, Sweden (*Child poverty in Sweden?*)

the life situation of children. In the discussions in the conference measures on relative poverty was used.

There were discussions on using economic or social definitions and what happens if issues as wellbeing are included in the definition of poverty. Even if there was no consensus developed on how to define child poverty it seemed that the participants agreed that shortage of external resources is reflected in wellbeing.

It was asked for more research on subjective poverty of children to get a picture of their experiences.

Which definition to use is very much an issue of interest and purpose: comparing different countries, intervening and changing situations or legitimising political intentions. Often used indicators seem to be income as well as need-assessed social benefit. In international comparisons income is often used as measure. Choosing 50 or 60% of median income gives obvious different results. If you e.g. look upon Greenland the figures when choosing less than 50% of median income shows 9% child poverty compared to 18% when using a median income of 60%.⁹ In Denmark the Ministry of Finances is defining low income families as families with a disposable income less than 50% of the median income, while the Norwegian figures presented from Fafo measured poverty by using both disposable income less than 60% of the median income and households getting social security.

Even when using income as a measure it is not evident that it takes into account the real conditions families have in different societies. How the welfare system is working and how expenses are included for families in different living situations is of importance. If it is a big family being able to live economic because of using large-scale benefits, or if the children are healthy or unhealthy and the society gives health care for free or paid by the family will affect the standard of living. Such things are usually not included in the measures.

Measures on income are frequently used in international comparisons, and are used over time. In the conference we could see that the different measures used in the countries made it difficult to make profound comparisons between the Nordic countries. Looking at any country you can see that the figures even changes depending on the measure used. Looking at Sweden e.g. the rate of poverty presented by Save the Children was 11.9% 2006 while it was 4%, respectively 9% 2007 when using 50% respectively 60% of median income.

A combination of different measures will give possibilities to give a many-sided picture. To get both a subjective and objective picture of child poverty was asked for in the conference.

⁹ Year 2007, Absalonsen, presentation in the conference

Presentations from different countries

Denmark

In the presentation of the situation in Denmark Adam Johansen¹⁰ emphasised the effects of the social political frames on child poverty. The Danish government has stated that poverty in Denmark is not an economic issue. Families with income below 50% of the median income are termed low-income families. Using this measure as a level of poverty, the share of poor children is estimated to 3-4% of all children 2006. The number of poor children has increased between 2001 and 2006 with 12000 (40%) children.

Social policy is changing in Denmark and the system of assistance to low-income families means smaller economic benefits and time limited support. Stimulation to work is looked upon as the solution. The welfare state is moving towards neoliberal incentives in social policy and immigration policy. Economic assistance regulated by the state and municipality will be handed by special agencies. Social service and job counselling is separated from economic issues of the clients. The presentation pointed at the parallel changes in policies in areas as housing policy and social policy resulted in arising number of poor children.

The gap between those who have and those who have not is increasing. Families with low income are vulnerable in different ways and the most hard-stricken families are the families with a single mother, unemployed parents (misusing parents, parents with psychical problems) and immigrant parents.

Greenland

In the overview of the situation in Greenland Avijâja Absalonsen¹¹ pointed at different living conditions in Greenland compared to the other Nordic countries. The country has a vast area with a small population (2009 less than 57.000). More than half of the population lives in the three biggest cities and the rest are living in the smaller towns and villages along the coast. The costs for perishables take a big part of the incomes especially in the northern and eastern parts of Greenland, where families have weaker economic resources. Especially in the remote areas there is an accumulation of economic and social vulnerability implying difficulties to be self-sustainable. There is no official poverty line.

Presented data showed relative child poverty of 9% 2007 when using the measure 50% below median income, and 18% when using 60% below median income. 39% of the children are living in households getting need-assessed benefit at least once during the year. These figures are obvious much higher than in other Nordic countries. Households at risk are characterised as single parent's households, young parents (below 25 years), families with many children, families living in villages and both parents born in Greenland.

The figures on child poverty were supplemented by researches on subjective poverty, where children of different age described their own experiences of poverty. In these interviews they pointed at scarcity of basic goods as food and housing. Children went hungry to bed and could not afford food in the school. Dwellings with low standard, not isolating from the arctic cold were described. Lack of money also meant they could not take part in leisure time activities and there were also children describing themselves being bullied as they could not

¹⁰ Senior Lecturer, Social University Collage, Copenhagen, Denmark

¹¹ Researcher, Centre for Knowledge of Children, MIPI, Greenland

afford what others could. When speaking about consequences of poverty they talked about feelings of shame and exclusion. The wishes children expressed pointed at different conditions of children. In the city the wishes were individual consumption as mobile phones and bicycles, while youngsters in the small villages wished premises for youth clubs and fellowship.

Avijâja Absalonsen pointed at the plans to formulate an Action Plan against Child Poverty based on CRC to reduce poverty and realise the rights of children. To better the situation of children UN had advised Greenland to enhance support to child families with reduced economy, reduce the uneven distributed wealth and use the economic growth to support marginalised families and especially take into consideration the remote areas when fighting poverty.

Finland

Presenting the Finnish situation Johanna Lammi-Tuskula¹² informed about increased child poverty in the country. Using a measure of poverty with 60% of the median income the rate of child poverty was 2007 about 14%. Compared with 1995 child poverty was nearly trebled, and looking at families with unemployed parents it is multiplied by four. Child poverty is enlarged with increasing wage differentials. Even if families with children are a bigger share of the working population than others, families with small children are at risk.

During the last decade the income of families without children has increased (3.4%) more than families with children (3.1%). Especially in families with a single supporter the increase is much lower (1.4%). Benefits to families as general child allowance, parent's allowance and child-care allowance are of importance for the families. The value of the allowances has not increased compared to development of incomes.

Poverty is in many families a temporary phase connected to the position on the labour market for mothers of small children. More than 70% of the mothers with children 0-2 years old stayed at home with child-allowance and short-time jobs. When children are three years and the child-allowance come to an end, the mothers start working and the economy get better. Single supporters better their income when the child starts school. Employment plays an important role, but is not enough to eliminate child poverty that parents are working.

Sweden

The report from Sweden was presented by Elis Envall¹³, who pointed at different definitions of child poverty and highlighted the importance to besides economic measures take into account social dimensions as, social life, health, knowledge and democratic participation.

The figures of child poverty in Sweden show 2006 11.9% of children were living in a poor family. It was slightly less than 2005, 12.6%. The figures are taken from Save the Children Sweden annual report 2008. The measure is a combination of families with low income standard and families with need-assessed benefit (see). It gives probably a higher rate of child poverty than measures on income. It is the lowest rate of poverty since the start of the

¹² Researcher, National Institute for Health and Welfare, Finland

¹³ Investigator Elis Envall, National Swedish Board of Health and Welfare, Sweden. The definitions of poverty from his presentation can be seen in the chapter on Definitions of poverty.

measuring, but the gap between the richest and poorest tenth of the population has increased during years, with the highest peak 2006.

Risk for child poverty was higher for children in families with foreign background (30.2%), children with a single parent (25.9%) and highest for children with foreign background and a single parent. Nearly half of them (49.2%) are categorised as poor. Child poverty is also related to segregation between different parts of the big cities. In the big cities you find both the richest and poorest districts - in six districts child poverty was shown as higher than 40%, pointing at very segregated housing areas.

Families with need-assessed social benefits have raised 2008 compared to 2007 and is still raising 2009. During 2009 it had raised about 15% until November.

A special category of children was attended to, namely paperless children. Paperless persons in Sweden are estimated to 10-50 000 persons in Sweden. The number of children is unknown. The children have rights to go to school, to get health care, but the risk to be discovered and sent away mean that many of them are living as outsiders. Newborn children to paperless parents are not registered and do not get a citizenship. The rights according to CRC are not fulfilled for this group.

Norway

Njål Petter Svensson¹⁴ gave an overall picture of child poverty and the national strategy to combat poverty in Norway. Psychologist Vigdis Bunkholdt pointed at the need to look also upon consequences on the individual level.

In the Norwegian statistics presented in the conference two measures were used: families with lower income than 60% of the median income and children in families getting social assistance benefit. Looking at the income measure the share of poor children is increasing between 2000 and 2006 from 5.1% to 7.9%. Children in families with need-assessed social assistance had a moderate increase during the same period, from 6.0% to 6.1%. Unemployed families, children to single parents, families with many children and parents with low education were overrepresented among the poor children. Looking in long-term perspective children has a tendency to follow the educational pattern of their parents, and to follow them regarding low income.

Norway was the only country in this conference working with implementation of an Action Plan against Poverty. During the last decade poverty has been on the political agenda in Norway and has got attention in political elections. This attention has also had impact on child welfare on structural and individual level. In the presentation of the situation in Norway both the action plan and individual perspective on child poverty was emphasised.

The action plan has both short-term and long-term goals and is seen in context with other ventures on social problems. Shortly:

- The economic policy will be designed to a high rate of employment
- The Nordic welfare model will be further elaborated

¹⁴ Manager Njål Petter Svensson, Norwegian Health and Social Forum, Norway

- Preventive perspective is a broad perspective
- Goal-oriented actions towards poverty

Long-term goals are to contribute to elimination of poverty, reduce social and economic differences and include people in risk of being marginalised. By a comprehensive view on poverty different policy areas will be combined to promote the efforts. The activities were implemented on both national and local level, by changed laws and stimulation to activities, experiments, researches, evaluations etcetera. Means were to strengthen social service and promote cooperation with volunteer organisations and user's participation in work with vulnerable families. An overall view including economic counselling, housing, social work with misusers of drugs and alcohol etcetera was put into practice.

Psychologist Vigdis Bunkholdt laid stress upon that families are not homogenous and on the individual level you always have to look at the context of the family and their resources to cope with the situation. Poverty has many dimensions, not only economic. Starting from UNICEF's definition you also have take into account variables as low education, poor health, removals both inside the country and immigration. It is a psychical stress to be poor and many children feel ashamed, even if they do not have any chance to influence the situation. To be reminded as an inferior again and again mean a risk to be marginalised.

The competences of families are shifting and some have good resistance resources and are able be active and to cope with the situation while others turn passive. By suggesting Human Rights as a starting point when working with immigrants with poor knowledge in the language and culture a model can be developed to support people according to their needs.

Child poverty in a long-term perspective and summary of the presentations

Moderator Tapio Salonen¹⁵ brought up that poverty as a concept was on the political agenda during the modernisation of the Nordic societies with the aim to reduce poverty and equalise income. As the welfare state developed the concept disappeared, but has returned during the 1990ies as the income gap is widened. In this conference poverty was defined as relative poverty. What definition to use, was discussed. Tapio Salonen pointed at the benefit of using a definition emanating from income and use economic measure as such measures can be used for comparisons between groups/societies and point out differences in living conditions. Other views among the participants on how to define poverty were to include also other dimensions as social issues and health. There was consensus in the conference that the economic/material situation has an influence on other dimensions as education, drop-out from school, health, quality of food, leisure time activities, culture, competencies and psychic wellbeing. These latter factors will also influence the economic situation and there is a risk of vicious spiral. Social groups and individuals are at risk to be excluded from the society.

Tapio Salonen was looking upon child poverty in Sweden and Nordic countries in a long-time perspective. The richness of the society has increased and income has risen in Sweden five times since 1950. The richest tenth in Sweden has enlarged their income since 1980ies and in combination with changes in e.g. capital tax the disposable income is doubled. When the income standard is 1.0, a family has a disposable income big enough to afford what is looked upon as basic necessities in the society. Below 1.0 you cannot pay expenses for

¹⁵ Professor Tapio Salonen, Växjö University, Sweden

minimal basic consumption and housing. Looking at the income standard of families with children in Sweden 2007, you can see that more than every second family has an income standard of at least 2.0, giving possibility to consume double of what is looked upon as necessities. A smaller amount 8-9% of families with children has an income below the limit. Welfare subsidies are not compensating the poor families and making the gaps smaller. It seems as welfare benefits are diminishing, and new demands are put on parents in bad difficult circumstances/economy.

The norm on what are necessities in the society is formulated by those with an income standard higher than 2.0. The standard of living is raised and access to internet, mobile phones etcetera are looked upon as necessities. During the last thirty years there has been a trend, independent of the state of the market that inequality of income has increased¹⁶. It is valid for all Nordic countries. The gap between those who have access to what is looked upon as normal and necessary and those who have not is rising. There is a risk that the group of relatively poor families with children is growing in the increasingly richer Nordic countries.

Certain groups are more vulnerable than others and in risk for poverty. Mainly it is similar in the different countries, but there are also differences.

- Children with immigrant background, but in Greenland it is a bigger risk if both parents are born in Greenland.
- Children to single parents and especially children to a single immigrant parent
- Children in poor districts in the big cities, where there also are a high degree of immigrant families
- Children in the poorest municipalities, especially in Greenland where the poverty is bigger in the remote areas
- Families with many children and in Greenland it is also families with parents below 25 years of age
- Children with low-educated parents
- Children to parents with social problems as misuse of drugs and alcohol

Reduction of child poverty is an issue for the Nordic welfare states. There are strong relations between economic conditions and other welfare areas. To reach the children you have to formulate policies for different political areas, as policy for housing, labour market, education, health, social issues etcetera.

How the policy is designed is of utmost importance. One example was the Danish one, which was described as neoliberal ideas laid the basis of a policy of norms of work. The assumption behind this policy seems to be if the gaps of income are big enough the poorest people will be stimulated to work to better their situation. It implies that poverty is depending on the individual and her will and activity. This policy is not taking into account unemployment, low education and that unqualified work is also low-paid work.

Looking at the different countries it shows that Norway is paying attention to child poverty more than the other countries by an ambitious Action plan. At the same time Norway seems to have less child poverty compared with the other Nordic countries. There were different

¹⁶ The gini-coefficient for disposable income per consumer unity as a measure of distribution of income has changed in Sweden from 0.218 to 0.310 between 1975 and 2006.

explanations. It was put on the political agenda in the elections 2001 as a main issue, which legitimised further actions. A scientific constructivist perspective emphasising actors' views was also mentioned. It was connected to acceptance of a child perspective in child welfare implying listening to parents.

Before starting a discussion in small groups Tapio Salonen introduced a four-field table to structure what kind of contributions can be done to reduce child poverty.

Contribution to reduce child poverty

	Proactive	Reactive
Selective		
General		

Using this four-field table to structure discussions in small groups the participants from the different countries were comparing their experiences from their countries on what has been done and what to do to reduce child poverty. Which aspects must be addressed? And what concrete actions are to be taken?

Ideas from small group discussions

In comparisons of the different countries some critical remarks were made regarding some countries: The cut-down of allowances and subsidies in Denmark with the aim to stimulate people to work is goal-oriented, but its consequences were seen as doubtful. The goal-oriented cut-down in public care in Sweden gives hard and wide consequences to the users. In Greenland an ineffective administration and lack of information obstruct changes and betterment especially of children in remote areas. Norway was seen as the positive example with its Action Plan against poverty including a whole battery of measures to support children in vulnerable situations.

The discussions in the small groups can be characterised as brain storming and gave a catalogue of different measures to discuss further on and turn into concrete actions. In the reports the suggestions from the groups were mixing general/selective and proactive/reactive interventions. The suggestions belonged to a wide range of policy areas. Here suggestions are presented as a long list of ideas.

Housing policy: Segregation was seen as a problem to address by general, proactive and reactive means. Planning of mixed areas with different types of houses and mixture of block of flats and private owned houses must be a priority. As a selective mean prohibition against evicting families with children was suggested.

Economy/Social policy: In the small groups the relation between economy and social issues were emphasised. Economic security was seen as vital for the families, but it is also connected to social efforts in the welfare sector. As general proactive means there were suggestions to guarantee a minimal wage, big enough to be able to live an acceptable life and

pocket money from the state for all children. A general upgrading of child allowances was on the wish list. And wealth tax of the most affluent people was suggested to be brought back where it was abolished. Child-care allowance was suggested to be taken away as it implied risks especially for women to be locked in the family.

Selective and reactive means were economic counselling and dept rescheduling to help families in difficult economic situations. Extra allowances for students with children and youth allowances up to 20 years were also proposed.

Child welfare was discussed in all groups. To look at families as a whole and be prepared to support vulnerable families out of their own needs was emphasised. It also included making social investigations of children in cooperation with them. Support to vulnerable children in families with misusing or psychical sick parents. Give practical support to families and think in terms of early intervention. Poor families must get economic support to a decent standard.

To make proactive actions to young people leisure time activities must be for free, as they will not be excluded because of lack of money. Special activities as summer colonies should be organised for free for children. Work on holidays was also suggested to help young people to get some own money and prepare them for the future.

Education policy: School was emphasised as the institution which can equalise the conditions for children from different social groups. Basic is to see children as a resource for now and the future. In all countries the participants worried about high drop-out of young people from the secondary school as it implies risks for those children to end up in low-paid jobs and a continued poverty. Reasons for drop-out as a too abstract curriculum, lack of knowledge of the main language of the country or lack of general support were discussed. To make researches on reasons for drop-out and how to support young people to stay in school was suggested. But it was also proposed to start at once to support immigrant children actively with language courses and to prepare their homework. Even here needs of early intervention was formulated. As a mean to give the right type of support in school resource analysis were suggested, implying what needs of special pedagogic and social support there was and what type of contributions should be set up.

Free lunch in school for everyone was seen as an important help for vulnerable children, especially in remote areas where children have long way to school and poor living conditions. Also competent teachers should be prioritised, especially in remote areas, where lack of good education hampers the future of the children.

Health care: Free health care for all children was also one general preventive measure. A good cooperation between health care and child welfare can make early interventions possible and diminish later problems.

Labour market policy: Labour was discussed in many contexts and the wish among most people to be self-sufficient was taken for granted. Unemployment as a social problem especially among vulnerable groups was on the agenda. Suggestions on special support to unemployed immigrant parents and special support to the labour market in remote areas (especially Greenland) to give better chances for unemployed people was discussed. Young people need to get possibilities to test different jobs in their holidays.

Conclusions

During the conference a broad picture of child poverty from different perspectives was given from representatives from the Nordic countries. The poverty is relative. In all countries the gap between children not having access to what is seen as necessities in the society and the ones having access is increasing. It is a long-standing tendency in all Nordic countries. There are some social groups being more vulnerable than others and there are some differences between the groups in different countries. The welfare models used seems not to reduce child poverty without special efforts. It was expressed that changes in systems of benefits and subsidies implied a risk of making poverty permanent. Only Norway had an Action Plan to reduce child poverty.

There was no common definition of child poverty, and this conference started a discussion on what definition is the most fruitful for future comparisons and actions towards child poverty. Economy and material conditions were looked upon as important factors influencing social, cultural, health issues and so on. If these latter factors should be included in a definition of child poverty was an open question. The value basis of CRC was shared by all participants.

To reduce child poverty there is a need of a multitude of activities on different levels and in different policy areas. In the discussions it was clear that efforts must be taken in economic, social, educational, health and housing areas to change the situation of poor children today and to give possibilities for a good life in the future. School is one important institution for preventing future poverty of children with different background, but it will not be able to do it alone, and other policy areas must contribute to equalise differences.

Children must be seen as resources and must be listened to. Their experiences are important to understand how poverty is affecting children.

In the end of the conference the participants talked about the needs of more thorough outlines of child poverty in the Nordic countries. These countries have a unique history of strong welfare systems with policies which effectively reduced poverty. Now there is a need to deepen the knowledge of child poverty and how it has changed during the last 10-15 years and what measures the welfare states can take to reduce the poverty.

The conference suggested as the next step to constitute a Nordic working team to deepen the analyses of poverty among children and youngsters. Comparisons between the situation in the countries, the welfare systems and what concrete measures were taken should be included. It was put forward to call on the Nordic Council of Ministers to get financial support for such a project. The Nordic board of ICSW will take an active part in the EU campaign of 2010 to control exclusion and poverty in Europe.

Appendix 1

Participants in the Seminar of Experts of Child Poverty 20-21 November 2009.

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