

Ethnic divisions and dissolution of responsibility

BJORG SANDKJAR

GUNHILD OERSTAVIK



Although standards of living are generally high, social inequalities persist, and the endeavours to create an egalitarian society are now reversed. International developments are mirrored nationally through the widening gap between rich and poor. The proportion of poor,¹ defined as those earning less than half of the median income of the population, has increased throughout the 1990s, and was in 1999 just under 8%.² The relative disparity and associated shame comprise a serious problem for the people in this category.

Poverty and equitable distribution

March 2000 saw a change from a centrist coalition to a Labour government. While the country still enjoys a booming economy, largely a result of high prices on Norway's main export commodity, oil, the bulk of this wealth does not benefit marginalised groups. These groups include long-term receivers of welfare benefits, long-term unemployed, the disabled, single parents, and immigrants, particularly those who have recently come to Norway. Features attached to these groups include non-participation in the work force, low participation in movements and organisations, low level of education, and substantially worse health.³

This results in low self-esteem, as well as an internalised image of being individually responsible for failing to succeed according to societal norms. Thus poor people in one of the world's richest countries are strapped to their marginalised status, rather than empowered to mobilise against a system that, by nature, is based on social exclusion of non-profitable citizens.

Children in poor families received renewed focus in 2000. An identified problem is that social and after-school activities come with a price tag that poor children cannot afford. Increasingly, school activities have to be paid for, resulting in a marginalisation of poor children also at school.

In addition to disparities in wealth among individuals or "private poverty", there are also disparities in wealth among local authorities or "public poverty". Several public services important to children, such as daycare, education, and healthcare, are decentralised to local authorities. Great variations in affluence and political priorities result in disparities in the level of services offered in different communities.

There are two ways this problem could be alleviated. Firstly, by ear-marking state subsidies to such services, and secondly, through national legislation supporting equal opportunities in public services provided to children and adolescents. Neither has been proposed yet.

In September 2001, there will be a general election, and it seems that basic services for children will be one of the main issues on the agenda. It remains to be seen whether acknowledgement of this problem will be translated into action.

Social integration

The government has initiated a process of drafting a comprehensive legal framework protecting against ethnic discrimination, and this is an important step forward.

The last half of the 1990s saw the launch of several government policies aimed at furthering social integration of immigrants and refugees, the long-term unemployed, the disabled and people with mental health problems. While such initiatives are commendable, progress is slow, particularly for ethnic minorities. Non-western immigrants and refugees are marginalised.

One size fits all-Norwegian language courses have been criticised for not meeting needs among a diverse immigrant population. Immigrant women, in particular, have lost out. Despite government and employer schemes to counter this trend, unemployment rates are still very much higher among ethnic minority groups than among the population in general,⁴ and finding housing is more difficult for this group. As the bulk of available housing is private, government schemes to lower the threshold at the entry point to the housing market are less effective. The schemes put in place to further integration include targets only to a very small extent. It is therefore almost impossible to monitor progress.

Refugees and asylum seekers

Only 1% of applications for asylum to Norway is approved. In addition, 29% receive residence on humanitarian grounds and another 20% receive a temporary residence permit. Neither of these grants the same level of protection as asylum.

On average, refugees and asylum seekers spend nine months at asylum seeker centres, waiting first for their applications to be processed, and, if the answer is positive, for settlement in a local community. People have, however, spent up to seven years at such centres. This waiting period creates and exacerbates psychosocial problems and destroys motivation for integration.

The residents at the centres are not provided with the means to live a decent life. Often, the means provided are insufficient to cover basic needs, and health care and proper clothing are sacrificed for food. Only rarely are funds available for activities in the community outside the centres, hampering the integration process.⁵

Gender equality, a myth

Formally, Norway has made progressive advancements toward achieving gender equality. There is, however, a great gap between the political and legal framework and the reality experienced by many women. Globalisation and international influences on the media and advertising represent a remarkable backlash, particularly through the way women are increasingly portrayed as mere sex objects.

1 The poverty concept in this report is relative, relating to the possibility of attaining a life in dignity in the Norwegian context.

2 Dag Ellingsen. *Sosialt Utsyn 2000*. Oslo: Statistics Norway, 2000.

3 Guri Ingebrigtsen (Minister of social affairs), opening speech at the conference "Social Pulse", 17 January 2001, in Oslo, Norway, organised by the Norwegian Red Cross.

4 "Registrert arbeidsløse blant innvandrere, 4. kvartal 2000". Statistics Norway, 2001.

5 Kirsten Lauritsen and Berit Berg. *Mellom håp og lengsel – å leve i asylmottak*. Trondheim, Norway: SINTEF, 1999.

Women are paid substantially less than men despite equal qualifications, and women do most of the domestic work. The vast majority of senior positions are still held by men.

The number one priority of the government-run *Centre for Gender Equality* is, according to its director, to fight against the myth that gender equality has been achieved in the country. In addition, the centre is engaged in the issue of gender-based violence, particularly the international trafficking of women into the Norwegian sex industry.

Security and development

Norway joined the UN Security Council in 2001. The government has identified three main objectives for Norway's two-year period in the Council. The first is to address the underlying causes of conflict, namely poverty, underdevelopment, inequality and oppression. The second is to strengthen the UN's ability to implement peace operations. The third is to make sure that special attention is paid to Africa.

NGOs and others have been disappointed on previous occasions when the discrepancy between domestic political rhetoric and international acting has been striking. Hence, NGOs will closely monitor the Norwegian political focus in the Council.

Global poverty eradication, development assistance and double standards

A commendable 0.91% of Norway's GNP was allocated to overseas development assistance (ODA) in 1999. This is an increase from 0.87% in 1995.⁶ The figure covers an increasing expenditure for assistance to conflict areas in Europe, however. Norwegian ODA is the main arena for consideration of WSSD commitments and outcomes when formulating policy. In international forums, Norway has actively worked for wider adoption of the 20/20 initiative and for

debt cancellation/alleviation. While there was disappointment at the five-year review of the WSSD in Geneva in June 2000 that Norway did not actively support the Canadian initiative to include a study on Currency Transaction Tax (CTT) in the outcome document, Norway now supports this.

While Norway is doing commendable work within ODA, Norwegian delegations in international negotiations of frameworks for trade, as well as Norwegian companies abroad, pursue policies and actions, which are in direct conflict with development assistance policy. NGOs would therefore like to see more coherence in Norwegian actions abroad.

Through membership in trade agreements such as the European Economic Area or the treaties of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), power is moved further away and responsibility is diluted. The civil society would like to see analyses of the potential consequences of agreements, such as the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), before such agreements are signed.

Increasing privatisation, nationally and internationally, also dissolves democratic accountability at a speed and in a way we find extremely worrying. The civil society is concerned about the lack of transparency and accountability in these processes and organisations. While the government has some mechanisms for communicating with civil society when formulating policy and entering into agreements, these are far from comprehensive.

Civil society is left with a feeling of powerlessness, and mobilising around social issues may feel pointless. Recent events provide glimmers of hope for popular demand for participation in political processes, however. Close to 10% of the city's population marched against racism at a demonstration in Oslo following the murder of a young black boy. Popular interest and mobilisation around the establishment of ATTAC Norway⁷ is encouraging. The civil society commits to continuing its work to alleviate the problems highlighted in this report. ■

Norwegian People's Aid
<gunhild.oerstavik@npaid.org>

⁶ "Offentlige utgifter til utviklingshjelp, 1995-1999." Statistics Norway, 2000.

⁷ ATTAC (Action pour la Taxation des Transactions pour l' Aide aux Citoyens/Action for a Transaction Tax to Aid Citizens) is a growing international movement.