NORWAY'S APPROACH TO INTEGRATION OF IMMIGRANTS AND MINORITIES

ABSTRACT

The universalistic welfare state and welfare concerns constitute core premises for Norway's integration policy towards immigrants, refugees and minorities. The principle rule is mainstreaming, which means that the needs of migrants' and minorities' are provided for within the general welfare policies, programs and services. General government policy is based on the principle that cultural plurality is positive, that discrimination, racism and intolerance are contrary to fundamental values and must be combatted actively. The design of welfare programs should recognize and respect diversity and different needs in the population. Some special measures are deemed necessary to ensure equal opportunities. Participation in the labour market is regarded the most important tool to fight poverty and exclusion. A coherent policy is sought by giving one ministry coordination responsibility for the integration and diversity policy as well as the coordination of the policy concerning the indigenous population and national minorities. Dialogue and contact with civil society are deemed important in developing policy. Mechanisms to follow up implementation of policies exist.

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Norway experienced net immigration for the first time in 1970, which was relatively late compared to other European countries of immigration. In 1954, Norway became part of the open Nordic labour market. In the 1950s and 1960s, Norway had few immigrants and no official policy for incorporating migrants into mainstream society. From the end of the 1960s until 1975 – when Norway needed labour – few immigration restrictions were in place, and other European countries were banning low-skilled immigration, so labour migrants from non-European countries (especially Pakistan, Morocco, Turkey) immigrated to Norway. Since 1975, the year that Norway also restricted labour immigration of low-skilled immigrants from non-Nordic countries, immigrants to Norway have mainly been refugees, asylum seekers allowed to stay for humanitarian reasons, and family immigrants. Norway has seen a substantial increase in labour migration since 2004 – especially from Poland – within the framework of the Economic Area Agreement (EEA)[1] with the European Union, where free movement of persons applies on certain conditions.

Net immigration to Norway has been considerable in the last 35 years, in relation to Norway's total population. In the beginning of 2006 the immigrant population numbered 8.3% of the total population.[2] Norway is known for its State-run universalistic welfare policies, combined with a liberal market economy. Norway's immigration and integration policies are developed within the framework of the welfare state, and welfare concerns constitute some of the core premises for the development of immigration and integration policies. The welfare state affects many aspects of immigrants' lives, and immigration also affects the welfare state; immigrants become users and producers of welfare services. The presence of immigrants also confronts the welfare state with new challenges related to cultural and religious diversity, citizenship and belonging. The generous welfare measures of the Nordic welfare states are based on high labour market participation of the population.

From 1975 onwards Norway's immigration policy has been restrictive and control mechanisms have been developed. Immigrants and refugees with a legal right to stay have been included in the general welfare policy and targeted by specific measures and, in principle, have been given the same social rights as Norwegian citizens. The aim is that everyone living in Norway, regardless of their background, shall have equal opportunities, equal rights and equal obligations to participate in society and make use of their resources.

General government policy is further based on the principle that cultural plurality is positive and that discrimination, racism, and intolerance are contrary to fundamental values and must be actively thwarted. A large step towards more comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation was taken when the *Anti-Discrimination Act* was implemented on January 1, 2006. The Act applies to all areas of society except family life and personal relationships, and prohibits discrimination based on

ethnicity, national origin, descent, colour, language, religion or belief. The Act protects against both direct and indirect discrimination. At the same time the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombud and the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Tribunal were established to enforce and monitor implementation of the law. The Ombud is mandated to deal with other anti-discrimination legislation such as the *Gender Equality Act*, as well as anti-discrimination provisions in the *Working Environment Act* and in housing legislation. The Ombud gives opinions on individual cases concerning discrimination, and citizens are given easy access to the complaints process. The Tribunal makes decisions on individual cases concerning discrimination and this service is free of charge.

The principle rule, however, is mainstreaming. The needs of immigrants and minorities are provided for within broad general programs or policies at the various levels (state, regional and local community). Public administration must recognize and respect diversity by ensuring that different needs in the population are reflected in the design of public services and general social systems. Offering equal services that take into account the fact that inhabitants may have new and different needs constitutes recognition, in practice, of the new diversity in Norwegian society.

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Special measures for newly arrived immigrants are deemed necessary to ensure that immigrants have equal opportunities. The most important special measure, the *Introductory Act*, was introduced in 2004 and combines an introduction program with an economic benefit to which participants are eligible. The aim of the program is to provide basic Norwegian language skills, offer insight into Norwegian society, prepare for participation in working life and/or further education and to increase financial independence. Individual rights and obligations apply to individuals aged 18-55 who require basic qualifications and who, along with their families, have been granted residence as refugees on humanitarian grounds. The program, organized by the municipalities, normally last up to two years and are offered as soon as possible after placement in a municipality. Municipalities receive an integration grant from the central government authorities and have a duty to offer a program adapted to the needs and abilities of individuals; each participant must have his or her own personal liaison officer in the municipality. The program runs on a year-round, full-time basis. Full-time participation entitles the individual to an introductory grant and irregular absence results in deductions from the grant, as would be the case in a working context. The grant is the same for all participants, and they are required to pay taxes. Women participate on an equal footing with men. The participants each have their individual plan and may leave the program when they have reached their individual goals. An effective transition to working life is dependent on close, binding cooperation between individual municipalities and the local government employment agency. A leaflet has been issued which describes the minimum elements that such cooperation must comprise. Effects of the Introduction Scheme will be monitored. So far there are indications of positive effects.

The *Introductory Act* also includes regulations regarding compulsory Norwegian language and social studies training. The target group is composed of immigrants aged between 18 and 55, who received a residence permit after September 2005, which constitutes grounds for a settlement permit. The training, offered free of charge, consists of 250 hours of language training and 50 hours of social studies in a language the immigrant understands. The completion of the 300 hours program is a condition for receiving either a settlement permit or Norwegian nationality. The training must be completed within the first three years in Norway. Immigrants aged between 55 and 67 have the right but no obligation to participate. Labour migrants are under the obligation to complete this program, but this is not an acquired right, which means that they have to pay for the course themselves. People holding an EEA permit are not required to take part in language training. Beyond the compulsory training, it is the municipalities' obligation to arrange for further language training for those who need it.

Norway has a long tradition of involving civil society in policy-making and implementation. The Contact Committee for the Immigrant population and the Authorities (KIM) is a government-appointed advisory body consisting of representatives from immigrant organizations, political parties, relevant governmental agencies and ministries. The Committee is a forum for contact and dialogue on a wide range of issues concerning immigrants, refugees and their families. The members from immigrant organizations represent different regions in Norway (www.kim.no). In order to facilitate their role as qualified partners, governmental grants are given to immigrant and minority organizations. There exists a multitude of voluntary immigrant organizations, which are mainly local.

The government wishes to promote dialogue and cooperation between religious and life stance communities both locally and nationally. In the wake of the controversy when a small newspaper printed caricature drawings of the prophet of Islam, there were fruitful dialogues between representatives of different religious communities as well as dialogues between the authorities and Muslim communities. The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities is an important tool for inter-religious dialogue in Norway.

Since 1983, foreign nationals have the right to vote in municipal and county council elections, if they have resided in Norway for more than three years. In order to

be eligible to vote in parliamentary elections at the national level, Norwegian nationality is a precondition.

Immigrants and their children are encouraged to naturalize. The new *Nationality Act*, in force since September 1, 2006, is based on the principle of a single nationality. A child automatically acquires the nationality of both parents by birth, irrespective of whether the child is born out of wedlock, or abroad. When the conditions of the Act are met, the applicant has a right to nationality, which means that there are few discretionary decisions to be made. A child can acquire nationality by application after the age of 12. Residence requirements are seven years of residence within the last ten years. A language requirement is introduced, i.e. applicants are required to have completed 300 hours of approved Norwegian language instruction. After having acquired Norwegian nationality, the applicants are welcomed to a voluntary ceremony where an oath must be taken.

The Sami are the indigenous people of Norway. The government's policies relative to the Sami people are based on the premise that the Norwegian State is established on the territories of two peoples, the Norwegians and the Sami, and that both peoples have the right to maintain and develop their language and their culture on those territories. The aim of the government's Sami policies is to enable the Sami people to preserve and develop their language, culture and way of life. In 1987 the Norwegian Constitution was amended, so that the State has a special obligation to establish the conditions necessary for the Sami to uphold and develop their culture, their language and their way of life. A Sami Parliament was established in 1989 and may on its own initiative raise an issue or voice an opinion with regard to any matter within the scope of its responsibilities. The Sami *Language Act* was established in the early 1990s giving the people in certain areas the right to communicate with the local authorities in Sami, in writing and orally, if necessary by means of an interpreter. The recent important national law is the Act concerning legal relations and management of land and natural resources in the county of Finnmark (the northernmost county of Norway), which came into effect on January 1, 2006. The purpose of the Act is to meet Sami demands for fairer legislation and reflect the Sami's historic and cultural affiliation with and their traditional rights to lands and waters. The Act constitutes a landmark decision concerning Sami rights in Norway. The Act establishes a body, the Finnmark Estate, to which ownership of approximately 96% of the land within the county's borders will be transferred by the State. The Finnmark Estate is an independent legal entity, which is governed by a board consisting of six persons. Finnmark County Council and the Sami Parliament each elect three members to the board. To decide on the extent and the content of the rights acquired by the Sami or others based on prescription or traditional usage, the act provides for the establishment of a commission to investigate such claims. The purpose of the Commission is to obtain a more rapid and complete clarification of rights in Finnmark than could be achieved through ordinary courts.

The Jews, the Kvens (Finnoethnic minority population), the Roma/Gypsies, the Romani people/travellers and the Skogfinns (people of Finnish descent living in southern Norway) are recognized as national minorities. Common to the minority groups is a long-standing tie to Norway, yet a different language, culture or religion from that of the majority. As well, they have all suffered from an earlier policy of assimilation, resulting in a partial loss of their language and culture. A change came about in 1999 when Norway ratified two essential international instruments: the *European Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities* and the E*uropean Language Charter for Regional and Minority Languages*. One important condition of these tools was that the authorities involve minority groups in the development and implementation of the policy. This started a process of dialogue between the various national minorities and the authorities and a contact forum has now been established. The priorities of the minorities have been the revival of language and culture, and compensation for previous suppression and discrimination during the assimilation process. Authorities have responded by presenting excuses for damages done and by setting up compensation packages.

Municipalities receive an integration grant from the central government authorities and have a duty to offer a program adapted to the needs and abilities of individuals; each participant must have his or her own personal liaison officer in the municipality.

Almost all of the 16 governmental ministries deal directly and indirectly with affairs relevant to immigrants and minorities. A coherent policy is sought by giving one ministry coordination responsibility. Since January 1, 2006, the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion has been given the responsibility of the integration and diversity policy as well as the coordination of the policy concerning the Sami people and national minorities, as well as migration and refugee issues. This reorganization emphasizes employment and social inclusion in a more comprehensive way than was done previously.

To follow up on the implementation of the Sami policy, an annual report from the Sami Parliament is submitted to the coordinating Ministry (the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion) and forwarded to the Parliament with remarks from the ministries involved.

To promote integration, concrete and measurable objectives on diversity and inclusion of immigrants and their descendents have been developed. The objectives

cover a broad range of issues such as labour, child care, education, foreign credentials, health, justice, housing, participation in elections and language skills. The annual fiscal budget includes concrete and measurable objectives that the different ministries should work towards within their own sectors of responsibility, in dealing with immigrants and their descendants. These objectives focus on outcome indicators, describing the situation of the immigrant population, usually compared to that of the population as a whole. The objectives are subject to regular reporting through indicators in the fiscal budgets for the coming years so that progress may be measured.

Government is concerned about unemployment levels among immigrants, higher levels of welfare dependency among people of migrant origin, dropping participation in local elections, and school dropout; it has therefore decided to prepare an Action Plan on the Integration and Inclusion of the Immigrant Population to be presented to Parliament in the autumn of 2006. The overall objectives are not only to ensure that as many people as possible participate in the work force, but to prevent development of a schism in living conditions along ethnic lines, to ensure equal opportunity for migrants and their descendants, to ensure that the labour market and society's institutions have room for all, regardless of background, and fight all forms of discrimination, intolerance and racism. The government will also launch an Action Plan to combat poverty and a White paper on Employment, Welfare and Social Inclusion which *inter alia* will contain improved and targeted measures to combat poverty and social exclusion in general.

An important tool to promote integration of immigrants and refugees was the establishment of the Directorate of Integration and Diversity, on January 1, 2006. The new directorate shall be a competence centre and a driving force for integration and diversity in Norway.

Notes

[1] The EEA includes the EU-25 plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway.

[2] The "immigrant population" consists of first generation immigrants (persons born abroad with two foreign-born parents) and persons born in Norway with two foreign-born parents (the descendents of the first generation immigrants). Norway does not register religion, ethnicity or race as categories in official statistics. See www.ssb.no/innvstat for statistics on migration flows, demographics and living conditions of the immigrant population.