

## DO WE WANT A SOCIETY FOR THE FEW OR A NATION FOR ALL?



### Foreword by the Ombudsman for Children in Finland

The work of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC, 59/1991 and 60/1991), the Act on the Ombudsman for Children (1221/2004) and the Government Decree on the Ombudsman for Children (274/2005).

This work is guided by the strategy of the Ombudsman for Children,<sup>[1]</sup> while more concrete guidance is provided by an annual action plan.

The Ombudsman for Children in Finland reports on an annual basis to the government (Act on the Ombudsman for Children, Article 3) using the Annual Report of the Ombudsman for Children.

The report must provide an assessment of the realisation of children's rights, the development of the welfare and living conditions of children, and any shortcomings in the related legislation. At the end of 2014, the Parliament of Finland added a section to the Act on the Ombudsman for Children, stating that the Ombudsman for Children in Finland must also report to Parliament every four years.

This year marks the first occasion on which the annual report has been presented to the Prime Minister, thereby emphasising the role of the government and its ministries in the implementation of the UN CRC in Finland.

An array of authorities, organisations and individual experts were invited to provide their opinions on

actions performed during the government term and their effects on children (the collection period was from 14 November to 15 December 2014, 43 opinions were received in total, LAPS/202/2014).

The annual report reviews the change factors in child welfare and child policy in Finland by means of a SWOT analysis. The assessment section uses the themes specified in Children's welfare indicators in Finland<sup>[2]</sup>:

- Material standard of living
- Safe environment in which to grow up
- Health and well-being
- School and learning
- Family, leisure time and social inclusion
- Support and protection provided by society

Each of the six sections includes a review of the latest recommendations made to Finland by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2011, an assessment of child welfare in Finland based on the above-mentioned indicators, an overview of key measures taken during the government term, and the assessment and recommendations of the Ombudsman for Children based on these. Questions involving special groups are discussed separately.

In this report, government programmes refer to those of Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen and Prime Minister Alexander Stubb (22 June 2011 and 24 June 2014, respectively). The annual report also includes a review of the work of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children in 2014.

The report is divided into four sections, according to the categories introduced in the action plan in the autumn of 2014:

1. Assessment and monitoring
2. Promotion and development
3. Networking and communications
4. Office of the Ombudsman for Children

Assessment of government actions is hindered by the fact that many of the key objectives and their preparation did not occur until the end of the term. Developments such as the social welfare and health care (SOTE) reform and the reform of the Early Childhood Education Act will affect the fulfilment of the rights of the child and the effectiveness of the service system

from the perspective of children and families with children. The final result of both reforms remained unclear at the end of the government term.

The definition of children in this annual report is the same as in the UN CRC, i.e. everyone under 18 years of age is considered a child. There are some 1.1 million children in Finland. In total, approximately 40 per cent of the population lives in a family with children.

It is important to remember that the development of the rights of children and child welfare is not linear in nature, but subject to several development trends that may also be contradictory. Concern about this can be expressed using terms such as social inequality, increasing health inequality and the fluctuation of social mobility or advancement.

Children in Finland assess their overall welfare and quality of life in positive terms. These are of the highest level in the Nordic countries. Some 90 per cent of children in Finland consider that they lead good lives.<sup>[3]</sup>

Despite the fact that Finland provides one of the best living environments in the world for children, resting on our laurels is not a suitable approach for a dynamic country. We can do even better! Finland must find a way of integrating its growing scientific knowledge on the growth and development of children with a dynamic but controlled approach to renewing our nation.

The children of tomorrow will reveal what the adults of today considered important. Caring for children forms the basis of a sustainable society.

Overall, it can be concluded that awareness of the UN CRC as a legally binding human rights agreement should be enforced at all levels of public administration in Finland, as well as among labour market organisations and businesses.

I would like to thank the government, in particular the Ministry for Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Finance, for their excellent cooperation.

I would also like to thank the Parliament of Finland, in particular its Employment and Equality Committee, for the important strategic changes introduced in the Act on the Ombudsman for Children in the autumn of 2014.

In addition, I would like to thank Finnish associations working with children, young people and families for their tireless efforts to promote a child-friendlier society.

Religious communities also deserve my thanks for their role in promoting the rights of children, particularly the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland for its exemplary pioneering work in child impact assessments.

I would also like to thank the various communities and individuals involved in research for the strong and growing scientific knowledge base supporting our work.

In particular, I would like to thank the National Institute for Welfare and Health for the publication of the Children's welfare indicators in Finland towards the end of 2014.

I would also like to thank the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the individuals involved in its preparatory work, the Council of Europe and the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC), whose role in the construction of a united Europe has proven more important than could have been foreseen just a few short years ago.

I would like to thank my young advisors for their stimulating ideas and rewarding discussions.

May I also thank the employees of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children for their outstanding work and open-minded attitude towards the further development of the Ombudsman's role. Even the very best of instruments require regular tuning. This is why it was so important that the Act on the Ombudsman for Children be reformed.

Secondly, the reforms introduced within the Office of the Ombudsman for Children have already improved job satisfaction and the effectiveness and quality of work there. As communications and awareness increase, it is crucial that contacts by citizens are processed effectively to ensure the legal protection of children.

Thirdly, as recommended by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, closer cooperation with the Parliamentary Ombudsman is of major importance. An example of such closer cooperation is the complaint issued by the Office of the Ombudsman for Children in the autumn of 2014 on the right of hospitalised children to basic education.

I would simply be lost without the superb organisational and time management skills of our Departmental Secretary, Pirkko-Liisa Rautio.

Without Lawyer Merike Helander's ability to understand major concepts with due consideration for the rights of the child, preparatory work on legislation would have been lacking in terms of the UN CRC.

Without the expertise of Senior Officer Terhi Tuukanen's (deputy from 1 January to 30 June 2014) in child participation, consultation and the importance of mobile growth environments, we would be less in tune with the everyday lives and future of children.

Without Senior Officer Raija Harju-Kivinen (deputy), the level of know-how in the Office of the Ombudsman for Children on the consultation of children in child welfare services, the utilisation of the knowledge acquired and the further development of child welfare knowledge would be lacking.

Without the tireless contributions of Senior Officer Jouko Laaksonen (deputy from 1 July to 31 December 2014), the coordination of information on the rights of the child and University cooperation would not have proceeded as smoothly.

I would like to thank my predecessor, Maria Kaisa Aula, for her outstanding pioneering work as the Ombudsman for Children in Finland.

Finally, I would like to thank Finland's children. Without you, we would have nothing – above all, we would lack a future.

In Jyväskylä, on 27 March 2015



Tuomas Kurttila

Ombudsman for Children in Finland since 1 May 2014

[1] Den nya strategin för barnombudsmannens byrå 3.9.2014, bilaga 1.  
[2] THL:s databank för statistik och indikatorer SOTKANet.  
[3] WHO:s elevenkät/JY (respondenter 11-, 13-, 15-åringar, 2010).