



NORWEGIAN MINISTRY  
OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Meld. St. 10 (2014–2015) Report to the Storting (White Paper) Summary

# Opportunities for All: Human Rights in Norway's Foreign Policy and Development Cooperation





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Translation from the Norwegian. For information only.



# 1 Summary

*Why do we need a white paper on human rights?*

The Government is concerned by the fact that human rights are coming under increasing pressure worldwide. Human rights are the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. They are fundamental rights that all people are entitled to, irrespective of personal characteristics such as gender, religion or belief, age, sexual orientation, disability or ethnicity. Human rights are the rights of the individual in relation to the authorities of a country, and it is the authorities' responsibility to ensure that these rights are protected. The realisation of human rights thus provides protection against the abuse of power and is a fundamental tenet of a democratic society. Democracy based on respect for human rights and the rule of law promotes stability, security and sustainable development. Failure to respect human rights is an infringement of the rights of the individual and can weaken and impede social development, with grave consequences over time at the local, national and international level.

Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the international community has agreed on a number of conventions and declarations relating to the protection of human rights. There is now a well-developed set of international norms in place that is supported by states in all regions. More than 160 countries are parties to the UN's two main human rights treaties, adopted in 1966, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Various international mechanisms have been established in the UN, the Council of Europe and other international organisations, with the aim of

ensuring that human rights obligations are complied with at the national level.

In practice, however, the degree to which human rights are respected varies considerably. The trend has been particularly negative with regard to fundamental civil and political rights. Freedom of expression is being limited. National legislation is being misused to restrict the activities of civil society and democratic opposition groups. In many countries, the rule of law is weak. Traditional values and religious dogmas are being used increasingly to justify restricting the freedom of the individual. Peaceful protests are being suppressed, and censorship and political control of the media are widespread in many parts of the world. Extremist and terrorist groups are responsible for tremendous humanitarian suffering and widespread human rights abuses, and demonstrate a blatant disregard for the right to life and the prohibition of torture. Many countries are using spurious arguments to justify strict state control and mass surveillance. Journalists and human rights defenders have become the target of threats, intimidation and arbitrary arrest, and in some cases there have been forced disappearances and even killings. Women and girls tend to have less legal protection and less access to health services and education than men, and their physical safety is more often threatened. There is also widespread discrimination of various minority groups. In international forums, the growing pressure on human rights is reflected by increasingly intense debates surrounding the definition and content of these rights. A growing number of countries are working actively to gain acceptance for restrictive interpretations of human rights, and are forming strategic alliances to this end – often across regions and religious or political divides.

It is 15 years since a white paper on human rights was last submitted to the Storting. Over the course of these years, global power relations have changed significantly. During the same period, knowledge and awareness of human rights and of their political importance has increased, among authorities and civil society actors alike. This has led to positive developments in some areas of human rights, while other areas are coming under increasing threat. The Government will

intensify its efforts to promote respect for human rights, not least in the light of the ever more complex challenges the world is facing.

*The need for greater compliance with human rights obligations*

The main challenge today is to strengthen compliance with human rights obligations at the national level. There are various aspects to this. Not only are states failing to comply with their obligations under international human rights conventions, but there is also a growing gap between decisions made in the UN political bodies and implementation at the national level. Moreover, global and regional systems for the protection of human rights are not sufficiently effective or are poorly developed. Most countries, including authoritarian states where grave and systematic violations of human rights still take place, are party to international human rights conventions and have fundamental human rights enshrined in their constitutions. The problem is that these principles and provisions are not complied with in practice. Formal adherence to human rights instruments cannot necessarily be equated with genuine protection of human rights.

Failure to comply with human rights obligations may be due to a lack of political will. In many countries, the authorities see human rights as a potential threat to their power, and may therefore deliberately seek to concentrate power and undermine respect for human rights. In other cases, the authorities may want to initiate reforms to safeguard human rights, but lack the political support needed to get these reforms approved. Violations of human rights can also often be attributed to poor institutional capacity and expertise. A well-functioning legal system at the national level is vital for ensuring that human rights are respected. For this reason, the Government is giving priority to supporting efforts to build well-functioning states governed by the rule of law. The UN has a key role to play in ensuring that states comply with their human rights obligations. The Government will therefore support efforts to modernise the UN and make it stronger and more effective, and thus enhance the organisation's capacity to assist countries in fulfilling their human rights obligations. The Government is working actively to ensure that human rights are given pri-

ority across the organisation and that a larger share of the UN's total resources is allocated to this area. The third pillar of the UN must be strengthened, and Norway will give its full support to the Secretary-General's Human Rights Up Front initiative. This initiative aims to make sure that the UN's voice is clearly heard when violations of human rights occur, and to promote the integration of human rights into the activities of the UN system as a whole. The Government will also work to promote UN system-wide coherence, and to strengthen cooperation between the UN system and the regional organisations, and between the UN system and the multilateral financial institutions. The Norwegian authorities will also support the regional human rights protection systems, with a view to improving the overall effectiveness of human rights monitoring mechanisms at the multilateral level.

### *Three priority areas*

A distinction is often made between two main categories of human rights: civil and political rights on the one hand, and economic, social and cultural rights on the other. This distinction is reflected in the two main UN human rights treaties, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adopted at the UN World Conference on Human Rights in 1993 states that human rights are 'universal, indivisible and interdependent' and that they must be treated globally 'in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing, and with the same emphasis'. The two main categories of human rights are mutually reinforcing, and it is only when all human rights are respected that the protection of human rights can be said to be genuine and complete. The close links between the two categories of human rights are clearly evident when, for example, people are threatened or imprisoned for protesting against girls being denied access to education or vital health services.

Despite the equal status of the two categories of rights in principle, the obligations placed on states are different for the two categories. To a large extent, civil and political rights are formulated as immedi-

ate obligations on states. With regard to economic, social and cultural rights, however, states have an obligation to achieve the full realisation of the rights progressively, using all appropriate means. The realisation of these rights depends to a large extent on the resources available and on value creation in the country concerned, and an effective policy to promote social and economic equality is essential. However, the prohibition of discrimination set out in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is an immediate and absolute obligation.

The Government takes an integrated approach in its efforts to promote compliance with human rights obligations, and will focus its work on the following three main areas:

1. Individual freedom and public participation
2. The rule of law and legal protection
3. Equality and equal opportunities

The first area – individual freedom and public participation – concerns fundamental rights in an open and democratic society. Work in the second priority area – the rule of law and legal protection – will place emphasis on principles of the rule of law and related mechanisms for achieving well-functioning and stable states. Work in the third area – equality and equal opportunities – will focus on gender equality and vulnerable groups in society, taking as its starting point the principle that all citizens are entitled to the same rights. These three priority areas reflect the links between democracy, the rule of law and human rights. When all three priority areas are secured, they lay the basis for peaceful societies characterised by sustainable development and genuine opportunities for all.

#### *Tools, arenas and partners*

The Government's work in these three priority areas will be carried out using a wide range of tools, in multilateral organisations, in individual countries, and in cooperation with civil society. The Government will use multilateral forums, the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review mechanism, and bilateral political dia-



logues as arenas for advocating greater respect for human rights. The Government will actively seek out opportunities to promote compliance with human rights obligations in its dialogue and cooperation with other countries, and will build broad-based partnerships and alliances in multilateral forums and at country level. In these efforts, human rights defenders, the independent media and civil society organisations will be key partners.

### *A coherent policy for human rights*

The Government will pursue a coherent human rights policy, in which Norway's efforts to promote and protect human rights are integrated into all aspects of its foreign and development policy. Ensuring respect for human rights is a foreign policy goal in itself, but it is also a means of achieving sustainable development and security. The work on the Government's three priority areas in the field of human rights will be incorporated into policy development in other areas, and will support democratic development based on respect for human rights. It is essential that all Norway's efforts pull in the same direction and are mutually reinforcing. The measures proposed and set out in this white paper are closely linked to other priority areas for the Government, such as education, health, climate and energy. For example, the Government's focus on education in development policy will be vital to our efforts to promote equal opportunities and participation in decision-making.

When assessing which countries should receive financial support from Norway, importance will be attached to the recipient country's willingness to govern in accordance with the principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Developments in these areas will be significant in determining whether or not Norway can provide financial support to individual countries, as well as the nature and amount of financial support given. The Government will work to enhance the ability of recipient countries to generate lasting and sustainable economic growth, and will seek to strengthen democratic development. In its development policy, the Government will support

the implementation of sound policies that promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Norwegian companies are increasing their investments and creating more jobs in growth markets, for example in Africa. In some countries, the Norwegian business sector provides a significant source of income, and has a considerable effect on overall economic development. Moreover, active and responsible engagement on the part of the business sector can have a direct and positive impact on the human rights situation in the countries concerned. The presence of Norwegian companies in a country can also help to facilitate constructive dialogue between Norway and the country's authorities. The Government considers it important that Norwegian companies make a contribution to economic growth and development, and it values the fact that for many Norwegian companies respect for human rights is an integral component of their global business strategies. The Government will give greater priority to promoting Norwegian business interests abroad, while at the same time working to promote respect for human rights in the business sector, by making its expectations of companies in the field of corporate social responsibility clear, and by actively providing information and guidance.

The Government's approach recognises the fact that human rights work involves dilemmas and difficult considerations. The Government will seek to handle these dilemmas through openness and dialogue, without compromising on Norway's human rights obligations.

This white paper describes Norway's efforts to promote human rights in its foreign and development policy and sets out the following main priorities:

- Ensuring an holistic approach to Norway's international human rights efforts, with a particular focus on three priority areas that highlight the links between democracy, the rule of law and human rights:
  1. Individual freedom and public participation – with an emphasis on rights that are under particular threat, such as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association and freedom of religion or belief, as well as intensified efforts to support

human rights defenders and to promote the independent media and the right to education;

2. The rule of law and legal protection – with an emphasis on the right to life, the development of fair and effective legal systems, the protection of private property rights, the fight against corruption and the protection of personal privacy;
  3. Equality and equal opportunities – with an emphasis on the rights of women and children, the right to health and food, as well as efforts to combat all forms of discrimination, including discrimination of religious minorities, indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, and sexual minorities.
- Promoting human rights in international cooperation at the global, regional and bilateral levels, by pursuing a coherent policy and through the systematic use of foreign and development policy instruments. This includes:
4. Integrating efforts to promote and protect human rights into all aspects of foreign and development policy, to ensure that our efforts in different areas pull in the same direction and are mutually reinforcing.
  5. Playing an active part in international efforts to further developing the normative human rights framework, and further developing Norway's role in this field as a key international player with a clearly recognisable profile;
  6. Working to make the UN more effective and to ensure that human rights are given priority across the organisation and that a larger share of its total resources is allocated to this area;
  7. Working to further strengthen the work of the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law;
  8. Developing long-term, targeted cooperation with regional organisations outside Europe, as part of efforts to strengthen international human rights protection mechanisms;

9. Further developing a systematic approach to bilateral efforts, based on the human rights obligations of the countries concerned and in line with our multilateral efforts;
10. Setting clear requirements for recipients of Norwegian aid as regards their willingness to take steps to promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law;
11. Engaging the private sector in efforts to safeguard and ensure respect for human rights, with reference in particular to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights;
12. Further developing human rights expertise in the Foreign Service, through training, capacity building and the development of relevant tools, and by facilitating cooperation with relevant actors, including civil society, the academic community, the private sector, religious groups and cultural networks.

The official English version of the white paper in its entirety, as per the below table of contents, will be issued in early 2015.

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