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Summary record of the 8th meeting

Held via videoconference, on Friday, 19 February 2021, at 12.30 p.m. Central European Time

Chair: Mr. Windfuhr (Rapporteur)

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In the absence of Mr. Zerbini Ribeiro Leão, Mr. Windfuhr (Rapporteur) took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 12.35 p.m.

Consideration of reports (*continued*)

(a) Reports submitted by States parties in accordance with articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant (*continued*)

Seventh periodic report of Finland (continued) (E/C.12/FIN/7; E/C.12/FIN/QPR/7)

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Finland joined the meeting.*
2. **Ms. Oinonen** (Finland), responding to questions put by Committee members at the previous meeting, said that the reference to “austerity measures” in news reports had resulted from an inaccurate translation of a reference to restrictive measures introduced in response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. In fact, fiscal support provided by the Government had amounted to almost 10 per cent of gross domestic product in 2021.
3. **Ms. Vaara** (Finland) said that the Government was committed to the targets set under the Paris Agreement on climate change, that Finland should become carbon neutral by 2035 and carbon negative soon afterwards. It had acknowledged the gap between current actions and the targets and was taking steps to achieve a climate policy with protection for human rights. The Climate Change Act was currently being amended to add updated emission reduction targets for 2030, 2040 and 2050 and set a target for carbon sinks. A road map for sustainable transport was being implemented and a reform of energy taxation was under way. A medium-term climate plan and a national energy and climate strategy were being developed. Over 70 municipalities, representing more than half the country’s population, had their own climate targets.
4. Human rights were at the core of climate policy. A round table on climate change measures had been set up, with broad participation, including representatives of young people and of the Sami community. Extensive public consultations on the amendment of the Climate Change Act and the midterm climate plan had been organized, through multilingual online surveys and events held in different parts of Finland, including events targeted particularly at young persons and the Sami people. In 2020, the Ministry of the Environment had organized an official consultation with the Sami Parliament, which had provided key insights to ensure that the rights of indigenous peoples were taken into account in the Act. The establishment of a group of experts on traditional indigenous knowledge related to the climate and the inclusion in the Act of a section on the rights of the Sami people were being considered. The introduction of citizen panels to evaluate the social justice aspect of climate measures and the reinforcement of procedural rights were also being discussed.
5. **Ms. Uusitalo** (Finland) said that persons performing unpaid care work were supported through informal care agreements with municipalities. The focus of policy was to support informal carers who were below retirement age to enable them to have paid employment. The latest legislative amendments, made in 2016, had introduced the right to two or three days of care leave per month, provisions on medical examinations and training for carers and discretionary leave for carers without an informal care agreement.
6. Although the level of some social security benefits had been frozen between 2015 and 2019, the basic social assistance for unemployed persons had increased significantly, which had left the overall income of its beneficiaries unchanged. Several non-governmental organizations had launched human rights campaigns related to the level of social security benefits; however, their claims were somewhat outdated as the level of many benefits had increased in 2020. The social security system included different components to be tailored to individual situations, which meant that there was no fixed amount received by everyone. The benefits paid to single parent families had risen; in addition, low-income families had free or low-cost access to health care and childcare and could receive complementary assistance from municipalities, such as funding for their children’s leisure activities or to prevent eviction. The social security system was mainly residence-based, which ensured coverage for all residents and employees. All residents whose income did not cover their essential needs had the right to basic social assistance. Eurostat statistics showed that social security benefits

in Finland were effective in eradicating poverty while, according to Statistics Finland, income inequalities had narrowed slightly in 2019, returning to 2010 levels.

7. Currently, over 300 municipalities were responsible for welfare and health care, which had resulted in a fragmented system with regional disparities in the availability of services. To address the situation, the Government had submitted a bill on a health and social services reform, which was intended to reduce health inequalities, safeguard the quality and improve the accessibility of health and social services and ensure the availability of skilled labour, in line with the Committee's general comment No. 14 (2000) on the right to the highest attainable standard of health. Under the bill, the welfare and health-care obligations of the local municipalities would be transferred to 21 new entities, known as well-being service counties, and the city of Helsinki, significantly reducing fragmentation, and the central Government's role in the management of services would be strengthened.

8. The drafting of legislative amendments to improve the availability and quality of mental health services would begin in March 2021. The National Mental Health Strategy 2020–2030 had been published in February 2020 and had subsequently been supplemented with a suicide prevention programme. In 2020, an online school support system for suicide prevention, aimed at health-care professionals, had been launched. The system was based on suicide prevention training that had been provided to over 2,000 health-care professionals in 2017 and 2018.

9. Health care for intersex persons was mainly provided by multidisciplinary teams in the country's five university hospitals. The measures taken depended on the cause of the intersex condition. Sometimes immediate surgery was required at birth, while sometimes the intersex condition was not discovered until adolescence. In that case, the intersex child participated in the discussion, according to his or her age and level of development. Whenever possible, medical procedures were postponed until the child was old enough to make decisions based on his or her own gender experience.

10. **Ms. Hoikkala** (Finland) said that the restrictive measures adopted to slow the spread of COVID-19 had had a detrimental effect on many children and young persons, especially those in vulnerable situations. To minimize such harmful effects, the Government had transferred over €100 million to municipalities for the provision of social services and mental health care to children, young persons and families during the pandemic. A working group had assessed the realization of children's rights and made proposals for post-crisis measures. The importance of ensuring long-term follow-up of the consequences of the crisis had been recognized.

11. The Government had allocated funding to improve access to mental health services for children and families. The family centre model would be brought into wider use and primary mental health and substance abuse care for children would be developed. Preventive mental health services would be strengthened, including through special funding to enable municipalities to employ psychologists and social workers in schools. The availability of evidence-based mental health interventions such as multidimensional family therapy was being improved. In March 2021, a new national strategy on substance use and addiction for the period up to 2030, including provisions for children and young persons, would be launched.

12. The number of children placed in alternative care had risen in recent years, with the largest increases seen in short-term emergency placements and the number of teenagers entering alternative care. Child welfare services were currently having to compensate for inadequate mental health and substance abuse services, which the Government had pledged to address. In addition, the Child Welfare Act had been amended and several million euros allocated to regional child welfare-related development projects, with a focus on securing multisectoral services, involving cooperation between the child welfare, education and mental health sectors. The Government had undertaken to achieve a minimum staffing level of 1 children's social worker per 35 clients by 2024. In parallel, multidisciplinary child welfare teams able to combine support measures into a coherent service package would be made available across the country.

13. **Mr. Puurunen** (Finland) said that all asylum seekers who were minors, whether unaccompanied or not, had the same entitlements to social and health-care benefits, including

child welfare services, as other residents of their municipalities. It was a challenge to guarantee equal access to mental health services and care for children and young people living in different parts of the country, but the mental welfare of unaccompanied minors was supported throughout the asylum process. The reception centres accommodating them had health-care professionals and social workers who monitored their well-being. Under the Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration, the cost of housing and other services for unaccompanied minors and young persons with residence permits was reimbursed by the central Government to the municipalities that provided such services until the person reached the age of 25. Several projects had improved the quality of the services in recent years, for instance by providing mental health support at housing units.

14. **Mr. Emuze** (Country Task Force) said that he would like to receive information on measures taken to assist persons with disabilities who were seeking employment or were working during the difficult times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

15. **Mr. Mancisidor de la Fuente** (Country Rapporteur) said that the Committee had received reports that inmates in prisons were not provided with sufficient mental health services and faced discrimination when seeking housing on their release. Did the State party have any policies or initiatives to assist them?

16. **Ms. Uusitalo** (Finland) said that the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment had recently visited prison facilities in Finland and had drawn attention to the need to improve prison health-care services. The Government was in discussions with health service operators to address the problem, including through the provision of mental health services.

17. **Ms. Vaara** (Finland) said that the Government recognized the problems faced by prisoners in finding housing after their release. Some housing assistance programmes that specifically addressed young people and immigrants could benefit people after release from prison, but there were no programmes specifically designed to help former prisoners.

18. **Ms. Mikander** (Finland) said that basic education in Finland had long been based on inclusion. Children with disabilities were supported individually and health and welfare services were provided in the framework of the regular services. Schools and municipalities had the duty to include special needs pupils in mainstream education, providing specific special needs education only when necessary and in small groups. It was only when such an approach was not feasible that special needs education was provided in special groups, classes or schools.

19. The Government had adopted measures to increase equality throughout the system with, for example, the Right to Learn development programmes for 2020–2022, which were helping more children take part in early childhood education and care and securing an equal start for all to education by improving equality in and the quality of early childhood, preschool and basic education. The programmes, which would offer a model for funding transfers from the central Government, had a budget of some €243 million, to be disbursed over three years, to narrow and prevent learning gaps resulting from socioeconomic factors or the immigrant background or gender of pupils, for instance by supporting school attendance and literacy. The Ministry of Education and Culture had set up a working group on support for inclusion in early childhood, preschool and basic education, with a view to proposing possible legislative amendments to strengthen neighbourhood schools and day-care services.

20. In Finland, every child had the subjective right to full-time early childhood education and care, provided by local authorities or private services. Municipalities also provided open early childhood education activities. The staff-to-child ratio for 3-year-olds had recently been improved to one educator for seven children. The current Government intended to make major investments in early childhood education and to study the effects of free care on family choices and parental employment. In addition, the Right to Learn development programmes would include a two-year preschool experiment in 2021–2023, the results of which would be used to review the transition between preschool and basic education and assess its impact on developmental, social and learning skills.

21. Over the previous two years, the Ministry of Education and Culture had awarded special State grants amounting to some €25 million to municipalities and private providers to strengthen inclusion, learning and well-being, equality, equity, interaction and the principle of local service in early childhood education and care. The impact of the grants would be evaluated.

22. Day-care centres had remained open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, although the Government had, until May 2020, strongly recommended that parents keep their children home. Since autumn 2020, contact teaching had remained the primary means of teaching in basic education, with legal provision made for switches to distance learning if the need arose. Upper secondary and vocational training institutions too used distance learning when necessary. The Ministry of Education and Culture had invested tens of millions of euros to patch the learning gap created by distance learning arrangements. Surveys and research had been conducted, including by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, on the situation of the education system and the well-being of children during the pandemic.

23. To prevent school dropout, the Ministry of Education and Culture had plans for 2023 and 2024 to develop, in cooperation with the municipalities, an operational model to promote a positive school culture and reduce bullying, targeting the fifth to ninth grades. The Government had an ambitious goal of zero tolerance of bullying, and students and staff would be offered the relevant training, with best practices identified and extended nationally. The Ministry had an action plan covering bullying, teasing, violence and harassment, to which the Ministries of the Interior, Justice and Social Affairs and Health had contributed measures, to ensure the right of all pupils and students to attend school in safety. The action plan aimed to promote well-being, foster a peaceful working environment and prevent loneliness and bullying.

24. In 2020, the Ministry of Justice had launched a project funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union called “All In for Equality”, the main objective of which was to combat harassment and discrimination against people belonging to ethnic and religious minorities. The project was coordinated by the Ministry of Justice, in partnership with the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman’s Office, the Finnish League for Human Rights, Finnish Businesses & Society and the City of Helsinki.

25. In 2018, the Government and the Sami Parliament had launched a distance learning development project in Sami language education, one of the aims of which was to make the teaching of Sami languages a permanent activity throughout the country, in particular for Sami children living outside the Sami Homeland. The project, with an initial budget of €400,000 for the period to 2020, had recently been extended until 2021, with plans for a further extension to 2023.

26. **Mr. Cortés Téllez** (Finland) said that significant progress had been achieved through the Government’s language revitalization programme for the three Sami languages spoken in Finland, adopted in 2014. One of the most effective methods used had been the development of Sami language nests, of which there were currently 12, including 3 outside the Sami Homeland. The Government provided about €1.4 million a year for the nests and had increased its financial support for the preparation of Sami language teaching materials for schools. The working group for the development of the teaching of and in Sami languages, whose mandate had been extended to the end of March 2021, was drafting proposals to address the availability of teaching staff, the development of Sami language early childhood education and care, the teaching of Sami languages in general education and the consolidation of the Sami language nests.

27. A study by the Ministry of Education and Culture had focused on the visibility of Sami people. It was now considering ways of improving the quality of educational material by including more information on the Sami people and their culture and had allocated funding to the Sami Parliament in support of a project presenting Sami culture in general education schools.

28. **Ms. Nyman** (Finland) said that the Government, through the Ministry of Transport and Communications, had provided €7.5 million in subsidies to independent media to help them survive through the COVID-19 pandemic and was currently considering the possibility of making such support permanent. It had also launched an application procedure to allow

national minority language newspapers and electronic publications to apply for State aid. The Government had adopted a national action plan against racism, which aimed inter alia to determine effective and proven ways of influencing attitudes and combating prejudice. A project called “Facts against Hate” made use of social media platforms to encourage young people to think about how social media were used and to discuss the impacts of hate speech. Its postings had been consulted 810,000 times and its videos viewed 32,500 times. The “All In for Equality” project produced material to increase the visibility of minorities, raise awareness of racism and empower bystanders to intervene against its manifestations.

29. A media campaign had been conducted with the objectives of improving attitudes to national and other languages, raising awareness of language groups and linguistic rights and increasing engagement between language groups. In October 2020, a webinar had been held for local politicians to raise awareness of hate speech and harassment. Many of the initiatives taken by the Government related directly to minority, disadvantaged or vulnerable groups, such as persons with disabilities and the Roma community. The number of incidents of hate speech against members of the Roma community had increased recently, and the Government was committed, through its National Roma Policy, to promoting human rights and citizenship education and reporting annually on its monitoring of hate crimes as effective means of combating discrimination. The number of hate crimes against Sami people was relatively low and generally related to land disputes. Some police officers spoke the Sami language, and a Sami language course had been arranged for the police. Government ministers from Finland, Norway and Sweden had recently issued a joint statement on the importance of tackling hate speech.

30. The Ministry of Justice had organized a number of round tables with national social media companies to discuss the monitoring of hate speech. In addition, the Government was planning to conduct a study on the effects of hate speech, with a focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, as the number of hate speech incidents had risen since the start of the pandemic. A bill recently submitted to the parliament provided for the addition of hate speech based on gender as an aggravating circumstance. Studies showed that women, especially minority women, experienced more hate speech than others.

31. The review of the Strategy for National Languages, the purpose of which was to secure the right of everyone to receive services in the national languages, had begun with the organization of seminars, dialogues and other activities to discuss: the availability of services, especially social and health services, in Finnish and Swedish; respect, attitudes and cooperation between Finnish- and Swedish-speaking groups; and growing concerns about the decreasing use of the national languages, especially in research and business. In January 2021, a steering group had been set up to guide the development of the revised Strategy, which was expected to be finalized by June 2021. In addition, a working group would soon be established to develop a language policy programme focusing on other languages spoken in Finland, including Sami, Romani and Karelian, and sign languages; its term would run until the end of 2021.

32. The Ministry of Justice would likely complete its assessment regarding ratification of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) of the International Labour Organization in the autumn of 2021. Indeed, the Ministry’s priority was the amendment of the Act on the Sami Parliament, which the Human Rights Committee had called on the Government to review in two sets of its Views.

33. The Government planned to improve the system of support for reindeer husbandry and to safeguard related investment grants. A working group on the future of reindeer husbandry, to include representatives of the Sami Parliament, would be set up shortly. It would be tasked with identifying: the development needs for the reindeer husbandry support scheme; ways of securing investment aids for reindeer husbandry; and ways of promoting reindeer husbandry as a profitable, sustainable and culturally recognized livelihood. Issues specific to the Sami people, such as the formulation of rules for pasture management plans for reindeer herding cooperatives, would be discussed in depth. Under the newly amended Reindeer Husbandry Act, stakeholders were better protected in disputes concerning compensation for damages caused by reindeer, including through the establishment by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of an independent and impartial board to deal with such cases. In addition, legislation had been adopted to allow for compensation for certain natural

disasters that affected people working in reindeer husbandry. While there had not as yet been any cases where the legislation would apply, there were proceedings under way to compensate reindeer owners with State funds for the exceptional snow conditions that had prevailed in the winter of 2019–2020.

34. **Ms. Uusitalo** (Finland) said that, while the Government had purchased vaccines through the European Union, Finnish scientists were also developing a national vaccine, with clinical trials set to start in the autumn. The advantage of a national vaccine would be the ability to produce more vaccines with fewer materials, in less time and at lower cost than the vaccines currently available on the market. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Finland had stressed the importance of solidarity with developing countries in the global fight against the pandemic; it supported the International Vaccine Institute, which it had joined in 2020, and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations with annual contributions. In its legislative proposal to the parliament prior to joining the International Vaccine Institute, the Government had invoked, inter alia, its obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

35. **Ms. Huhta** (Finland) said that the mass transition to telecommuting in 2020 owing to the COVID-19 pandemic had affected persons with disabilities in the workplace in much the same way it had everyone else. Outside of the workplace, however, persons with disabilities had been particularly affected by the closure of activities and services at the beginning of the pandemic, although the Government had made it a priority to ensure that essential services remained available.

36. **Mr. Abdel-Moneim**, welcoming the information provided on the Finnish vaccine being developed, said that he would like to know how much the Government had spent on medical research, including research relating to epidemics, during the period under review; and the reasons for a reported 15 per cent decline in institutional care, indicated in statistics from the Institute of Health and Welfare. Referring to article 2 of the Covenant, he said that Finland had clearly and consistently demonstrated its commitment to the progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights. However, a State party such as Finland, with a gross domestic product of US\$ 270 billion for a population of 5.5 million, might be expected to have already achieved the realization of those rights, more than 45 years after ratifying the Covenant. He looked forward to the State party's subsequent periodic report.

37. **Mr. Mancisidor de la Fuente** said that he appreciated the delegation's frank and in-depth dialogue with the Committee, especially as it had been carried out in unusual circumstances – under the simplified reporting procedure, in coordination with the Human Rights Committee and online. Despite the constraints involved, the dialogue could be described as a success in every way.

38. **Ms. Voipio-Pulkki** (Finland) said that there were several sources of funding for medical research in Finland. Around €21 million was allocated from the budget each year to university hospitals, based on a competitive process that was designed to support all types of medical research, from PhD projects to major clinical trials. That amount had been much higher in the past and lack of funding was often denounced by medical universities, which appealed to the Government to increase direct funding of State-owned hospitals and primary care institutions. Medical research was primarily funded by private foundations. The Government also actively promoted public-private partnerships; in that connection, the Health Sector Growth Strategy supported the value chain from academic research to clinical research and, in some cases, commercialization of the final product.

39. The government-run Institute of Health and Welfare was tasked with data collection and the maintenance of registries, among other things, and was involved in most Finnish research. The Government had been actively promoting the use of health data depositories for research purposes and had adopted fairly unique legislation on the secondary use of health data, consistent with the General Data Protection Regulation, which allowed for secure access to Finnish research data by academic researchers and companies.

40. **Ms. Oinonen** (Finland), expressing the delegation's appreciation of the constructive dialogue with the Committee, said that the Committee members' questions and comments would help the Government assess to what extent it had implemented the Covenant thus far to achieve the realization of its people's economic, social and cultural rights. The Committee's concluding observations would be translated into Finnish, Swedish and Northern Sami, widely distributed and published on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The meeting rose at 2.35 p.m.