



Convention on the Rights of the Child

Distr.: General
19 August 2011
English
Original: French

Committee on the Rights of the Child Fifty-sixth session

Summary record of the 1590th meeting

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Thursday, 20 January 2011, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Lee

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Consideration of reports by States parties *(continued)*

Second and third periodic reports of Singapore on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC/C/SGP/2-3; CRC/C/SGP/Q/2-3; CRC/C/SGP/Q/2-3/Add.1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Singapore took places at the Committee table.*

2. **Mr. Balakrishnan** (Singapore) said that his delegation comprised representatives of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Health, the Attorney General's Chambers and a non-governmental organization. A long-established inter-ministerial committee coordinated and implemented policies and programmes for children at the national level. Singapore considered that children needed strong family relationships, the support of a close-knit community and a safe and nurturing environment in order to fulfil their potential.

3. Since the consideration of the initial report of Singapore, several major legislative acts had been amended, notably the Children and Young Persons Act, the Women's Charter, the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Criminal Code, and two new acts had been adopted: the Mental Capacity Act, which provided for the designation by a court of legal representatives for minors who lacked mental capacity, and the International Child Abduction Act, which gave effect to the Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction.

4. The infant mortality rate in Singapore, was among the lowest in the world. More than 90 per cent of children were immunized against tuberculosis, diphtheria, poliomyelitis, hepatitis B, measles, mumps and rubella. Improved nutrition had led to a decrease in the number of overweight schoolchildren from 14 to 9.5 per cent between 1992 and 2006. In recent years, growing attention had been given to mental health; in particular, a national working group on mental health had been established in 2006.

5. Education accounted for more than 20 per cent of the State budget; the illiteracy rate was only 4 per cent, and more than 92 per cent of primary schoolchildren went on to secondary and post-secondary education, pursuing a range of courses suited to diverse talents and labour market needs. The school dropout rate had fallen from 5.3 per cent to 1.2 per cent between 1997 and 2009 and, under the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment carried out in 2009, in which 65 countries had taken part, Singaporean students had ranked fifth in reading, second in mathematics and fourth in science.

6. Singapore had adopted an inclusive approach (the so-called "many helping hands approach") to raising public awareness about child protection and ensuring timely intervention in the event of child abuse or neglect, engaging numerous partners in those activities. Victims were offered counselling, medical treatment and follow-up care.

7. The level of budget funding allocated to support children with special needs was increasing and Singapore had established both a master plan to empower such children and an early intervention programme under which special-needs infants and children of up to 6 years of age were provided with social, educational and therapy services and benefits. There were 20 special schools for older children with special needs, and special classes were also available at ordinary schools. Of the 12,500 special-needs children attending school, some 7,600 had been integrated into ordinary schools, and partnerships had been established between special schools and mainstream schools with a view to greater integration.

8. The State was working to support families in their role and to place emphasis on the importance of family for the healthy development of the child, in cooperation with non-governmental organizations such as the National Family Council. The initiative “Dads for Life” was aimed at raising awareness of the crucial role of fathers, while a range of social services — financial support, telephone helplines and assistance in seeking employment — was available to families facing financial difficulties.

9. As a multiracial and multi-faith State, Singapore sought to promote cross-cultural exchanges in both schools and the community, as exemplified by its hosting of the Youth Olympic Games in August 2010, an event that had helped to promote sporting values.

10. **Mr. Koompraphant** (Rapporteur for Singapore) welcomed the positive results achieved by Singapore in several areas, particularly education and health, as reflected, for example, in the decrease in the infant mortality rate from 26.3 to just 2.2 deaths per 1,000 live births between 1965 and 2009. The amendment of the Children and Young Persons Act represented a further step towards ensuring the well-being of children. However, the frameworks and mechanisms in place appeared to provide for work to be done directly with children rather than with children and their parents together or with the family as a whole; it might therefore be necessary to create new mechanisms for implementing the amended Children and Young Persons Act. Steps should also be taken to review procedures for the identification of victims of abuse, to develop support for child victims and to establish a programme to protect child victims and witnesses and assist them in giving testimony.

11. The numerous declarations and reservations made by the State party suggested that improvements were needed with regard to the issues of stateless and foreign children, the right of the child to be heard, the media, and children in conflict with the law. The delegation might also indicate how the State party collected data, *inter alia*, on child abuse and neglect and on the trafficking and exploitation of children.

12. **Mr. Filali** asked whether the State party was considering withdrawing its declarations and reservations relating to several of the Convention’s provisions and whether any debate had been initiated on the marriage of girls under 18 years of age, a practice tolerated in Muslim communities. He asked the delegation to clarify whether the process of amending the Children and Young Persons Act had been concluded and whether all children born to Singaporean mothers could acquire Singaporean nationality regardless of their date of birth, since if that were not the case, the Act would lack objectivity. He also asked how the Internal Security Act affected children and, in particular, whether the possibility of sentencing persons between 16 and 18 years of age to caning meant that such children were tried as adults.

13. **Ms. Aidoo** (Rapporteur for Singapore) asked the delegation to clarify the definitions of the terms “child” and “young person” since, in certain texts such as the Employment Act, the term “child” applied to children under 15 years of age and the term “young person” to children aged 15 and 16, which raised the question of whether persons aged between 16 and 18 were regarded as adults. In other contexts, notably that of the National Youth Council, the term “young person” was understood as referring to any individual under 25 years of age, which suggested that persons between 18 and 25 years of age constituted the majority of the members of the Council and thus that children as defined in the Convention were poorly represented in it.

14. The general attitude of Singaporeans to children also called for clarification; certain terms conveyed a paternalistic attitude that was at odds with the approach taken in the Convention, which recognized children as subjects of law. Expressions such as “children beyond parental control” and “dysfunctional families” were pejorative and should be replaced with more neutral wording, such as “children at risk” or “families at risk”.

Furthermore, the Children and Young Persons Act appeared not to recognize explicitly the right of the child to be heard.

15. The State party should take into account changing attitudes towards corporal punishment and review its position regarding its use, particularly in the light of the United Nations study on violence against children. Caning, a punishment provided for in ministerial directives and for use only with boys, which was discriminatory, should simply be prohibited.

16. **Mr. Gurán** requested clarification regarding the mandate and structure of the Inter-ministerial Committee on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Inter-ministerial Committee on Dysfunctional Families. He also asked how Singapore ensured cooperation between the State and the public sector, how the National Family Council operated and whether Singapore had plans to establish an independent mechanism to monitor observance of the rights of the child and to receive complaints of violations of those rights.

17. **Mr. Puras** asked how the right of children — particularly adolescents — to privacy was guaranteed and how legislation ensured that children had access to appropriate information and protected them from harmful information and material.

18. **Mr. Kotrane** said that, with the adoption of certain laws, Singapore might now be able to withdraw its reservations with respect to articles 7 and 32 and its declaration with respect to article 12 of the Convention. He asked whether Singapore intended to ratify other international instruments, particularly the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography; whether the Convention was directly applicable by the courts; and whether judges were aware of the provisions of the Convention and were making efforts to improve the legal status of children.

19. **Mr. Zermatten**, drawing attention to inconsistency in the various measures relating to the right of the child to be heard, requested clarification regarding the involvement of children in decisions affecting them and questioned the content of paragraphs 99 and 126 of the report under consideration, underscoring that the purpose of the right of the child to be heard was to determine the child's best interests, which were sometimes contrary to the child's preferences.

20. In Singapore, initiatives for children were organized by adults, which indicated a paternalistic attitude, whereas children should be given the means of controlling their own fate. The fact that the freedoms enshrined in articles 13, 14 and 15 of the Convention were restricted and subject to a State party declaration was of concern, given that those articles already provided for certain restrictions. He asked what nationality a child born in Singapore to an asylum-seeker would take.

21. **Mr. Pollar** asked whether Singapore planned to standardize its definition of "child", whether all children were treated in the same way, regardless of their nationality, and whether children born out of wedlock were victims of discrimination.

22. **Ms. Al-Asmar** asked how the authorities involved non-governmental organizations in the implementation of the Convention, whether border control agents and parents received information and training relating to the Convention and why the minimum age for admission to employment had been raised only from 12 to 13 years, which was still too low.

23. **Ms. Ortiz** asked what was being done to protect children from accessing inappropriate material disseminated through electronic media and whether user advice was given to children and parents. She also asked how the authorities were promoting the adoption of a code of ethics to protect the privacy of children and adolescents and to curb

media that denigrated children and thereby created or exacerbated prejudice, discrimination and even exploitation.

24. **Ms. Varmah** asked whether Singapore planned to review its policy on nationality with respect to stateless children with a view to eliminating all forms of discrimination and whether a child born in Singapore to foreign parents working there could acquire Singaporean nationality. She also asked whether the authorities were planning to review policies on the care and protection of children and to help parents to raise their children in a secure family environment.

The meeting was suspended at 11.10 a.m. and resumed at 11.35 a.m.

25. **Ms. Ong Su Min** (Singapore) said that the provisions and principles set forth in the international instruments ratified by Singapore had been incorporated in domestic legislation; however, the fundamental principles of the Convention — particularly that of non-discrimination — had been enshrined in Singaporean legislation even before Singapore became a State party to the Convention. Moreover, that legislation — notably the Evidence Act — provided for the participation of children in proceedings. In all decisions that they took concerning children, the courts always considered the best interests of the child. The right of children to be heard in proceedings affecting them was enshrined in the Children and Young Persons Act, the Probation of Offenders Act, the Women's Charter and the Termination of Pregnancy Act.

26. In administrative and judicial proceedings, children were heard by a children's adviser who was appointed by the court to record their opinions and all other information that would help the judge to make a ruling on the question of custody. Following the ruling issued by the Court of Appeal in the case *CX v. CY*, joint custody had become the most common outcome of custody proceedings. The judge could choose to question the child directly. Judges were trained in Singapore and Australia. There were tailored custody plans for children taken into State care and plans that provided for the continuing care of children who were victims of abuse. Children in distress had access to several support networks, including the telephone helpline of the Singapore Children's Society.

27. **Mr. Citarella** asked whether judges were obliged to hear minors in all proceedings concerning those minors.

28. **Ms. Ong Su Min** (Singapore) said that judges were not obliged to hear minors, but in practice most did so.

29. **Mr. Kotrane** asked whether judges were required to justify any decision not to hear a minor.

30. **Ms. Ong Su Min** (Singapore) said that the law did not oblige judges to justify decisions not to hear a child, except in cases of appeal.

31. **Mr. Lau** (Singapore) said that, pursuant to the amendment made to article 122 of the Constitution in April 2004, any child born abroad to a Singaporean mother after that date automatically acquired Singaporean nationality, whereas, previously, such a child would have acquired that nationality only if his or her mother had requested the child's registration in the Singaporean civil registry. Children born in Singapore to foreign parents did not automatically acquire Singaporean nationality, but they were not stateless, since they could acquire the nationality of the country of origin of their parents.

32. **Mr. Filali** expressed concern that children born prior to the amendment of article 122 of the Constitution were treated differently from those born after that date with respect to the acquisition of nationality. The State party should consider applying the amended provision retroactively.

33. **Mr. Balakrishnan** (Singapore) said that, to his knowledge, no child had been identified as stateless as a result of the provision in question.

34. **Mr. Ho** (Singapore) said that, in Singapore, the term “voluntary welfare organization” was used more frequently than “non-governmental organization”; members of voluntary welfare organizations were volunteer professionals who belonged to the National Council of Social Service. The National Council was a non-governmental, umbrella organization that had been established in 1992 to bring those organizations together in order to coordinate and guide their activities better with a view to increased effectiveness. Those voluntary organizations assisted children directly, and the Council oversaw a broad range of programmes in a large number of areas; for example, it helped school authorities to introduce procedures for combating bullying and had established after-school centres for schoolchildren. The centres, whose employees were paid by the Council, were managed and run by voluntary organizations.

35. **Ms. Aidoo** (Rapporteur for Singapore) asked whether the National Council of Social Service participated in the activities of the Inter-ministerial Committee on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and how the various responsibilities relating to children were assigned, in particular, which agency defined protection standards and which ensured that the rights of the child were respected in all sectors.

36. **Mr. Balakrishnan** (Singapore) said that the National Council of Social Service worked closely with the Inter-ministerial Committee on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The main role of the latter was to monitor the policies of ministries with competence for children’s issues, while the former managed and implemented most social programmes and services. The National Council of Social Service submitted programme proposals for approval by the State with a view to obtaining partial public funding. That mechanism for cooperation between the National Council and the State had produced excellent results and had ensured that there was no interference by the State in the programmes of voluntary welfare organizations.

37. **Mr. Citarella** asked what the procedure was for establishing a non-governmental organization or association and, specifically, whether the Government approved the establishment of such entities prior to their official registration.

38. **Mr. Balakrishnan** (Singapore) said that details of all the steps required in order to establish a non-governmental organization or association were provided on a website, the address of which would be communicated to the Committee at a later stage. Hundreds of non-governmental organizations worked without restriction in Singapore, and the Government encouraged citizens to form associations.

39. **Ms. Ghoh** (Singapore) said that children were taken from their families only in very serious cases in which they were in imminent danger. In such cases, a child was placed in a safe environment. Only a court could decide on placement, based on an extensive range of non-arbitrary criteria. The duration of the placement varied, depending on the situation and needs of the child; the best interests of the child were always taken into account. Each case was reviewed every four months by a committee comprising psychologists and independent experts.

40. Since the use of the term “dysfunctional families” had caused controversy in Singapore, it had been decided, for the sake of clarity, that the term would be used to describe families with complex problems and multiple needs. The term implied no stigmatization on the part of the public authorities or the general public.

41. In the event of a complaint of violence against a child, an inquiry was carried out by the social services, involving interviews both with the child victim and with members of the child’s family, in order to determine the cause of the problem and to draw up a plan of

action to improve the situation within the family. If the case came before the courts, the judge took into account the views of the child victim on the basis of the inquiry conducted by the social services. The State had furthermore launched a programme of family group conferences that made it possible for the views of the child to be taken into account.

42. **Mr. Cheong** (Singapore) said that foreign and stateless children were allowed to attend State schools, although their education was not completely free of charge. Most of those children attended school and thus could make their voices heard in the school setting.

43. **Ms. Bhalla Ajay** (Singapore) said that all persons, regardless of their origin, had the right to health care according to their needs. The State provided most of the funding for health-care institutions and had established a social safety net.

44. **Ms. Ong Toon Hui** (Singapore) said that corporal punishment was permitted in institutions for juvenile offenders, schools and households. It was used as a form of discipline in isolated instances and for serious misconduct, and only as a last resort. While the administration of such punishment was governed by a number of directives and regulations, increasing efforts were being made to encourage parents and institutions to use other forms of discipline.

45. The Media Development Authority had drawn up directives aimed at raising awareness among children and parents about the reasonable and secure use of information technology. Awareness programmes had been established at all levels of the educational system, and Internet providers were required to make filters available to their clients in order to block access to certain websites.

46. While programmes encouraging people to have children were aimed at married couples, the State had established social assistance programmes for all children, regardless of their family situation.

47. Singapore planned to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography and was reviewing its legislation with a view to bringing it into line with the Optional Protocol.

48. **Ms. Aidoo** (Rapporteur for Singapore) asked whether family monitoring mechanisms or social programmes had been established to identify children at risk of delinquency at an early stage and thus avoid placement of such children in institutions; whether studies had been carried out to determine the causes of stigmatization of certain socio-economic and sociocultural groups; and why more girls than boys were classified as being beyond parental control.

49. She also asked what was being done to address the increase in the number of cases of sexually transmitted infections among young people between the ages of 10 and 19, to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS and to counter the increase in the suicide rate among children.

50. **Mr. Koompraphant** (Rapporteur for Singapore) asked how child protection agencies identified cases of violence against and neglect of children within the family, how children could lodge complaints and whether child protection officers were required to report such cases. He also asked whether programmes were in place to protect child victims or witnesses.

51. **Ms. Maurás Pérez** asked how much official development assistance was provided by Singapore, whether part of that assistance was allocated to child support programmes, given the modesty of the country's contribution to UNICEF, and whether Singapore had drawn up directives that called on private companies to respect human rights in general and the rights of the child in particular.

52. **Mr. Puras** asked what follow-up Singapore had given to the recommendations made by the Committee in 2003 with regard to breastfeeding and the improvement of health services for adolescents. The excessive paternal control exercised over adolescents might harm their mental health. There was a certain contradiction between innovative programmes aimed at developing adolescents' self-esteem and legislation penalizing certain behaviours that were quite normal among adolescents, particularly sexual relations between minors under the age of consent. It would be helpful to have information on the various measures taken to improve the mental health of children and adolescents and, in particular, to prevent suicide.

53. **Ms. Al-Asmar**, noting that some children with disabilities were placed in special institutions that were financed by the State and managed by voluntary organizations, asked how the State controlled the quality of the education provided by such institutions and of their internal operations, particularly since corporal punishment was not prohibited. She would be glad to know how the State ensured that children with disabilities exercised their right to freedom of expression and to information in the same way as all other children.

54. **Mr. Pollar** asked whether the State party had concluded agreements with neighbouring countries on combating the illicit transfer and non-return of children abroad and whether it faced the problem of harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, the preference for male children, forced feeding of girls, early marriages, taboos concerning methods of contraception, and honour crimes.

55. **Mr. Zermatten** said that he wished to know what programmes had been put in place to treat drug-dependent children and what measures had been taken to prevent drug abuse and addiction among children.

56. **The Chairperson** asked whether hospitals provided neonatal care services.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.