Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
Sixty-fifth session

Summary record of the 4th meeting*
Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Tuesday, 19 February 2019, at 3 p.m.
Chair: Mr. Zerbini Ribeiro Leão

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* No summary records were issued for the 3rd meeting.

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The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Consideration of reports

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

Third periodic report of Estonia (E/C.12/EST/3; E/C.12/EST/Q/3 and E/C.12/EST/Q/3/Add.1)

1. At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Estonia took places at the Committee table.

2. Mr. Ehrlich (Estonia), providing an overview of recent developments and current challenges in the area of economic, social and cultural rights in the country, said that Estonia was committed to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially the health-related goals. Target 3.4 to reduce premature mortality from non-communicable diseases was a particular priority. In that connection, Estonia had been successful in reducing the harm caused by alcohol and tobacco through a variety of measures, including counselling and treatment services for persons struggling with addiction or substance abuse. In order to support families, the Ministry of Social Affairs had made changes to the parental leave and benefits system – to be phased in by 2022 – to improve work-life balance and encourage more fathers to share childcare responsibilities with their partners. The country’s parental benefit system was one of the most flexible and generous in the world. Furthermore, universal child allowances had increased three times in the previous five years, which had led to a rapid drop in child poverty, from 8 per cent to 2.8 per cent between 2014 and 2017.

3. Measures envisaged under the 2016–2023 Welfare Development Plan, the main policy document in the area of gender equality, ranged from awareness-raising to legislative initiatives, and included activities to promote gender mainstreaming. Despite being a main policy focus, the gender pay gap remained a challenge. From 2019 to 2021, studies would be carried out to help understand the causes of unequal pay and set up a database that would include features such as digital dashboards and applications. The Plan also addressed employment, although employment figures were at a historical high both in Estonia and in comparison to other European countries, a situation that greatly benefited minority groups.


5. Estonia was a European leader with regard to government spending on culture and had rates of participation in cultural life among the highest in the European Union. The key areas of action of the culture policy included the availability of culture, the accessibility of cultural events, inclusiveness and the development of funding models. Considerable attention had been paid to improving the accessibility of culture for vulnerable groups. Most cultural institutions were wheelchair accessible, and systems for hard-of-hearing persons had been installed in several theatres. The online catalogue of the Estonian Library for the Blind had nearly 4,000 audiobooks available for download, as well as newspapers and magazines in Estonian, Russian and other languages. The public news broadcaster provided sign language interpretation and audio description. In order to enable access to cultural services, cultural institutions offered discounts to retirees, persons with disabilities, young people and families. In addition, the Government supported the preservation and promotion of the culture of national minorities by building the capacity of their umbrella organizations and cultural societies.

6. Estonia was particularly attached to reducing the number of people with undetermined citizenship and assisting them to become citizens. The number of people in that situation had fallen by 0.4 percentage points between 2017 and 1 January 2019. The national integration programme, which was currently in its third iteration, managed and
supported cultural diversity. The latest integration monitoring survey had shown that integration efforts had produced positive results, in particular with regard to Estonian language skills, interaction between residents of different mother tongues and the attitude of Estonian nationals towards integration. The goal was for all non-Estonians living in the country to be able to feel safe, work, pursue an education, practice their culture and be full members of society.

7. Ms. Liebenberg (Country Rapporteur) said that, in the light of the State party’s upcoming review by the Human Rights Committee and efforts to harmonize treaty body practices, she and her counterpart in the Human Rights Committee had coordinated their remarks to reduce overlap and duplication. Given the importance of the availability of judicial remedies in the event of a violation of rights under the Covenant, she would appreciate detailed examples of cases where the provisions of the Covenant had been invoked by the courts and of cases where the Supreme Court had invalidated domestic legislation for not complying with the Covenant. Similarly, she would like to know whether article 53 of the Constitution, on the duty to preserve the environment, had ever been invoked to protect the environment or obtain compensation for harm to the environment. It would be interesting to know whether the State party intended to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Covenant and whether the new role of the Chancellor of Justice as the national human rights institution extended to monitoring the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights.

8. Noting that social spending as a percentage of gross domestic product compared unfavourably to the European Union average, she would like to hear why that was the case and whether the Government had identified specific social sectors requiring additional budgetary allocations. She would be interested to know what impact the Ida-Viru County Action Plan 2015–2020 had had, whether any milestones had been achieved and what the Government’s plans were to further improve living conditions in the region.

9. While she welcomed the proposed amendments to broaden the scope of the Equal Treatment Act, she would appreciate an update on their status. She would be curious to know whether the impact of non-discrimination legislation on the situation of the Russian-speaking minority had been assessed. She would welcome the delegation’s comments on any further initiatives to expedite the acquisition of Estonian nationality by persons of undetermined nationality and improve their circumstances, the Government’s plans to accede to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, the conditions in which asylum seekers lived while awaiting a decision on their application and any plans to develop a refugee integration policy.

10. Lastly, regarding gender equality, she wished to know: what tangible milestones had been achieved since the adoption of the 2016–2023 Welfare Development Plan with regard to equal rights, obligations, opportunities and responsibilities; what impact the strategic litigation initiative had had on gender discrimination complaints brought before the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner; whether the Commissioner’s funding and staffing levels were sufficient to tackle gender inequality in the State party; and whether the €500,000 in annual funding pledged by the Government would be enough to achieve the objectives set out in the Plan.

The meeting was suspended at 3.30 p.m. and resumed at 3.40 p.m.

11. Mr. Kalmet (Estonia) said that awareness of international instruments was steadily rising among judges and law enforcement personnel. The fact that the Covenant was not frequently referred to in judgments did not reflect a lack of knowledge of its content but, rather, a habit of basing decisions on the most proximate source of law even when a matter was regulated on a higher level.

12. Ms. Hion (Estonia) said that the rights and principles enshrined in the Covenant had been incorporated into domestic legislation and national provisions tended to be invoked more frequently than international ones. Moreover, once a precedent was set using a national provision, other cases then tended to invoke the same provision. Nevertheless, there had been cases of prisoners whose rights under the Covenant had been infringed being awarded compensation by the European Court of Human Rights. A recent survey had
revealed that over 70 per cent of respondents believed that human rights were guaranteed in Estonia. Respondents had also said that, in the event of a violation, the first place they would turn to for information was the Internet, followed by free legal assistance clinics and then a lawyer; the courts and the Chancellor of Justice were a last resort.

13. The Administrative Court had been seized of a case where a prisoner claimed that denying him the possibility of receiving prescribed rehabilitation services outside the prison violated his rights under the Covenant. The Court had found no violation since the services were available at the prison. In another case involving a man who claimed that denying him an old-age pension from the Estonian authorities on the grounds that he was also receiving a pension from the Russian Federation as a veteran of the Soviet Army violated the Covenant, the Administrative Court had found no violation or discrimination. In a case involving the denial of reimbursement for dental care, in which articles 12 and 13 of the Covenant had been invoked, the Supreme Court had quashed the decision of the lower court and, referring to the State party’s obligation to realize the Covenant to the maximum of its available resources and to the Committee’s general comment No. 3, had found in favour of the complainant and had ordered compensation.

14. Mr. Ehrlich (Estonia) said that article 53 of the Constitution was justiciable. The circuit courts had a long-standing history of cases related to article 53, and the Supreme Court had begun hearing such cases in 2012. In 2011, Estonia had adopted the General Part of the Environmental Code Act, which provided for the enforceability of article 53. Most relevant cases related to planning issues and building permits.

15. Ms. Kolk (Estonia) said that various ministries had discussed the possibility of ratifying the Optional Protocol, particularly following the universal periodic review and previous dialogues with the Committee; however, she was not in a position to say how soon ratification would take place.

16. Mr. Ehrlich (Estonia) said that, under the Chancellor of Justice Act, the Chancellor was responsible for monitoring compliance with international agreements, including the Covenant. The Chancellor of Justice had indeed occasionally invoked the Covenant in proceedings.

17. Ms. Rummo (Estonia) said that, in 2016, social expenditure had amounted to about 17 per cent of gross domestic product, which was lower than in most countries of the European Union. The main areas where an effort would be made in the future to raise the level of social expenditure were the provision of pensions and welfare and health services. Social expenditure covered eight main areas of social services, including the pension system, welfare services, health care, survivors’ pensions, services for people with disabilities and unemployment benefits. The methodology used to calculate budget levels was quite complex, as it was aimed at ensuring the greatest possible effect and efficiency for the use of resources. Long-term health-care services, currently provided by the health service and the social welfare services, were being improved and more resources were to be allocated to general care and local government services.

18. Mr. Ehrlich (Estonia) said that increases in pensions and improvements in health care provision, which had been under discussion for a number of years, were highly political subjects as they had to be considered in the light of fiscal policies.

19. Ms. Reimaa (Estonia) said that an investment programme for Ida-Viru County was described in detail on the website of the Ministry of Finance, which was responsible for regional development. Its main objectives being improved quality of life and the growth of business, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, the programme had led to improved environmental and living conditions and the creation of a number of new companies in 2018 and 2019, notably in the Narva region. Some State services had moved from Tallinn to Narva and cultural activities and tourism had expanded. Unemployment rates were lowest in Harju County, which included the capital region, but were generally quite high in outlying areas, including Ida-Viru County, where additional measures implemented by the Unemployment Insurance Fund included the provision of job market services in the framework of the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund and efforts to develop the oil shale industry. Employers in areas of high unemployment who created at least five posts with salaries exceeding one and a half times the minimum wage could apply
to the Unemployment Insurance Fund for job creation grants. Training subsidies were also available. In August 2018, representatives of various government ministries had taken part in meetings held in local towns in Ida-Viru County to discuss ways of supporting the development programme and economic growth. The economy had become more diverse and unemployment had decreased in Ida-Viru County.

20. **Mr. Ehrlich** (Estonia) said that statistics from 2018 indicated that the unemployment rate among people who did not speak Estonian as a mother tongue was 7.1 per cent, which was higher than among Estonian speakers, but considerably lower than the average in the European Union. The disparity was partly due to the fact that the population whose mother tongue was not Estonian was generally older than Estonian-speakers, and older groups generally had lower rates of employment. The Government had introduced measures to help non-Estonian-speakers to find employment. A pay support scheme implemented in 2016 and 2017, and resumed in early 2019, had helped over 700 people to find employment in Ida-Viru County.

21. **Ms. Einman** (Estonia) said that equal treatment was guaranteed under the Constitution, but draft amendments to the Equal Treatment Act had been prepared with the aim of broadening the scope and application of the Act to cover discrimination against persons on the grounds of religion, belief, age, disability or sexual orientation outside the field of employment and thus extending its coverage, for instance, to questions related to access to social welfare, social security, health care, social benefits, education and goods and services, including housing. The draft was pending approval and would be put to the legislature after the forthcoming parliamentary elections in March 2019.

22. **Mr. Ehrlich** (Estonia) said that, although no specific impact study had been conducted for the Equal Treatment Act, impact analysis was a required step in the adoption process for new laws and covered various aspects, including that of equal treatment.

23. **Ms. Lüüs** (Estonia) said that measures taken by the Government, including legislative changes, to motivate persons with undetermined citizenship to apply for Estonian citizenship, had led to a decrease in the number of persons in that situation. Following changes to the Citizenship Act in 2018, applicants for citizenship who had at least five years of residency in Estonia could conclude language study agreements whereby they were entitled to paid leave from work to study Estonian. It was hoped that some 400 people would take part in the programme in 2019. The Minister of the Interior had sent letters encouraging applications for citizenship by the parents of children who benefited from simplified naturalization procedures. The Estonian Government had not agreed on a deadline for ratification of the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, but the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees had recognized that, in practice, the Government satisfied the criteria for the protection of persons with undetermined citizenship under the 1954 Convention.

24. In December 2018, the Police and Border Guard Board had opened new detention centres for migrants. The facilities had a maximum capacity of 123 and were used for detained asylum applicants and foreigners who were facing forced return from Estonia. The centres had separate accommodations for male and female detainees and allowed family members to be accommodated together. As a rule, unaccompanied minors were placed in substitute home services rather than such centres. The centres offered free health care, with nurses always in attendance, regular medical and psychological services, a social worker and an activities leader. Detainees had access to personal electronic items and could use telecommunications, the Internet and other forms of correspondence. They were entitled to State legal aid and were informed of their rights and obligations on arrival. All school-age minors had access to the basic education system, and their leisure time was organized in an age-appropriate manner.

25. While there was no specific strategy on the integration of refugees, there were two more general strategies, on internal security and Estonian integration, both of which were based on a long-term perspective for the period up to 2030. An interministerial refugee policy committee was regularly convened by the Ministry of the Interior to discuss improvements to refugee policy with representatives of other relevant ministries, including
the office of the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner. Refugee integration was also regularly discussed with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) active in that field.

26. **Ms. Raag** (Estonia) said that asylum seekers held at accommodation centres enjoyed freedom of movement within Estonia but had to return to the centres at night. There were currently two such centres, for 70 and 50 persons, respectively, both with separate accommodations for men and women and special areas reserved for families with children, and both accessible to persons with specific needs. Asylum seekers were provided with counselling, medical care, interpretation services and Estonian classes, among other services.

27. **Ms. Einman** (Estonia) said that, although the Government had adopted numerous measures to eliminate the gender pay gap over the years, progress had been slow. The main aims of the 2016 Welfare Development Plan were to support equal economic independence for men and women, improve the gender balance at decision-making and management levels, counter gender stereotypes and their negative impact on decisions affecting the economy and society, and guarantee the institutional capacity to reduce gender inequality. The plan included awareness-raising activities and legislative changes, for example, by means of an amendment to the Gender Equality Act to allow labour inspectors to monitor equal remuneration in the public sector. Other provisions, on data collection and information relating to equal pay to be provided to employees, extended to the private sector. In view of the upcoming parliamentary elections, the draft would be resubmitted to the new legislature.

28. Research indicated that only about 15 per cent of the gender pay gap could be explained by factors such as segregation or education and work experience. An in-depth analysis would be conducted to shed light on other possible explanations. The results would be used to inform policymaking and to orient awareness-raising activities, including through digital dashboards and other applications that would be made available to employees, employers and other target groups. Women often entered negotiations with lower pay expectations than men; it was hoped that the information produced would help rectify that situation. The project would run until 2021, with the first results expected in mid-2019.

29. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications had carried out a campaign to encourage girls and young women to study information and communication technologies, with online gender-sensitive video clips aimed at young people, and supported NGOs that sought to inspire female students to embark on studies in those fields. Career counsellors received training in gender awareness to help them encourage female participation in science, technologies, engineering and mathematics, and gender equality campaigns, for instance on equal remuneration, were held regularly.

30. While no specific study of the impact of gender policies had been conducted, the number of complaints filed with the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner had risen steadily, reflecting a better awareness of rights. For example, 116 requests for explanation in cases of suspected discrimination had been filed in 2013 and that number had risen to 192 in 2014. State funding for the Commissioner’s office for the implementation of its legally established tasks had increased regularly, and was 45 per cent higher in 2019 than the previous year. It was not influenced by the amount of external funding, which varied according to the number and nature of ongoing projects. The total budget had been approximately €550,000 in 2015 and had risen to €897,000 by 2019. Basic State funding for gender equality came to €500,000, and additional funding was provided from other sources. The Government considered that level of support to be satisfactory.

31. **Mr. Abashidze** said that the legal and practical situation of non-citizens, including persons with undetermined citizenship, appeared equivalent to statelessness and had negative consequences on their enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights. Although Estonian legislation prevented discrimination on the basis of nationality or ethnicity, it did not sufficiently clarify the legal status of people with undetermined citizenship. He would appreciate any available statistics on the number of stateless persons and non-citizens in Estonia. He would also be interested to hear the delegation’s comments on the fact that the
2015 amendments to the Citizenship Act had excluded several categories of children from automatic naturalization: stateless children aged between 15 and 18 as at 1 January 2016, children born in Estonia to stateless parents who had not been legally resident in Estonia for the preceding five years and children who had been unable to acquire Estonian citizenship at birth owing to conflicting nationality laws.

32. Noting that non-citizens had the country’s highest rates of unemployment and poverty and that only 25 per cent of people with undetermined citizenship spoke Estonian fluently, even though language courses were available through the Unemployment Insurance Fund, he said he would like to know the status of the draft amendment to the Equal Treatment Act and the kind of remedy it would provide to persons who had faced discrimination in the enjoyment of their economic, social and cultural rights.

33. Mr. Sadi (Country Task Force) said that it was discouraging that the Covenant was not seen to be popular in Estonia; he would appreciate assurances that officials considered it to be important and of practical value.

34. Mr. Windfuhr said that he would be interested to know how the Government implemented its obligations under the Covenant compared to those under the Sustainable Development Goals. He would also appreciate further information on any obstacles hindering the State party’s adoption of the Optional Protocol.

35. Estonia’s flat-rate tax system had been described as both the world’s most competitive tax system and Europe’s most unequal. It would be useful to know how it was viewed from within the country, particularly in regard to the relationship between taxation, inequality and the poverty rate.

36. Ms. Liebenberg said that the Committee had received only two parallel reports from civil society organizations. She would be interested to hear how civil society organizations were consulted during the preparation of State party reports and how the Government facilitated their involvement. Secondly, in view of the planned closure of three oil shale plants, she would appreciate information on the Government’s plans for the workers who would lose their jobs during the transition to green energy. Lastly, as the Government had struggled to find housing for refugees in the past year, it would be helpful to hear about the availability of housing relative to demand.

37. Ms. Lüüs (Estonia) said that the percentage of the Estonian population with undetermined citizenship had fallen from 32 per cent in 1992 to 5.5 per cent as of January 2019. In practice, people with undetermined citizenship enjoyed largely the same rights as Estonian citizens, except that they were unable to establish or join a political party, stand for elections or vote in national elections. They were, however, able to vote in local government elections and, unlike Estonian citizens, could enjoy visa-free travel in both the European Union and the Russian Federation. Adolescents aged 15 to 18 years at the time of the amendment to the Citizenship Act had been considered old enough to apply for Estonian citizenship themselves if they chose, and had therefore not been granted it automatically. There had not been any cases in which children had been unable to acquire their parents’ citizenship.

38. Ms. Reimaa (Estonia) said that citizenship did not generally restrict opportunities in the labour market, as Estonian citizenship was only required for positions in public administration. According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Culture, the majority of people in Estonia with undetermined citizenship would like to have Estonian citizenship, approximately 18 per cent of respondents were happy with their undetermined status and 8 per cent wished to acquire citizenship of the Russian Federation. The majority of respondents did not think that their lives were negatively affected by not having Estonian citizenship. Lack of proficiency in the Estonian language, cited as the main reason for non-Estonians not applying for citizenship, was decreasing. The Government continued to offer free Estonian language courses and new Estonian language houses had been opened in Tallinn and Narva. Efforts were being made to encourage non-citizens to use the language in their daily lives and to increase contact between people of different ethnicities.
39. **Mr. Ehrlich** (Estonia) said that the Estonian Constitution established that the Covenant was an integral part of the legal system. The annotated version of the Constitution was among the many academic and practical materials that made direct reference to the Covenant. The Chancellor of Justice, who was responsible for implementation of the Covenant, participated in weekly government meetings and therefore wielded significant political influence. As a small country with relatively few civil servants, Estonia also showed its respect for the Covenant through the large delegations it sent to treaty body meetings.

40. **Ms. Hion** (Estonia) said that the Covenant played an important role in court proceedings, although the European Convention on Human Rights was the international treaty most commonly applied. The rights and principles enshrined in the Covenant had been incorporated into national law, and the Estonian population was aware of the issues covered by the Covenant.

41. **Mr. Ehrlich** (Estonia) said that the country’s obligations under the Covenant and the Sustainable Development Goals were considered on an equal basis during strategic planning, such as the ongoing preparation of the “Estonia 2035” plan. However, as an inseparable part of the legal system, the Covenant played a larger role in court proceedings.

42. Regarding tax rates, the previous Government had increased the tax-free income allowance for persons with lower incomes. While the reform had been successful in reducing inequality, it had also increased the relative poverty rate, particularly among pensioners, because it had pushed up the average wage. The Government was therefore considering alternative ways to measure poverty rates. The child poverty rate had fallen and a benefit for pensioners living alone had been introduced. There were ongoing discussions as to whether benefits should be means tested.

43. **Ms. Kolk** (Estonia) said that accession to the Optional Protocol had been discussed, but action had been delayed because of a lack of resources. Since the mid-1990s, it had been government practice to send all national periodic reports to active Estonian NGOs of which the Government was aware for their input. Feedback was often received and some NGOs also held meetings with ministries.

44. **Mr. Ehrlich** (Estonia) said that the Unemployment Insurance Fund was prepared for the consequences of the transition to green energy, including unemployment among workers at coal and oil shale plants. Employees in the plants earmarked for closure already received tailored services to help them find new jobs. Estonia was part of the European Union Platform on Coal Regions in Transition, which aided the Government in its preparations.

45. **Ms. Raag** (Estonia) said that it had been challenging to find sufficient housing for refugees, as the amount of social housing remained low. At present, refugees, social workers and municipal administrations worked together to find private sector accommodation. The Government subsidized initial rental payments by approximately 1,000 euros per family, and families could apply for further subsistence benefits, if required.

46. **Mr. Chen** (Country Task Force) said that he would appreciate more up-to-date employment and unemployment figures and information on the practical effects of the measures taken to address structural unemployment, including the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy for 2020 and the labour and skills prognosis system, OSKA, with particular reference to the unemployment rate among non-Estonians. He wished to know more about the road map developed for the 2015 Labour Market and Education Cooperation Programme and its implementation.

47. The increase in the minimum wage from €278 in 2011 to €540 in 2019 was encouraging, but he would like to know if it was sufficient to provide an adequate standard of living, whether it covered workers in the informal economy, how the Government ensured that employers paid it and how violations were addressed. He asked what measures had been taken to reduce the gender pay gap, which remained high.

48. The Committee had not received comprehensive information on occupational safety and health. According to the International Labour Organization Committee of Experts on
the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, the statistics on the website of the Labour Inspectorate were not as reliable as in other European Union member States and the actual number of industrial accidents was estimated to be 2.4 times higher than that reported. Could the delegation clarify the situation?

49. Given the prohibition on strike action by civil servants, he wished to know how those employees could raise concerns related to their conditions of work. He inquired whether the State party intended to enact the bill on collective bargaining and collective labour dispute resolution, which had not been adopted because the parliament had been dissolved. He was also interested to know if pillar I of the old age pension scheme was sufficient to ensure an adequate standard of living and whether there were obstacles to eligible persons receiving their pensions.

50. One of the Committee’s concerns during the previous review had been that unemployment benefits were not paid in cases where the employment contract had been terminated owing to a professional fault; he would like to know what the State party had done to address the issue. Given the information received by the Committee about inadequate coverage of unemployment insurance benefit, he wished to know if the self-employed and those working in the informal economy were covered by such schemes and what measures the State party had taken to increase coverage.

51. Mr. Ehrlich (Estonia) said that full data on employment were available from Eurostat and from Statistics Estonia. In 2018, for the 15–74 age group, the employment rate had been 68.1 per cent, which represented an increase of 0.6 per cent compared to 2017. The unemployment rate, which had been 5.4 per cent in 2018, had been steadily decreasing since 2015. That was despite the effects of the 2016 work capacity reform, under which people who had previously been out of the labour market owing to disability had been brought back into the system. Many of them had been out of the labour market for long periods and so would need some time to find employment, which had increased unemployment rates. The general improvements in the labour market had also applied to specific groups, with an increased employment rate among people aged 15 to 24 and one of the highest rates in Europe for the 55–64 age group. The employment rate of the non-Estonian speaking population had also improved since 2015.

52. Structural unemployment had been caused in part by the rapid salary growth seen in recent years, of between 6 and 7 per cent annually. The economy had changed markedly and some skills that had been needed in the past were no longer required, with some regions affected more than others. For example, the textile industry had been concentrated in Ida-Viru County, but the level of salaries meant it could no longer compete with markets elsewhere, which had led to a local rise in unemployment. That structural nature of unemployment meant that the affected population would require training to address it. Since 2001, unemployment insurance funds had been in place to help those already unemployed, while new measures introduced in 2017 were aimed at persons in danger of losing their jobs. The new measures were popular, with more than 4,000 workers having participated in courses in 2018. The Ministry of Education provided services through vocational schools, which had led to an increase in the numbers enrolled in training.

53. One of the factors contributing to the higher unemployment rate among non-Estonians was that many of them lived in Ida-Viru County, where many of the economic problems were concentrated. To address that, wage subsidies had been introduced on 1 January 2019. Applications had been received from 14 companies and the measure was expected to have a major impact. Non-Estonians were also on average much older than Estonians and that led to a number of structural problems, including poorer health and a skills gap, because they had acquired their education many years previously.

54. Measures taken in line with the road map on the labour market and education were channelled through the Unemployment Insurance Fund, but also involved persons who were currently employed but at risk of unemployment or earning low wages. Because the numbers of unemployed people were fairly low at the current point of the economic cycle, it was necessary to focus on keeping people employed during any future economic downturn. Since 2016, special attention had been paid to persons with disabilities.
2014 and 2020, more than €300 million would be invested in the reintegration of persons with disabilities into the labour market.

55. The minimum wage provided an adequate standard of living, and people who earned it were usually not at risk of poverty. The rate was not decided by the Government but negotiated between labour unions and employers, who had agreed that it should increase by at least double the economic growth rate. That had led to the sharp rise observed in recent years, which was predicted to continue. Responsibility for ensuring that employers paid the minimum wage was shared between the Labour Inspectorate and the Tax and Customs Board, both of which visited workplaces, such as construction sites and factories, to check that all employees were recorded in the new mandatory employment register. The Tax and Customs Board also monitored companies to ensure that they paid the minimum wage. Those measures had led to a decrease in the proportion of workers in the black economy to slightly over 10 per cent, which compared favourably to the situation in other European countries. Furthermore, even if companies did not pay the minimum wage, they would be taxed as if they did, which reduced the incentive not to do so. Trade unions were increasingly valued as part of a system of protection of employees’ rights, which included safeguards, for example, in the case of non-payment of the minimum wage.

56. The discrepancy between the occupational safety and health statistics on the website of the Labour Inspectorate and in Eurostat resulted from different ways of measuring occupational accidents. The former gave the number of accidents reported while the latter used survey data. In general, occupational accident rates had been increasing in recent years to approximately 6,000 occupational accidents each year for a workforce of 660,000 employees. The reasons for the rise were the increased number of workers and higher reporting rates. The measures being taken included increased funding for the Labour Inspectorate to monitor employers, development of an information technology solution for risk mitigation to be used by companies and plans to establish occupational safety insurance.

57. Mr. Sadi said that he had been shocked by the fact that the minimum age of marriage was 14 and by the assertion that it was intended to protect mothers who were already raising children; he hoped that the delegation would address the subject. He would also welcome information on the divorce rate and an explanation for the absence of a specific law on domestic violence.

58. He was concerned by the forcible treatment methods used in attempts to deal with the widespread drug problem and wondered why practices similar to those in other European countries had not been adopted. He wished to know whether the breakdown in family structure could be linked to the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS and widespread alcoholism. He would also like to know whether all people in Estonia had access to the same quality of health care, if undetermined citizens had rights to health protection, if health insurance was accessible to everybody and whether it was affordable.

59. Although the Government had provided safe drinking water to the best of its abilities, the Committee had received information that water supplies contained excessive amounts of fluoride and boron. He would like information on cancer rates in the country and on the measures taken to protect the public from the causes of cancer. It was also reported that many people lived in substandard housing and did not enjoy adequate housing protection.

60. Mr. Uprimny said that, given reports that only about 20 per cent of persons in need received opioid substitution therapy, and that the Government’s own data showed a decrease in the use of harm reduction services since 2015, he would like to know how the State party intended to ensure effective access to drug treatment all over the country. The Committee had also received reports of police officers harassing women who used drugs, forcing them to undergo drug testing in the street, and women with children unlawfully being obliged to terminate opioid substitution therapies under the threat of losing their parental rights. He would welcome clear information on how the State party intended to overcome barriers to treatment for women who used drugs, to develop a gender-sensitive drug policy and ensure that abuses such as forced testing were avoided. While not a crime, drug use appeared to be de facto criminalized, because arrest could result from the non-
payment of fines. He would like to know whether total decriminalization and abolition of the fine had been considered.

*The meeting rose at 6 p.m.*