

# **The Welfare Watch**

A Broad Social Partnership in order to protect the Welfare  
System in Iceland under the Economic Crisis  
2009 - 2013

**IFSW EUROPEAN CONFERENCE  
EDINBURGH 2015**

Lára Björnsdóttir, Social Worker MA  
former Chair



# Iceland



# Iceland

## » Previously a Homogenous Nation for Centuries



- » A rapidly changing Society within the last few decades - for better and for worse
- » Population 330.000
- » 71 Municipalities



# Demography



- » A young Nation - Children 25% of the Population
- » Elderly – 67+ 11%
- » Total Fertility Rate 2.03
- » High proportion of Single Parents
- » High Proportion of Female Participation in the Work Force
- » Historically low Unemployment Rate - 2.6% June 2015
- » Rapid increase of immigrants
  - 2003 3.5%; 2008 7.4% 2013 6.7%
- » Active in the Labour Force:
  - 84% males, 78.5% females





## October 2008 in Iceland:



- » **The Banks collapsed**
- » **The Icelandic nation lost its credibility abroad**
- » **Common feeling among the Icelandic people:**
- » **Anger- Disbelief - Desperation –Lack of Confidence  
Sadness and Grief – Bleak vision of the Future**



# The Welfare in Iceland

- » First reactions were somewhat bewildered
- » Almost in every field people expected the worst
- » A Civil Rebellion in January 2009
- » Four Governments from October 2008 – December 2013

All these governments  
“promised” to  
**Protect the Welfare system**

So did all political Parties



# The Welfare Watch

- » **The Government of Iceland decided in February 2009 to establish a Welfare Watch**
- » **In order to monitor the Consequences of the financial Crisis on Individuals and Families**
- » **A Steering group - Cross-sectoral Approach**
- » **Partnership of NGO's, Social Actors and local and state governments on welfare issues**

**Meeting with the  
Minister of Welfare  
September 2011**



Association of Academics

Icelandic Red Cross

Association of Local Authorities

Icelandic Teacher's Union

City of Reykjavik

Ministry of Industries and Innovation

Confederation of Icelandic Employers

Ministry of Education, Science and Culture

Icelandic Human rights Centre

National Organization of Elderly Citizens

Deptor's Ombudsman

Ministry of Interior

Directorate of Health

Ministry of Welfare

Directorate of Labour

The National Church

Federation of State and Municipal Employees

Umbrella organizations of Disabled Persons

Gender Equality Council

WELFARE  
WATCH



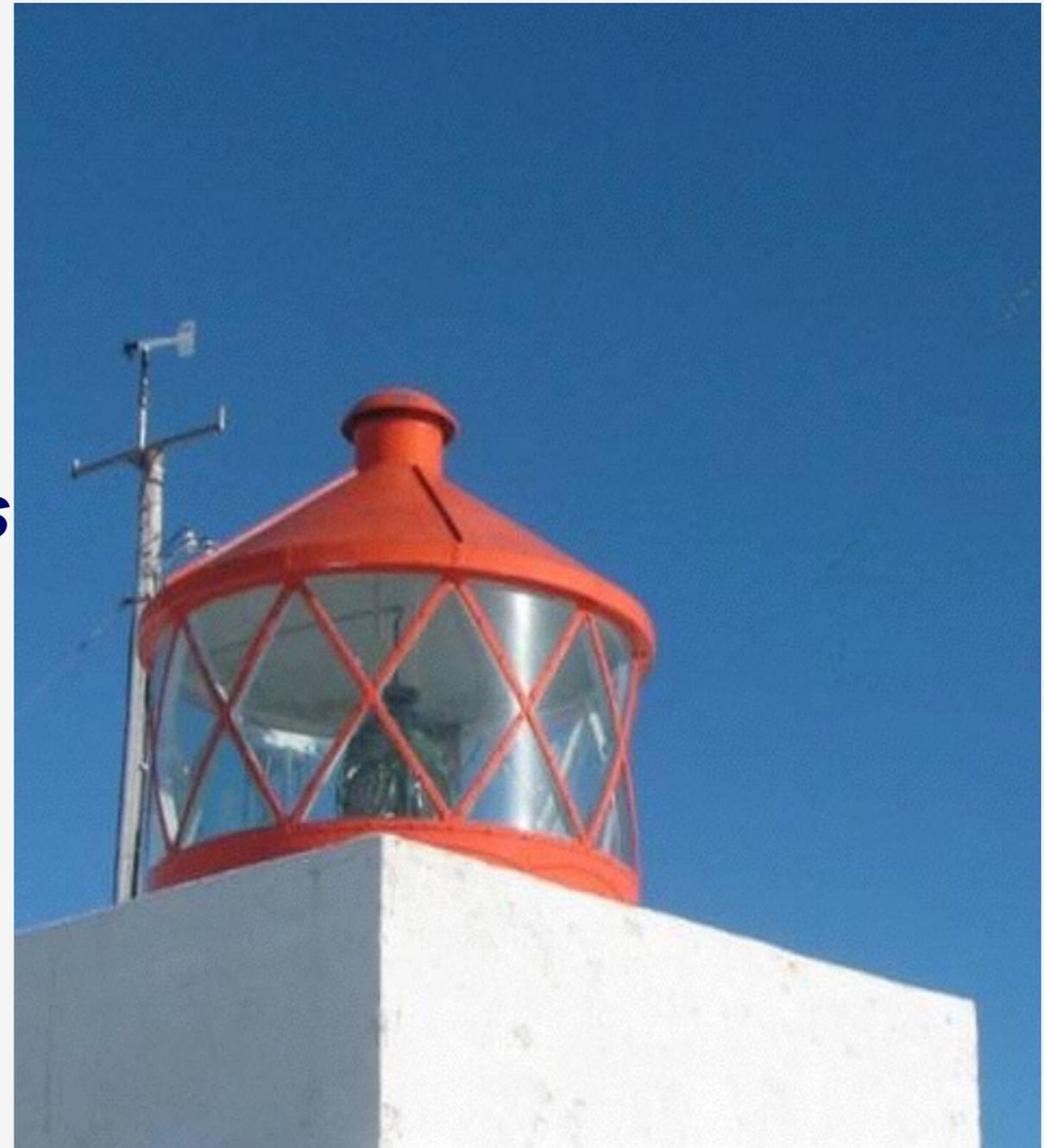
MINISTRY OF WELFARE

# The Light-House symbol and Logo

## » The first steps!

### *Simple advice in times of crisis*

- » *Exercise, eat, sleep and mingle*
- » *Activity in Leisure and Work*



# The Welfare Watch

## Main objectives:

- » **Collect information regarding the Consequences of the financial crisis**
- » **Present recommendations to the Minister and state government and local authorities.**

**“ An Independent observing Body making proposals to the Government, Local Authorities and NGO’s” June 2011**



# The infrastructure

- » **Steering Group**
- » **Working Groups established on special issues supporting the Steering Group**  
**Over 100 individuals took active part**
- » **Broad Cooperation/Partnership**
- » **Information from the Community to the Welfare Watch and on to the Government and Local Authorities**
- » **Cooperation with the Research- and University Community**



# The Working Groups

- » **Children (under 18 years)**
- » **Youth and Young Persons (15–25 years)**
- » **Marginalised Individuals and Groups**
- » **The Unemployed**
- » **The Financial Situation of the Families (Homes in Dept.)**
- » **Health in Times of Crisis**
- » **Social Indicators**
- » **The Basic Services provided by the Local Authorities and the State**
- » **Cooperation across municipalities in one vulnerable Area**



# The Red Thread in the Work

**The Steering group and all working groups:**

**Focus on the Children's Welfare in all areas**

- **Young Families with Children – low income families**



**And:**

- » **Long-term unemployment**
- » **Unemployment among young people**
- » **Vulnerable Groups**

# Examples of Actions taken by the Welfare Watch

- » Appeals to all local authorities falls 2009 – 2010 – 2011-2012 -2013  
Lunch should be provided to all school children, and extra costs for families kept as low as possible
- » Letter to the MPs in June 2010 Challenging them to Focus on those who are in most vulnerable situations and prioritise accordingly
- » Request to the Budget- and Social Comities of Parliament and Local governments on Caution in cut backs in Welfare Services
- » Letter to the Minister of Social Affairs on securing employment and access to training for young people (16-25 years)
- » Appeals to the Minister of Health to ensure dental services for children in poor families, 2010 and 2013



# Recommendations regarding Austerity sent to MPs and Local Authorities in 2009....

- » **Define and Protect public Basic Services**
- » **The level of Basic Services must be ensured with**
- » **No lowering of the standard of services available to the most vulnerable groups (Report in dec. 2009)**
- » **Satisfactory information must be at hand regarding the Consequences of Decisions for Users of the services.**



## .....AND

- » **Flat-rate cuts across the board should be avoided, streamlining measures in strictly defined areas should rather be implemented.**
- » **Rationalising and savings in one area must not result in increased expenditure and strain in other areas of public services.**
- » **When any decision on streamlining is announced, it shall be stated whether it is a temporary measure and if for how long it is to apply.**



## One of the warnings from the Welfare Watch

- » **Cuts in the parental leave programme are resulting in preventing fathers taking their leave**
- » **Might have consequences for the children and equal rights of men and women**



# The Compilation of Social indicators

- » One of the Guidelines in the Group's work:
- » Recommendations of the Welfare Watch should at all times be based on Quality information and Research

Therefore:

- » Under the auspices of the Welfare Watch a specialist group was established 2009 on the compilation of very much needed social indicators
- » In 2012 the Group finished its suggestions on indicators and the Steering Group handed the work to the Minister of Welfare
- » The Government handed the responsibility over to the National Statistics of Iceland.
- » Updated Social Indicators were presented by the NS in the fall of 2013 and are updated once a year.

**One of the important Achievements of the Welfare Watch**



# Last Report in December 2013

## » Main Recommendations:

» **Authorities, State and Local authorities, should present a comprehensive, scheduled plan on how to fight poverty**

» **Authorities should apply specific measures to ensure the welfare of low income families, especially single parents and their children**

- **At risk of poverty: Families without children 9.1%**  
**With children 9.3%,**  
**Single parents 28.4%**

**The Welfare Watch should be reappointed under the auspices of the Ministry of Welfare**



# The Welfare Watch

## Seven years after the Bank Collapse



- » **Most findings show that we have succeeded in preventing serious Consequences of the Economic Crisis on families and individuals**
- » **Most children are in general well cared for both at home and in schools**
- » **According to research children seem to feel better than before the Crisis**
- » **Employment rate almost as before the Crisis**



# However....

- » **Poverty is more visible than before the Crisis**
- » **and those who were poor before are worse off**
  
- » **Families in serious dept are still too many - housing**
- » **problems**
  
- » **The Welfare Institutions and their Workers had to make**
- » **sacrifices which still remain**
  
- » **..and even worse:**
- » **The inner feelings of Anger and lacking trust are**
- » **still there and it affects the political situation and**
- » **the well being of many people**
  
- » **Many young families choose to stay away abroad**



- » The Watch was on duty at all times and used the independence from the Minister to present a variety of Recommendations**
- » The Co-operation within the Watch resulted in a broad and improved Co-operation between Institutions and the Administration of Welfare provisions.**
- » Information from the thorough investigation on different Welfare issues was taken back to the shareholders.**



# Why was it a Success ?

- » **Strong engagement and interest of members.**
- » **Broad ownership – members hosted the meetings**
- » **No one was paid for work or participation**
- » **Members and stakeholders enable the activities and provide the mandate.**
- » **Consensus on Main issues and on all Recommendations.**
- » **Backup from the Minister**
- » **However an independent consultant to state- and local authorities**



# The Welfare Watch and Social Work

- » **Many experienced Social Workers participated**
- » **The Chair and her closest Co Worker within the Ministry**
- » **Methods of Community and Social Work**
- » **Knowledge of the Welfare System and the Workers**
- » **Reaching out for Cooperation and Partnership**
- » **Listening to different Views and Opinions**
- » **Consensus**



# The Future



**Message used by the Welfare Watch  
2009 - 2013**



**» ..lost opportunities in childhood may not be restored  
later in life**



# Publications of interest in English

» **Report on Basic Services and Streamlining Measures in Times of Recession, 2009/2010**

<http://www.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/velferdarvakt09/Report-on-Basic-Services-and-Streamlining-Measures.pdf>

» **Report to the Althingi (the Icelandic Parliament) 2010**

[http://eng.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/velferdarvakt09/29042010The-Welfare-Watch\\_Report-to-the-Althingi.pdf](http://eng.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/velferdarvakt09/29042010The-Welfare-Watch_Report-to-the-Althingi.pdf)

**Interim Report by the collaborative group monitoring welfare in the Suðurnes region 2011**

<http://www.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/rit-og-skyrslur2012/InterimReportEnglishFeb2012.pdf>

**Prosperity The fight against Poverty in Iceland 2012**

[http://www.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/Rit\\_2013/Prosperity-the-fight-against-poverty-in-Iceland-1406-C.pdf](http://www.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/Rit_2013/Prosperity-the-fight-against-poverty-in-Iceland-1406-C.pdf)

**Evaluation of the welfare watch.pdf**

