



Rauði krossinn
Af mannúð - í 90 ár



Ljósmynd: Morgun

Who are our vulnerables?

The main findings of a Red Cross study into which groups in society are vulnerable and/or marginalized, and proposals for reforms

2014

Main findings

The Icelandic Red Cross is part of the world's largest humanitarian movement, the International Red Cross & Red Crescent Movement, whose mission it is to improve the lot of the world's most vulnerable people. The Movement bases all its work on its Fundamental Principles, namely *humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality*. The Icelandic Red Cross plays an active role in various humanitarian fields at home and abroad.

The role of the Red Cross

In order to be able to meet its obligations, the Society needs to study and analyze trends in society to be able to:

- identify where the need is greatest at any given time,
- be able to adapt to changing circumstances,
- prioritize its activities in order to have the greatest impact possible,
- decide how to play its advocacy roles,
- draw the attention of both public and government to the plight of vulnerable groups in Iceland.

This report details the findings of a study undertaken by the Icelandic Red Cross in early 2014. The main purpose of the study was to identify which groups in the country were most disadvantaged, as it is one of the main roles of the Society to work with and for those identified as vulnerable. The findings will also help the Society and its branches around the country to identify the most pressing needs and thus better prioritize its activities. Earlier studies have proven useful for the Society with a number of

new activities initiated and others reorganized and/or redefined.

Three-fold

This was the fifth time the Icelandic Red Cross has conducted a study of this sort – the prior ones were in 1994, 2000, 2006 and 2010. The study is based on information gathered through answers to written questionnaires, interviews with selected experts within the national welfare structure, desk study of written materials and academic journals and the findings of a public opinion survey undertaken especially for this study by the University of Iceland's Social Science Research Institute (SSRI).

This year's study was in three parts:

- a) An SSRI survey where members of the institute's Online Panel were asked to answer two standard questions, i.e. questions used in previous IRC studies (on socially and financially marginalized groups), and a third question relating to prejudices against people of foreign origin. These aimed at identifying public opinion in the country. Additionally, the panel was asked to agree or disagree with four statements put forth to gauge possible prejudices among the population.
- b) A written questionnaire from the Icelandic Red Cross to 100 experts in the national social, health, and education structures. We put the same ten questions to this group of people as in prior studies. About half of the group provided written responses.
- c) Interviews were conducted with about a third of the experts where an attempt was made to delve deeper

into their responses and related issues.

In compiling the report we also sourced various other materials, written and printed, such as media coverage, academic journals, other studies etc. A detailed list of sources is found at the end of the full report.

Findings

- The SSRI Online Panel findings indicate that the public believe that *the physically disabled, single parents* and *the elderly* face the greatest financial difficulties. These findings contrast markedly with our 2010 study findings: today a significantly larger group now believes that the disabled are having a hard time, while concern over the unemployed has diminished.
- At the same time, the public concern for the socially disadvantaged remains the same as in 2010: *the disabled, the elderly* and *the unemployed*.
- Analysis of the written responses from the experts indicates the same views: the respondents agree with the public perception, believing that *the disabled, single parents, low-income retirees* and *the long-time unemployed* are worst off.
- At the same time we found that throughout the welfare system there is growing concern for young people, particularly young males, who appear to be unable to find their footing in life and are increasingly seeking public support for their daily needs.
- We also found serious concern for children of disadvantaged families, be it socially or financially.
- The experts agreed with the SSRI Online Panel – in both instances there is a widespread sense that

poverty is an increasing problem in the country, as are exacerbated class differences.

Particular cause for concern

The sentiment revealed by response to the third question put to the Online Panel (Which groups in society do you believe face the greatest prejudices?) is a serious cause for concern. The findings indicate that 44% of the population believes that people of foreign origin face prejudice (and/or discrimination) in the country. The same can be deduced from the experts' written responses and their interviews. There, in fact, they'll go further and point out that immigrants from countries outside the „white world“ are particularly disadvantaged; additionally the experts voiced their grave concern for immigrant children who often are forced to make a choice between their own culture and Icelandic friends.

The SSRI Online Panel respondents were also given four statements and asked to respond to them – how much or how little they agreed with the following statements:

- 1) *Poor people are themselves responsible for their situation.*
 - Primary response: *Disagree.*
- 2) Among the unemployed there is a group of people who prefer to benefits to work.
 - Primary response: *Agree.*
- 3) Poverty is linked to families, generation after generation.
 - Primary response: *Disagree.*
- 4) There are clearer class differences in Icelandic society today than a decade ago.
 - Primary response: *Agree.*

In the interviews with the experts we sought a deeper understanding of these views. These are detailed in the report.

Vulnerable groups

It is safe to say that the findings of this study indicate that a significant number of people in society are both socially and financially worse off than can be justified or ignored. The following groups stand out:

- Disabled people
- Financially strapped elderly people
- Single and low-income parents
- Long-time unemployed people
- Young, uneducated young males
- Immigrants
- Children of immigrants

These findings clearly call for an urgent response by the Red Cross and its national and international partners to strategically tackle the problems we are faced with in line with the society's „guiding light“ in its Strategy 2020:

- *The Icelandic Red Cross responds to emergencies at home and abroad and provides assistance that will make people better equipped to deal with their problems and adapt to crises. The Society safeguards the human rights and dignity of individuals.*

Methodology

Work on the study commenced in mid-January and took until late April. This included the collection and study of written source material, interviews with nearly three dozen experts in the welfare, health, and education sectors, analysis of written responses to the Red Cross questionnaire, analysis of responses to the SSRI Online Panel responses etc.

The Social Science Research Institute – Online Panel

- The survey was done among 1.483 members of the SSRI's *Online Panel* comprising individuals over 18 years of age from all parts of the country who have agreed to participate in SSRI's online surveys. Panel members are recruited by telephone interviews with random samples from the National Register; care is given to rebalancing when needed. Therefore, samples drawn from the online panel are representative of the whole population.
- Having received these quantitative data we sought deeper understanding of the challenges faced by those who are, for one reason or another, lagging behind in society. Here, we chose to interview experts who work with vulnerable individuals and families to gain a clearer picture of their situation and views.

The Red Cross survey – the group of experts

- The Red Cross's part of the study sought qualitative data. 100 experts from the welfare, health, and education sectors were asked to provide written responses to our standard ten written questions used in earlier studies of the same issue. The experts were largely from the same group who have taken part in earlier studies but new names were added in order to ensure as broad a base of knowledge and experience as possible. About half of the experts turned in written responses to the questionnaire. Thirty people were interviewed, mainly people from the experts' contingent. Their views and responses are detailed in the full report.

Participants

As previously, we emphasized that the surveys on which this report is based, mirrored the views of both rural and urban areas, as well as seeking to ensure that our sample was broad enough to provide a clear overview of vulnerable groups in the country. We pledged full confidentiality to each participant, whereby it should not be possible to match particular answers to individual participants.

Working Group

At the outset, the Icelandic Red Cross appointed a Working Group to oversee the project. The Group was comprised of the following people:

- Nína Helgadóttir, division head, Icelandic Red Cross (chair).
- Guðný H. Björnsdóttir, division head, Icelandic Red Cross.
- Helga G. Halldórsdóttir, fundraising manager, Icelandic Red Cross.
- Hermann Ottósson, Secretary-General, Icelandic Red Cross.
- Hrafnkell Tumi Kolbeinsson, secondary school teacher, former head of the Reykjavik RC branch youth group.
- Ívar Schram, project manager, Reykjavík RC branch.
- Linda Ósk Sigurðardóttir, director, Kópavogur RC branch.
- Rannveig Einarsdóttir, head, Family Services Division, Hafnarfjörður.
- Dr. Sigurveig H. Sigurðardóttir, senior lecturer, Faculty of Social Work, University of Iceland, former director of the Reykjavik RC branch.

The report was written and edited by Ómar Valdimarsson, anthropologist and RKI international delegate.

Proposals for social reform

Repeated studies over the past eight years show that 9-10% of the population survives on wages below the specified minimum-wage threshold and are therefore in danger of experiencing poverty. Poverty is real in our society and appears in different guises at any given time. It is well known that specific social groups live under more difficult circumstances than others, such as those who have become unemployed or are, for other reasons, outside the labor market.

Farsæld – the fight against poverty in Iceland.

A report by the Icelandic Red Cross and Icelandic Church Aid (2012).

- Poverty is a constant in Iceland, one of the world's richest countries. The United Nations defines poverty as fundamentally „the inability of getting choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and clothe a family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities...”
- We need to have clear and open dialogue about poverty in Iceland. The problem has already been identified. It is the role of government to ensure that the available data and proposals be used to tackle the problem.
- A group of single mothers is at serious risk of being trapped in permanent poverty. Children raised

in poverty are more likely to be poor adults and poor elderly. It is imperative that government and NGOs join hands to halt this development.

- The at-risk-of-poverty threshold (i. *lágtekjumörk*), as defined by the National Statistics Bureau and Eurostat, is shameful. It is totally indefensible that the threshold is set way below the actual cost of living. It is the duty of government to take note of the actual cost of living when making policy on the at-risk-of-poverty threshold and social transfers.
- The indexing of social transfers and regular earnings tend to trap recipients of social transfers in poverty. To be able to break out of the indexing dilemma, the recipient's additional income needs to be substantial. This is a system which makes poor people's lives more difficult, when the aim of the programme should be to provide people with sufficient assistance to leave poverty behind.
- Children and youth who are brought up in poverty are denied the social inclusion available to other children. Their health, both mental and physical, is markedly worse than that of those living in more affluent circumstances.
- Attention has been drawn to the fact that academic research has laid the foundations for development of purposeful methods to develop and improve parenting skills. Such solutions are already being utilized in some cases. There is a clear need for more cooperation between municipal welfare agencies in this regard.

- We are now seeing more marked class distinctions in Icelandic society compared to a decade ago. It is the primary role of government, political parties, industry and trade unions to lead the effort to tackle this problem in cooperation with academia and non-governmental organizations.
- Increased prejudices and intolerance in society call for a change in public attitudes. It is the role of the Red Cross, religious institutions, academia, the labor market and the political parties to initiate a national push against prejudice and discrimination and for increased tolerance.
- One manifestation of increased narrow-mindedness and intolerance in society is the fact that children and youth are increasingly the victims of sexual attacks by their peers. Battling this is a joint task for families and schools in cooperation with mass media.
- We need to increase language training for immigrants. Experience shows us that the immigrants who are disadvantaged in some way are primarily those who are challenged by the language and, subsequently, adaptation to their new society.
- We must honor the pledge on mother tongue instruction given by the national curriculum.
- Only a few of the ten municipalities with the greatest proportion of immigrants have formulated immigration policies. Municipalities need to join hands in the formulation of comprehensive policies on issues important to immigrants.
- The Welfare Ministry's policy-making process on immigrant issues needs to be formulated in cooperation with the immigrants themselves, academia and non-governmental organizations that safeguard the interests of immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers.
- We must put an immediate stop to the trend that specific neighborhoods or sections of towns become immigrants' poverty traps.
- We need to ensure that large groups of refugees and immigrants arriving in Iceland are not all directed to the same place where they could end up in isolated cultural islands; but rather seek an even distribution of newcomers.
- Immigrant children of playschool and primary school age should receive the specific support and assistance they are entitled to according to law.
- Citizens of municipalities around the country are urged to form multi-cultural associations in order to focus on what we all have in common, regardless of national origin.
- We must immediately stop imprisoning refugees and asylum seekers. Those who need psychological counseling should receive it.
- There is a growing mass of young people, particularly males, who seem to have lost their footing in life before it really begins. The social impact of bringing up hundreds or even thousands of young people who neither attend school nor participate in the labor market but are on long-term social benefits, is frightening and likely to trap these individuals in permanent poverty. Non-governmental organizations in the country can, and should, support municipal efforts to bring these people out of the doldrums, focusing on their strengths rather than their weaknesses.
- Non-governmental organizations and government should provide

handsome support to the wide-ranging activities being instigated around the country for the benefit of this group.

- The welfare system and academia should join hands to carefully study the origins of the problems faced by this socially and psychologically disadvantaged group.
- It is the duty of national and municipal governments, in cooperation with the labor market, academia and non-governmental organizations, to disconnect the vicious circle of the „social inheritance“ whereby a third and fourth generation of families are unable to find their footing in society and base their existence on social transfers. These actions need to include the systematic education of the older individuals within these groups.
- We should support innovative approaches, such as the one currently being initiated by Icelandic Church Aid, whereby dysfunctional families are assisted in turning their lives around with the setting of reachable objectives and clearly identified milestones.
- We must ensure that the „silent desperation“ of vulnerable people in society is not allowed to fester and find outlet in xenophobia and extreme views which could lead to social unrest.
- We all need to look in the mirror and ask ourselves whether our communities are fit to face our current challenges and how we can adapt to new realities with new action, better cooperation and more flexible and holistic approaches.

The 2012 *Farsæld* Report discusses several identified *poverty traps* in society and proposes various reforms. Among those are the following, which rhyme perfectly with the views and suggestions put forth by respondents and interviewees in this Red Cross study, and which the Icelandic Red Cross supports:

- *That we approach poverty on the basis of quality rather than want, so that we measure ability rather than the lack thereof.*
- *That we come to a national agreement on the basic cost of living which would ensure that no individual or family need to experience want that could cause permanent damage.*
- *That we systematically avail ourselves of the services of coordinating bodies when an individual or families need multi-faceted assistance.*
- *That we reconcile the national structures of social security, welfare and taxation in such a way that one specific social transfer amount is not reduced because of another existing benefit.*
- *That we ensure that children enjoy free health services and that regular and mandatory health checks guarantee that children do not suffer from health problems due to poverty.*
- *That we undertake a study of the circumstances of foreign-born children who receive support from the welfare structures and seek new ways of preventing recurrent problems.*

What can we in the Red Cross do?

Local branches, staff, volunteers and supporters of the Icelandic Red Cross are urged to study this report and adapt their work to the information and proposals contained herein. The Red Cross needs to show courage and innovation in its work on behalf of vulnerable people; to be fearless in seeking new and creative ways of working and adopting new ideas; and lead by responsible conduct in all its endeavors.

- Regularly conduct needs assessments of the circumstances of socially isolated groups and review activity plans according to the latest available information.
- Increase our regular home visits to the elderly and the disabled.
- Initiate local campaigns against prejudices and discrimination against immigrants and other socially vulnerable groups. Fully participate in national campaigns organized by the National Office. Organize seminars and public meetings locally in cooperation with immigrants, municipal authorities and local organizations.
- Strengthen friendship with immigrants and offer assistance in adapting to the community; branches are encouraged to scale up their home visiting service and other activities suitable for immigrants.
- Ensure that the composition of the National Society and its branches reflects our multi-cultural society.
- Seek cooperation with local multi-cultural organizations, organize cultural festivals in cooperation with people of foreign origin, municipal authorities, schools and non-governmental organizations.
- Seek cooperation with the social services locally in order to support socially isolated groups, such as the young, unemployed and uneducated, the mentally disabled, single parents, immigrants, the elderly and the disabled.
- Offer branch support to implementation of activation initiatives for the young and socially inept.
- Use every opportunity to emphasize people's strengths rather than their weaknesses.
- Scale up activities and support among groups in neighborhoods and community sectors where particular social problems have been identified.
- In cooperation with local schools, offer family and school work assistance to families facing difficulties and help break their social isolation.
- Organize and offer family and child-rearing assistance to young, vulnerable mothers and their children.
- Scale up work with and for children and youth against intolerance and discrimination.
- Organize training and information courses for volunteers, including psycho-social support training to ensure that our volunteers are able to provide needed assistance.
- Strengthen the National Society's advocacy role in support of vulnerable individuals and groups.
- Fight against the steadily increasing materialism and consumption in our communities.