

Interview with Margrét Steinarsdóttir, Director of the Icelandic Center for Human Rights (ICEHR), partner institution of ELIAMEP

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In the context of the Acf Project “Civil Society Network in the Context of UN’s Sustainable Development Goals in Greece”, we asked our partner institution to share with us their experience.

Here are the interesting answers which we obtained to our eight questions on voluntarism and NGO activism in Iceland.

Question: Iceland shows high levels of voluntarism. By whom are young people motivated to do voluntary work? Are there courses in primary and secondary education devoted to voluntarism or do the Icelandic mass media promote voluntarism? In brief, what are the "propellers" of voluntarism in Iceland? Please give examples.

Answer: Iceland has a long standing tradition of voluntarism and around 40% of the population works on a voluntary basis for various organizations. There are really no courses in primary or secondary education and the media do not promote voluntarism. Many organisations visit, for example, leisure centres for young people trying to engage them in voluntary work. Young people are mostly motivated by their immediate environment, many want to do good and give back to society. Many of them claim that voluntarism enhances their sense of self worth and social skills, as well as working for justice and the greater good. Organisations like the Icelandic Red Cross and Icelandic Scouts recruit people for voluntary work.

Question: The Icelandic State offers tax incentives to NGOs. What are these incentives exactly?

Answer: Gifts and donations up to 350.000 ISK, to NGOs listed on the Register of Organisations working for the common good, are tax deductible.

Question: Are there other incentives, not for organizations, but for volunteers, related to social insurance law or labour law? Why would someone be incited to give time to NGO work in Iceland, instead of behaving in a selfish manner?

Answer: There are no incentives, except for many organisations holding regular events for volunteers with educational lectures and free food and drinks, the Icelandic Red Cross and Amnesty International being examples of this. As mentioned before, both young and older volunteers find it beneficial to be in the company of others and to contribute to a better society.

Question: There are volunteers and professionals in NGOs in Iceland and other countries too. In Iceland, in particular, are professionals trained somehow before they assume their

tasks at NGOs? Are there any specific training programmes for NGO activists? Please give examples.

Answer: Whether or not volunteers and professionals are trained before they assume their tasks in NGOs, depends on what kind of work they're volunteering for. For example, the Red Cross Helpline train their volunteers. Many other initiatives carried out by volunteers for the Red Cross involve training.

Question: In Iceland, NGOs have played a consultative role regarding the formulation of state legislation. What was a concrete example of a law which eventually incorporated recommendations by NGOs, thus proving the importance of the government's consultation with NGOs? Please give examples.

Answer: NGOs always have the opportunity to comment on any proposed legislation. Even if not all comments are taken into consideration, many of those are listened to. It is not least through the efforts of NGOs that we have a legislation on Marriage which applies to all, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity etc. Also, we have an Act on Gender Autonomy which was brought about, in part, due to the efforts of NGOs. The legislation on Discrimination was adopted also due to lobbyism and pressure from NGOs. The same holds for changes to the General Penal Code, with regard to aggravating sentences for hate crimes and a clearer stipulation on human trafficking.

Question: By contrast, what was a concrete example of a law which was adopted without taking into account recommendations by NGOs, as much as the latter wanted? Please give examples.

Answer: There are also many examples of legislation not going as far as NGOs would have wished. A recent example is an amendment to the Code of Criminal Procedure, improving the status of victims of violence, but not to the extent proposed by NGOs. Another example is the Act on Autonomy that concerns disabled people. On this occasion, many organizations involved with the rights of disabled people pointed out that amendments to the Act did not wholly comply with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Question: In Iceland there is strong activism with regard to gender rights and migrant rights. What were specific examples of activism regarding these two issues, namely specific cases in which more than one NGO united together and protested/collected signatures/pressed government authorities?

Answer: As mentioned above in this interview, an example was the promotion of our current legislation on discrimination and the Act on Gender Autonomy. Also, the prohibition of clubs making money by exploiting the nudity of their employees (strip clubs) came about through the efforts of the Women's Movement (various NGOs working on women's issues).

Question: Iceland is a signatory of all relevant United Nations (UN) documents promoting the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. In what concrete ways do Icelandic NGOs participate (if they do) in the drive to achieve these goals? Do

Icelandic NGOs press the government to achieve the SDGs or produce and disseminate reports on the SDGs to the population of Iceland? Please give examples.

Answer: The Icelandic Government has an official website on the SDGs, <https://www.heimsmarkmidin.is/forsida/en/>. Many NGOs in Iceland integrate the SDGs into their activities, promote them and pressure the government to meet with them. UNICEF and the National Association of People with Intellectual Disabilities are examples of this. Municipalities, government agencies and institutions also seek to implement SDGs through their operations. Examples are the Kópavogur municipality, the Ombudsman for Children Youth Council, the State Electric Power Works, and Landsvirkjun.