The Most Vulnerable Groups in Iceland

A summary report

Spring 2010

This article summarizes the results of a nationwide survey conducted by the Icelandic Red Cross in the spring 2010. The main goal of the survey was to examine what groups in Iceland are affected by adversity since it is the Red Cross’ commitment to work with and for those individuals who are the most vulnerable. The purpose of the survey was to identify the need for assistance, prioritize projects so that they operate effectively and generate awareness among Government Agencies and civil society of the circumstances and needs of the poorest and most vulnerable groups in Iceland. This is the fourth survey of its kind conducted by the Icelandic Red Cross; the first one was conducted in 1994.

The survey collected data from 69 individuals situated around the country from different professional backgrounds but all working closely with vulnerable individuals.

According to the survey results, there are five groups of individuals in Iceland who are considered to be the most vulnerable. These are: the unemployed, families with children to support and single parents, immigrants, the disabled, and children/youth who lack opportunity. Not all of the members of these groups are in a vulnerable position but only those individuals who live under difficult economic and social conditions.

The reasons why the unemployed are part of the most vulnerable groups in Iceland are the following:
- People who are unemployed have difficulties paying for the minimum necessities and the uncertainty of the labor market makes it difficult for them to predict for how long they might have to “make ends meet.”
- The consequences of unemployment on the emotional and physical wellbeing of individuals can be very complex. For instance, unemployment can lead to a decline in a sense of self-worth, a decrease in self-esteem, fatigue and isolation. Additionally, some people experience emotional difficulties like numbness, hopelessness, anxiety, guilt and even depression.
- People who are unemployed and have a low educational background are part of the largest group receiving unemployment benefits and the ones facing the most difficulties. Apart from this, these individuals earned the lowest salaries before being laid off and now struggle to find new employment.
- Additionally, people who are unemployed and have children to support also struggle to survive financially and pay off their debts.

The reasons why families with children to support and single parents with low-income are part of the most vulnerable groups in Iceland are the following:
- Low-income families, and single parents, with children to support often live in poverty. The cost of living has considerably increased but neither the lowest salaries nor unemployment benefits have increase proportionally. Some individuals belonging to this group have problems living on the money they earn and often solicits financial support in order to cover expenses related to their children; like school meals and extracurricular activities.

The reasons why immigrants are part of the most vulnerable groups in Iceland are the following:
- The most vulnerable immigrants in Iceland are those who speak little or no Icelandic, those who are isolated and those who lack a social support network. Without the Icelandic language, these individuals have a hard time participating in activities that society has to offer making it even harder for them to socialize and maintain relationships with others.
- Immigrant children also face difficult challenges like having to adapt to a new
culture and learn a new language.

The reasons why the disabled are part of the most vulnerable groups in Iceland are
the following:
- People who are disabled and receive full compensation from the Social
Insurance Administration also struggle because this type of financial
assistance is often not enough to cover basic living expenses. Additionally,
medication in Iceland is quite expensive and its cost is not always
reimbursed. Furthermore, those who are disabled don’t have the opportunity
to increase their income by working a part time job because when they do so
the disability compensation they receive is proportionally reduced.
- Disabled people often live in isolation and many have to face complex
challenges like mental, intellectual and/or physical disabilities.

The reasons why children and the youth who lack opportunities are part of the
most vulnerable groups in Iceland are the following:
- Survey participants often mentioned the circumstances of children and
adolescents who lack opportunity. Particularly those who do not have a solid
social support network and whose parents or legal guardians refuse to meet
their needs.
- Young people who do not pursue higher education or who are unemployed
are also vulnerable. Young people who do not have the resources to pursue
higher education, or who lack encouragement, could face difficulties securing
their future.
- Young people who are now graduating from college or university struggle to
find jobs due to the current economic crisis. If these individuals become
accustomed to being unemployed they are at risk of becoming inactive
citizens of society even if the employment situation improves.
The survey also asked about ways to improve the current situation of the above-mentioned groups; here is summary of the participants’ response:

- It is imperative to strengthen the economic situation around the country, reduce unemployment and create incentives and opportunities for those who are unemployed so that they can return to the labor market. A variety of employment opportunities need to be made available with additional support tailored to the needs of individuals.

- It is essential to provide effective assistance and encouragement to people who lack vocational skills; like the disabled, the long-term unemployed and young people with limited work experience.

- It is important to work creatively in reducing the negative impact of unemployment. Educational opportunities need to be made available, particularly for those who lack formal education, as well as opportunities for people to participate in social activities.

- People’s access to services, information and support can be simplified by the joint cooperation of public organizations and NGOs.

- Children need to be supported, especially those whose families are affected by poverty. Survey participants agree that society’s responsibility towards these children needs to increase and that a change in attitude has to occur. Additionally, survey participants point to the preventive value of supporting, both economically and socially, children who grow up with legal guardians who receive social security compensation. Participants pointed out that by doing so, we might prevent the vicious circle that creates when generation after generation of people within the same families remain unemployed. Consequently, it is important to ensure that all children have the opportunity to participate in leisure, social and sports’ activities.

- Some survey participants also believe that prejudice against immigrants and the mentally disabled is also a problem. Prejudice can deter the social involvement of people and for this reason it is necessary to work systematically to eradicate it.
The survey also asked about other critical matters; here is summary of the survey participants’ response:

- Those groups that are most at risk of becoming underprivileged in the future are children and adolescents whose families struggle to cover basic living expenses, individuals who are long-term unemployed and young people who have little or no former education (who are either employed or unemployed).
- Most participants believed that even though more social assistance is offered in the capital area, people who live in the countryside are often better treated and shown more compassion by the members of the smaller communities.
- Most participants believe that poverty exists in Iceland and that it’s difficult to distinguish between those who struggle in a social context and those who struggle financially since social and financial poverty often go together.
- Participants also expressed their concerns over individuals who live of disability compensation or compensation from the Social Insurance Administration or from municipalities and have no other type of income.
- Additionally, participants believe that young people with little or no former education with children to support often live under the poverty live.
- It was participants’ opinion that emotional abuse and neglect of children is the most common form of abuse in Iceland. Reports of child neglect have increased and many participants know of children who have been neglected and/or mistreated.

Internet survey

The original report also builds on data collected from a web survey conducted by MMR (Market and Media Research) were 865 Icelanders between the ages of 18 and 67 participated. Participants were chosen randomly from a group of 12,000 survey sample respondents of MMR.

The results of the Internet survey conducted by Market and Media Research, where two questions were asked to participants, confirm the results of the survey
previously summarized on this article. Additionally, in the immediate environment of participants, the unemployed and disabled are the groups of individuals who face the most financial and social difficulties. Furthermore, may participants believe that senior citizens are also among those who suffer most from social isolation.