

The Welfare Watch Iceland

Title in original language: Velferðarvaktin

Short description of the intervention:

The Welfare Watch was established in accordance with a cabinet resolution in 2009 as a response to the economic crisis and it was re-established in 2014. The Minister of Social Affairs and Social Security appointed the Welfare Watch, a Steering Committee, with the main role to monitor systematically the social and financial consequences of the economic situation for families and individuals in Iceland and to propose measures to help households and in particular vulnerable groups. Originally the Welfare Watch had representatives from 19 stakeholders, among others from six ministries, Social Partners, NGOs, Union of Local Authorities, The City of Reykjavik, the Directorate of Health, the Directorate of Labor and the Council of Equal rights of man and women. In 2014 the Welfare Watch expanded and is now a platform with 35 stakeholders represented from all sectors and levels of the society. The Welfare Watch is a governmental enterprise, with chairman and an employee provided by the Ministry of Welfare. Other stakeholders do not get special payment for their participation but donate the time of their representatives to the work (is considered a part of their daily work). The Welfare Watch established the Social Indicators which have been published every year since 2012. The Social Indicators are a collection of indicators regarding democracy and activities, standard of living and welfare, health and social cohesion. The Welfare Watch has frequent meetings and has smaller working task groups. Several proposals and reports have been delivered by the Welfare Watch. Social gradient in health is a fact in Iceland, like in other European countries. The report Review of the social determinants and the health divide in the WHO European Region informed the development of Health 2020, the European Policy framework for health and well-being. The report emphasises that without improvements in all the social determinants of health, there will be no significant reductions in health inequities. Health 2020's ultimate goal is to achieve health equity by reducing the socially determined inequities in the WHO European Region. The key to success is engagement of stakeholders across sectors and levels, like is facilitated by the work of the Welfare Watch.

To which type of interventions does your example of good practice belong to (choose only one)?

Policy/strategy. The Welfare Watch is a national level platform, involving key stakeholders from all sectors and levels, providing important data and insight in general, informing policy and actions.

How is this example of good practice funded?

National/regional/local government; Institution of education, public health and/or research; Non-governmental organization; and other resources. The Welfare Watch is a governmental enterprise, with chairman and an employee provided by the Ministry of Welfare. Other stakeholders contribute the time of their representatives to the work.

What is/was the level of implementation of your example of good practice?

National; (No regional level in Iceland); Local (municipality level); and other. Most of the recommendations published by the Welfare Watch are aimed at the government although in some cases they focus on the local level (i.e. recommending that the municipalities guaranty that every child gets school lunch in primary school).

What are the main aim and the main objectives of your example of good practice?

Originally it was to monitor the social and financial consequences of the economic situation for families and individuals and propose measures to help households. In 2014 the objectives were narrowed to focus on families with children and those living in severe poverty. In January 2015 proposals regarding these groups were published and introduced to the Minister of Social Affairs and Housing. The main themes were:

1. Child benefits and child social insurance
2. Criteria for the minimum subsistence
3. The Housing situation
4. Basic service
5. Case coordinators
6. Cooperation with NGO,s and a project fund

In Icelandic:

http://www.velferddarraduneyti.is/media/rit-og-skyrslur-2015/Skyrsla_Velferdarvaktar_Jan2015.pdf

Please give a description of the problem the good practice example wants to:

Originally the main aim was to monitor the effect of the economic crises to be able to give guidance to the government on where actions were most needed. Now it is the situation of families with children and those living in severe poverty. After the crises, many families have struggled with housing and employment. The Welfare Watch tries to keep monitoring the situation and watch that difficult situations do not get worse. Example could be young people who drop out of school and are inactive and young single mothers.

Is your example of good practice embedded in a broader national/regional/ local policy or action plan?

Yes. The Welfare Watch was established and is operating on ministry level. In the group there are amongst others representatives from several ministries.

Implementation of your example of good practice is/was:

Continuous (integrated in the system).

Target groups:

General population; Children; Adolescents; Young adults; Adults; Older population; Pregnant women; Women; Men; Families; Other. The focus since 2014 has been on families with children and those living in severe poverty. All the target groups mentioned above can fall under those criteria.

Vulnerable social groups:

Ethnic minorities; Migrants; Disabled people; Low income groups; Low education groups; Unemployed; Uninsured groups; Homeless; and Isolated older people.

Who implements/implemented the intervention?

The Welfare Watch is led by the ministry of Welfare, with a chairperson and an employee. The 36 entities that have their representative in the watch are from different kind of public bodies in the field of health, education and social affairs. Furthermore there are representatives from non-public entities such as the Red Cross, the Home and School Association, Unicef etc. Most representatives have a professional background of some sort [See Annex I].

What core activities are/have been implemented?

A report regarding the work of the Welfare Watch in 2009 is available in English, see: http://eng.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/velferdarvakt09/29042010The-Welfare-Watch_Report-to-the-Althingi.pdf

Evaluation report for the Welfare-Watch's work from 2009-2014 will be available soon in English [See Annex II, Summary for the report].

Who did the evaluation?

An external party.

What has been measured / evaluated?

Process evaluation (respondents, method, participants' satisfaction) (please describe): The Social Science Research Institute at the University of Iceland recently evaluated the Welfare Watch. Many methods were used, questionnaires answered by the working groups in the Welfare Watch, collaborating partners and the general public. Individual interviews with ministers and people from the Steering Committee of the Welfare Watch. Focus groups among those in the working groups of the Welfare Watch and a content analysis.

In Icelandic: http://www.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/velferdarvakt09/Velferdarvaktin_Lokautgafa_150315.pdf. Evaluation report for the Welfare-Watch's work from 2009-2014 will be available soon in English [See Annex II, Summary for the report].

Evaluation of the impacts/effects/outcome (please describe the design): Analyses of progress reports from the working groups and interim reports from the steering committee to the government revealed that the steering committee utilised the work performed by the working groups to propose improvements. The working groups formulated most of their proposals in 2009 – the first year of Welfare Watch operations – and the steering committee passed on most proposals to the government that same year. The steering committee focused on the issues of unemployed people, bolstering labour-market measures, household debt issues, and education issues, to name but a few. Information on the website of the Icelandic national parliament (hereinafter "Althingi") for 2009–13 was looked at in order to ascertain what had happened to the various proposals put by the steering committee to the government. Several plans and legal acts entering into force in the early years of the financial crisis closely resemble proposals made by the Welfare Watch. Examples of this are various labour-market measures for young people not covered within the unemployment insurance system and measures for people struggling with mortgage payments.

The Social Indicators have been published annually since 2012. Social indicators, numerous publications in English: <http://www.statice.is/Pages/1377>

Health, social affairs and justice, numerous publications English: <http://www.statice.is/pages/1384>

The Social Indicators Examples of Published material in English:

- Social indicators: The quality of children's lives (2015): <http://www.statice.is/Pages/452?itemid=7b3410f1-c16d-4cf6-835d-dd3cfa38d7b9>
- Social indicators: Children and poverty: <http://www.statice.is/Pages/452?itemid=7cf65dd1-13d4-4705-98a7-4e8ee2ba7ae5>
- Social indicators: Material deprivation 2004-2013 (2014): <http://www.statice.is/Pages/452?itemid=110ec029-f96f-4d99-b3da-caefbc433e33>
- Social indicators: Tenants renting at market rates (2014): <http://www.statice.is/Pages/452?itemid=e6efd001-4f80-49bf-be39-2b32038f6e29>.

Other (please add and describe): 'Report of the Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States on full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights, Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky' – Addendum, Mission to Iceland (8-15 December 2014):

Page 11, paragraph nr. 34: "One of the new innovative bodies formed in early 2009 was Welfare Watch, an independent consultative body which today includes more than 35 representatives, from key ministries, municipalities, social partners and civil society, many also working at grass root level. The aim was to monitor the social impact of the crisis, provide advice to State institutions and coordinate targeted interventions on the ground. Welfare Watch managed to spread the message that during the crisis the weakest in society should be protected. The watchdog submitted several reports with recommendations, including a report that was submitted to Parliament. Welfare Watch is expected to submit in 2015 additional recommendations on how to address and guarantee the rights of persons suffering multiple forms of deprivation to the Government and the Independent Expert hopes that their expert advice will be duly considered by Icelandic authorities." Page 20, paragraph nr. 69: "Welfare Watch should explicitly be mentioned as an innovative response to a financial crisis. The body can be credited for having improved collaboration between Government departments, local authorities and civil society in tackling the social impact of the crisis and for enhancing citizens' participation. Its work resulted in improved social monitoring and targeted interventions by authorities and welfare organisations. Welfare Watch also helped to spread the message within public authorities and society at large that nobody should be left behind as a consequence of the banking collapse."

The report online:

http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session28/Documents/A_HRC_28_59_Add.1_AUV.doc.

What are the main results/conclusions/recommendations from the evaluation (please describe)?

To structure the work further. Have an employee who can work with all the sub-groups to stop possible duplication of work. Many of the proposals from the Welfare Watch were realized or used in some way by the government, i.e. free dental care for children from low income families and much lower cost for all children under 18 in a 5 year period [See Annex II].

Is the evaluation report available, preferably in English or at least an English summary? (if yes, please provide link/reference/document)

A report regarding the work of the Welfare Watch in 2009:

http://eng.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/velferdarvakt09/29042010The-Welfare-Watch_Report-to-the-Althingi.pdf

English report that evaluated the Welfare-Watch's work from 2009-2014 will be available soon in English [See Annex II].

The previously mentioned Report of the Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States on full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights, Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky – Addendum, Mission to Iceland (8-15 December 2014):

http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session28/Documents/A_HRC_28_59_Add.1_AUV.doc.

What were, in your opinion, the pre-conditions for success? Were there any facilitating factors?

Among other things pre-conditions for success could be:

- The Welfare Watch is a governmental level platform, with representatives from four ministries, Ministry of Welfare (Health, Social Affairs and Housing), Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, Ministry of Education and Culture and Ministry of the Interior and numerous governmental institutes. (See Annex I)
- Participation of other, key stakeholders, cross sectors and levels. (See Annex I)

- The utilization of data (The Social Indicators) to inform policy and practice, focusing on vulnerable groups.

What are the main lessons to be learned?

In 2014 Iceland had the presidency for the Nordic Council of Ministers and established a 3 year project based on the Welfare Watch, called the Nordic Welfare Watch. The project is divided into three separate projects: 1) The Nordic Welfare Watch – in response to crises; 2) Welfare consequences of financial crises; and 3) Nordic welfare indicators. Further information in English: <http://eng.velferdarraduneyti.is/nordicwelfarewatch/>

Web page related to the intervention

- The Welfare Watch, In Icelandic <http://www.velferdarraduneyti.is/velferdarvaktin/>
- The Nordic Welfare Watch, in English: <http://eng.velferdarraduneyti.is/nordicwelfarewatch/>

References (with possible links) to the most important articles or reports on the intervention

- Prosperity, The fight against poverty in Iceland:
http://www.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/Rit_2013/Prosperity-the-fight-against-poverty-in-Iceland-1406-C.pdf
- *The Welfare Watch - report to Althingi:
http://eng.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/velferdarvakt09/29042010The-Welfare-Watch_Report-to-the-Althingi.pdf
- The Well-being Watch, Task Force on Basic Services – Report on Basic Services and Streamlining Measures in Times of Recession:
<http://www.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/velferdarvakt09/Report-on-Basic-Services-and-Streamlining-Measures.pdf>
- Interim Report by the collaborative group monitoring welfare in the Suðurnes region:
<http://www.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/rit-og-skyrslur2012/InterimReportEnglishFeb2012.pdf>
- *The Bohoslavsky report:
http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session28/Documents/A_HRC_28_59_Add_1_AUV.doc

Contact details of person who may be contacted for further information

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Annex I (of 'Welfare Watch' Programme - Iceland)

<p>Participants in the first Welfare Watch from 2009-2014 Steering Committee: Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Insurance Icelandic Confederation of Labour Association of Academics (BHM) Federation of State and Municipal Employees (BSRB) SA – Business Iceland Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland</p>	<p>Participants in the current Welfare Watch 2014- Ministry of Welfare – Siv Fríðleifsdóttir Chairwoman Icelandic Family Therapy Association Icelandic Family Help Centre The Debtors' Ombudsman Association of Academics (BHM) Faculty of Social Work – University of Iceland Women of Multicultural Ethnicity Network in Iceland</p>
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Ministry of Justice Ministry of Education Ministry of Commerce Ministry of Finance Ministry of Health The Teachers Union Icelandic Red Cross Reykjavik Municipality Icelandic Association of Local Authorities (Labour market) Later additions: The Organization of Disabled in Iceland National Association of Intellectual disabilities Directorate of Labour Directorate of Health The Gender Equality Council The Debtors' Ombudsman National association of older citizens Icelandic Human Rights Centre Also more representatives joined specific working groups formed by the Steering Committee	The Office of the Ombudsman for Children Ministry of the Interior Reykjavik Municipality Federation of State and Municipal Employees (BSRB) The Organization of Disabled in Iceland The Ministry of Education and Culture Icelandic Association of Local Authorities Rights Keepers for the disabled (rettindagaeslumenn) VIRK – Vocational Rehabilitation Fund Directorate of Labour The Icelandic Mental Health Alliance National association of older citizens The National Parents Association SA – Business Iceland Unicef – Iceland Safe the Children Iceland Icelandic Human Rights Centre National Association of Intellectual disabilities Sjonarholl – Counselling Centre Directorate of Health Icelandic Confederation of Labour The Women's' Shelter The Social Insurance Administration The Centre for Gender Equality Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs Icelandic Church Aid The Primary Health Care of the Capital Area The Homes Association The Teachers Union Red Cross Iceland
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Annex II (of 'Welfare Watch' Programme - Iceland)

Summary from the evaluation report on the first Welfare Watch (2009-2013), soon to be published online

The financial crisis in the autumn of 2008 created a new playing field in Icelandic society. Many people lost their jobs, and the Icelandic economy fell into deep recession. One of the government's responses to the financial crisis was to set up the Welfare Watch, which was in operation from early 2009 to December 2013. This assessment report discusses the organisation, implementation and outcome of the proposals made in the course of this first Welfare Watch.

The work of the Welfare Watch has been assessed by means of interviews, questionnaires and content analysis. Data was collected in the autumn of 2014. Interviews were held with the Head of the Welfare Watch, one of the project's workers and three other representatives from the steering committee. The various ministers in office during the lifetime of the Welfare Watch were also interviewed. Discussions were held in two focus groups amongst working-group representatives who had participated in Welfare Watch activities. The project was then assessed by means of three questionnaires sent to representatives of Welfare Watch working groups, staff in agencies involved in the project and the general public. Finally, the content of reports, minutes and other material connected to the Welfare Watch was analysed in order to gain insight into the organisation of the project and the proposals generated.

The Welfare Watch was set up and mandated by Asta Ragnheidur Johannesdottir, then Minister for Social Affairs and Social Security. The Minister entrusted the then-Head of the Welfare Service, Lara Bjornsdottir, with the task of running the Welfare Watch and recruited Ingibjorg Broddadottir, who at that time worked as an expert in the Employment and Equality Office, to work on the project. The Director of the Icelandic Federation of Skilled Construction and Industrial Workers, Thorbjorn Gudmundsson, was also brought in to work on the project. This group decided jointly on the composition of the Welfare Watch's steering committee.

The steering committee was made up of representatives from ministries, stakeholders, Reykjavik City Council, the Association of Icelandic Local Authorities and the third sector (NGOs). From the interviews with ministers and members of the steering committee, it emerged that people were generally satisfied with how successfully a broad group of people with varying knowledge and experience had been put together. The steering committee set up working groups to deal with the various projects that it deemed urgent to tackle. Each working group was headed by a chairman who also sat on the Welfare Watch steering committee. These chairmen had the task of calling upon

people with expert knowledge in the specific fields dealt with in each group. Each working group had the task of assessing the consequences of the financial crisis on the group in question and proposing improvements for the use of the steering committee in its interim reports to the government.

When the Welfare Watch was set up, it was given the task of monitoring the social and financial repercussions of the financial crisis on individuals and families and proposing improvements. The Welfare Watch's mandate was renewed during the term of office of Gudbjartur Hannesson. The commission letter he issued stated that the steering committee must keep both the government and public fully informed and act independently. A survey among the members of Welfare Watch working groups contained questions on how well the Welfare Watch had fulfilled its role. A large majority, i.e. 84%, felt that the social and financial consequences of the economic crisis had been well monitored, but fewer considered that proposing improvements had been successful. The role of the Welfare Watch was also discussed in interviews with ministers and members of the steering committee. These discussions included what people understood regarding the Welfare Watch's independence. Respondents agreed that the Welfare Watch had been independent in the sense that the group decided for itself what issues were discussed and how these issues were discussed. Some, however, felt that a working group appointed by the government could hardly be considered independent.

The Welfare Watch handled projects of various types. Meetings were held on the situation in Icelandic society in both the steering committee and working groups, and the steering committee of the Welfare Watch also issued conclusions, recommendations and challenges; wrote five progress reports containing recommendations for the government; had audits done; and organised meetings and forums. These projects were more often than not aimed at children, families with children and young people. Respondents from the steering committee agreed that urging municipal councils to ensure school-meal provision was one of the most important recommendations the committee had issued and that the number of schools offering children free porridge in the morning had risen considerably. The recommendation to ensure children's dental health was also considered to have been effective.

The defined role of the Welfare Watch was to act as analysts and advisors. In two cases, however, the Welfare Watch was actually responsible for implementing projects. One of these two projects was to set up social indicators – respondents from the steering committee felt this to be one of the most important of the Welfare Watch's projects. These social indicators provide a collection of statistical data in one place, enabling the public and the government to follow developments and changes in society and compare the situation of various groups to that in other countries. The other project was to set up the Sudurnes Watch. The results of the Sudurnes Watch include fostering co-operation between the police, social services and child protection services in the field of domestic violence.

Meetings of the Welfare Watch steering committee were used to discuss the activities of the working groups, to present the work performed at the workplaces of the group's members and to gain insight and expertise from individuals outside the Welfare Watch. The role of the Welfare Watch chairman was to convene the group and oversee its activities. They did not, however, set the group specific tasks, as the members of the steering committee would generally reach their own conclusions as to which matters needed attention at any given time. Interviews with members of the steering committee included discussions of how the group's meetings had been used. Respondents appreciated how often the Welfare Watch met, particularly in the early stages of the financial crisis when many matters were pressing. There were, however, some instances of excessively long agendas and meetings. Some indicated that excessively long meetings could get in the way of members' other activities and prevent material presented by attendees from being utilised as it should. There were high levels of satisfaction with the work of the chairman, who was considered to possess a good deal of knowledge and experience.

Assessing the work of the Welfare Watch included assessing working methods and management within the working groups. The replies given by respondents suggest that working methods were similar to those present in the steering committee. The chair ran and convened the group, but in every other respect, things were done by teamwork, with the group deciding collectively what material was worth examining. From focus group discussions, it emerged that, in some cases, the division of tasks within working groups was unclear. A questionnaire answered by members of the working groups showed that 57% of respondents were satisfied with how tasks were divided within their groups, while 13% were unsatisfied.

Interviews with members of the steering committee revealed that, while heated debates on individual matters were frequent, the group had worked together well. A majority of working-group questionnaire respondents (78%) indicated that they were satisfied with the level of communication with others in the working group. Respondents from Welfare Watch working groups did, however, consider that more co-operation was needed between the steering committee and the working groups. It was considered important to strengthen the ties between the members of the working groups and the steering committee to ensure that the members of the working groups gained a better understanding of what was expected of them. Information was requested on the results of the work carried out in the working groups.

Analyses of progress reports from the working groups and interim reports from the steering committee to the government revealed that the steering committee utilised the work performed by the working groups to propose improvements. The working groups formulated most of their proposals in 2009 – the first year of Welfare Watch operations – and the steering committee passed on most proposals to the government that same year. The steering committee focused on the issues of unemployed people, bolstering labour-market measures, household debt issues, and education issues, to name but a few. Information on the website of the Icelandic national parliament (hereinafter "Althingi") for 2009–13 was looked at in order to ascertain what had happened to the various proposals put by the steering committee to the government. Several plans and legal acts entering into force in the early years of the financial crisis closely resemble proposals made by the Welfare Watch. Examples of this are various labour-market measures for young people not covered within the unemployment insurance system and measures for people struggling with mortgage payments.

Interviewees considered the Welfare Watch to have had a significant effect on welfare in Iceland at the beginning of the financial crisis. This was also the case for individuals external to Welfare Watch. Surveys among the general public and the staff in public bodies represented in the Welfare Watch revealed that half of those who had heard of the Welfare Watch considered it to have been very important for Icelandic society in the early years of the financial crisis. One aspect of the importance of the Welfare Watch was the various reports containing proposed improvements used by the government to prioritise tasks. One respondent indicated that the work of the Welfare Watch may have contributed to fewer cutbacks being made in welfare than in other areas. Note was also made of the fact that, although not all the Welfare Watch's proposals had been implemented, its work had an indirect impact on welfare in Iceland by raising awareness about issues requiring attention. Increased debate subsequently led to entities other than the government taking on such issues.

Through the Welfare Watch, various public bodies and organisations worked together on welfare issues, and representatives of the Welfare Watch felt they had learnt a great deal from their participation in this cross-discipline project. Respondents agreed that co-operation on a broad basis had played a crucial role in efforts to improve the situation of people in Iceland. A large majority of working-group members expressed pride at having taken part in Welfare Watch working groups.