

Annual report from the Icelandic Network for 2014

Influencing National Governments for better policies

Last year we had national elections and a new government, this year we had local government elections giving us a new Reykjavík mayor and new political majorities for municipalities across the country. Given this situation our work on the political front is in a reshaping process.

Participation in government committees has helped us to directly influence policies and both Þorbera and Vilborg have had seats on such committees as representatives of EAPN. A Welfare Ministry committee on housing issues (where Þorbera represented EAPN) released a report this year which will hopefully guide new local governments to solve problems related to housing, especially in Reykjavík, where there is dire need for solutions. The report includes strategies to narrow the gap between those renting and owning their homes as facts have shown great inequalities between those two groups, with those renting being on average severely worse off.

Vilborg's participation in the Welfare Watch (around 2011) produced the report "Prosperity" which was published as a booklet that will continue to be helpful for our future work as it contains suggestions for governments to reduce poverty and the effects of it. The report was also published in English which has been useful for promoting our work and our cause abroad. One of the report's suggestions, free dental care for children, was enforced by the last government and implemented in stages from 2012-2013. The Welfare Watch was discontinued in 2012 but we are pleased to hear of plans of reestablishing it and hope to see it up and running again later this year, keeping the government in check on issues of poverty.

Our participation in the EMIN (European Minimum Income) project will also help to get us noticed. The work is lead by Hanna Björnsdóttir, who has been gathering information and interviewing a wide variety of people experiencing and working with issues related to poverty. A conference to present findings and outcome has been planned for September and will be a platform for us to get noticed and open up a dialogue with politicians, media and the public. The drafts to the final report are ready and the final product will be a valuable asset to our future work.

As we now have members not only in Reykjavík but also in Reykjanesbær and Akureyri, we will be more able to influence the local governments in these areas as well and hopefully expand our reach for political co-operation and acknowledgement.

Participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in internal and external workings of the national network.

Our PEP work is still in early stages as we have had difficulties reaching people. Our participants for the annual meetings in Brussels up to this point have been hand picked by the organizations but we wish to gradually change that to a more democratic way of selecting participants.

We would also like to reach people from other parts of the country (other than Reykjavík) to gain a broader view of experiences faced by people living in different municipalities and how their local governments are dealing with their issues.

Last year's PEP annual conference in Brussels was a huge success for the Icelandic network. Along with Ásta Dís, our national coordinator, our delegation made up of 3 women from the town of Reykjanesbær (a town hit hard by the financial crisis as well as having the country's highest rate of unemployment at the time), had a great influence at the conference as their stories touched everyone present. The experience also had an impact in their lives and they have all since been involved with the network in different ways. One of the participants, Ester Ellen Nelson, who is a graphic designer, is now working on our website and the Icelandic publication of "Braking Barriers – Driving Change", which is now available online.

The PEP work is a great platform for ordinary people to get involved and is an important tool for the organization to get ordinary people to share their experiences and get their voices heard.

Development and growth of the network

We are developing a website for the Icelandic network which is in final stages of development. This will be helpful for gathering and accessing information on our issues and helping members keep up with what we're doing as well as keeping educational and promotional material for those wanting to easily access information about us and our issues.

There have been two main developments in the growth of the network this year. Firstly, a Northern Branch was established in Akureyri at the beginning of the year. Secondly, we were joined by The Organization of Women of Foreign Origin, who we believe will give a valuable voice to the cause. In addition, there has been a renewal of representatives from a few of our members, who we hope will be active on our board. Naturally, it can be challenging to find people who can give their time to do voluntary work and this has been one of our obstacles.

Having material in Icelandic is important both for promotional and educational purposes. We have now had the EAPN booklet “Breaking Barriers – Driving Change” translated into Icelandic which will be available on our website in pdf format.

The EMIN project will hopefully get the attention of possible new members and may as well reach the ears of possible PEP participants. The conference is set for September.

Our participation in EAPN conferences, workshops and meetings abroad is a great training ground for members to become active as it is a way for them to “experience directly” the work of EAPN. Attending the Learning Forum for the first time was a great experience and a learning curve for two board members (Laufey and Hjördís). Hosting the Exco meeting was also an exiting opportunity and an all around great experience for our network, especially as it was greatly successful and we have had great feedback on the event. Our participation in the MASS project has also been great as it has helped us reflect on our work so far in order to proceed with more knowledge and learn how to organize ourselves better in the process.

Governance and internal democracy

Our annual general meeting took place on April 28th this year. We made no changes to our internal organization, statutes, board members arrangements or annual fees. The turnout was satisfactory and the atmosphere was promising so we hope for a more active board with new representatives from our members as well as new member organizations.

We will need to develop a system of communicating with our new branch in Akureyri. The new website will help with this as well as communication through Facebook. A full or a part time employee would be very helpful for this purpose as communication can often be confusing if no one person is responsible for “getting things done”. This includes

gathering information, organizing projects, making sure all is done on time and that everybody is kept up to date and informed of what's happening.