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Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Forty-ninth session

Summary record of the first part (public)* of the 44th meeting

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Wednesday, 21 November 2012, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Mr. Pillay

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* No summary record was prepared for the second part (closed) of the meeting.

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Consideration of reports

(a) Reports submitted by States parties in accordance with articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant *(continued)*

Fourth periodic report of Iceland (continued) (E/C.12/ISL/4); core document (HRI/CORE/1/Add.26); list of issues (E/C.12/ISL/Q/4); written replies of the Government of Iceland to the list of issues (E/C.12/ISL/Q/4/Add.1), English only)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the delegation of Iceland took places at the Committee table.*

Articles 10 to 12 (continued)

2. **Ms. Thorsteinsdottir** (Iceland) said that, as a share of GDP, the health budget had dropped from 7.5 per cent in 2006 and 2007 to 7 per cent in 2011; the peak of 7.9 per cent reached in 2009 could be explained by the fall in GDP which had taken place during that year. The health needs of all of the inhabitants of Iceland's territory being covered, no specific financial provision for migrants or for children with disabilities existed. Obesity among 12-year-old children was falling, with the rate standing at around 5 per cent; programmes to promote healthy eating habits and sporting activities had been established in schools and a ban on the screening of advertisements for foods with low nutritional value during young people's television broadcasting hours had been introduced; around 20 per cent of adults were affected by obesity. Levels of consumption of alcohol, tobacco and drugs among young people, which had long been monitored, were falling steadily, as was tobacco consumption among adults (14 per cent). There had been 33 suicides in 2005, including 6 cases involving young people under the age of 30; 32 cases in 2006, 7 of which had involved young people under the age of 30; and 36 cases in 2009, including 4 cases involving young people under the age of 30. The restrictions affecting the health services had not had an impact on the quality of the services provided, waiting times or indicators such as life expectancy or the infant mortality rate. According to a user survey recently carried out by the National University Hospital of Iceland, users were satisfied with the health services.

3. **Ms. Gunnsteinsdottir** (Iceland) said that all areas of activity were governed by collective agreements. As to the conditions imposed by the Unemployment Insurance Act, article 14, (3) of the Act provided for a number of exceptional circumstances under which unemployed persons could turn down an offer of employment. The minimum monthly wage for unskilled workers was ISK (Icelandic krona) 193,000, the minimum retirement and disability pension stood at ISK 203,000 per month and the minimum monthly unemployment benefit was ISK 167,000. Between 2010 and 2011, household disposable income had risen by 9.6 per cent, while per capita disposable income had increased by 9.3 per cent and per capita purchasing power had grown by 5.1 per cent. Over the same period, total household income had increased by 6.7 per cent and total household expenditure had risen by 2.7 per cent. The proportion of single-parent families at risk of falling into poverty had dropped from 30.1 per cent in 2010 to 28.4 per cent in 2011, while that of persons over the age of 65 who were in the same situation, which had stood at 31 per cent in 2009, had fallen to only 7.7 per cent in 2011. The law stating that 40 per cent of the seats on the governing boards of 321 companies and 31 pension funds should be occupied by women would enter into force in September 2013, but 47 per cent of those companies and 42 per cent of those pension funds had already complied with the provisions concerned. Turning to social issues, she said that special measures had been taken in the Sudhurnes region, which had felt the full force of the crisis. Social development indicators had been prepared and the

funds necessary for their implementation by the Iceland Statistics Agency had been secured. There were a large number of training and financial assistance projects designed to promote career reorientation for the unemployed, in particular young persons and the long-term unemployed. In August 2010, the Government had appointed a Debtor's Ombudsman responsible for assisting individuals in great financial difficulty by applying the debt-relief measures approved by the Government. In November 2012, the Ombudsman had received 4,400 applications for debt relief. Ways of restructuring or cancelling debts amounting to more than 110 per cent of the value of a property had also been established.

4. **Ms. Bjarnadottir** (Iceland) said that the Government intended rapidly to designate a national human rights institution but was in the process of searching for a non-governmental organization (NGO) with the necessary experience. Given the clear link between trafficking in persons and prostitution, the Government had strengthened legislation against prostitution, in order better to combat human trafficking by adapting the Penal Code to take into account the relevant ratified international instruments. Following the Swedish and Norwegian models, the Government had chosen to tackle prostitution by criminalizing procurers and clients, rather than those engaged in prostitution. The Government had implemented a plan to combat human trafficking, which was based on the provision of training to the various police forces, international cooperation and public funding for NGOs which assisted the victims of ill-treatment and sexual violence. Furthermore, the Government had opened up a wide-ranging national debate on the issue.

5. **Mr. Texier** asked whether the State party was affected by the issue of informal work.

6. **Ms. Shin** enquired what penalties could be imposed on the clients of persons engaged in prostitution and whether provision had been made for Icelandic nationals who purchased such services abroad within the framework of sex tourism.

7. **Mr. Abdel-Moneim** said that the conditions imposed on job seekers were contrary to the requirement of freedom of choice and acceptance contained in article 6 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. He hoped that, despite its wording, the law was applied in accordance with that important provision.

8. **The Chairperson**, speaking as a Committee member, asked what measures were being taken to tackle the rise in the number of persons living below the poverty line, in particular single-parent families and families with many children.

9. **Ms. Gunnsteinsdottir** (Iceland) said that informal work was a problematic issue in Iceland, in particular in the construction, hotel and catering industries, and that the authorities were working closely with the social partners to eliminate it. Following the economic collapse of the country, the Government had launched a campaign designed to encourage individuals to hire declared workers, in particular by refunding the VAT on the work carried out. Those persons whose wages were lower than the minimum wage received assistance from their municipal social services and had access to a large number of benefits.

10. **Ms. Bjarnadottir** (Iceland) said that the maximum penalty imposed for purchasing services of prostitution was 1 year's imprisonment. Extraterritorial jurisdiction applied to the purchasing of services of child prostitution. In 2012, based on Norwegian best practices, Iceland had published the first ethical standards for Icelandic officials, prohibiting them from purchasing services of prostitution. Six articles of the new draft Constitution currently under examination by Parliament referred directly to the Covenant, while five others were based on other provisions of the Covenant. Her delegation would not fail to point out to the drafting group working on the new Constitution that the provisions referred to in article 15. (1) (b) of the Covenant, concerning the right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications, had not been included in the draft text.

11. **Mr. Tirado Mejía**, noting that prostitution was criminalized in Iceland, asked whether utilization of the services of prostitution of a minor constituted a double offence, for which two penalties could be imposed.
12. **The Chairperson**, speaking as a Committee member, asked why it was necessary to wait until 2013 before increasing the amount of family allowances.
13. **Ms. Thorsteinsdottir** (Iceland) replied that the increase in family allowances and other social benefits had been included in the 2013 finance bill, which was due to be adopted in the coming weeks.
14. **Ms. Bjarnadottir** (Iceland) said that it was not the act of prostitution that was punishable but rather the purchasing or facilitation of sexual services. The penalty was higher in cases involving minors and could be up to 2 years' imprisonment.

Articles 13 to 15

15. **Mr. Marchán Romero** asked where the monthly grant given to artists in order to allow them to devote themselves to their creative work was located on the wage scale. He also enquired as to the conditions governing the allocation of that wage and asked whether foreign writers residing in Iceland qualified for such payments. He wished to be informed of the budgetary implications of the measure under which writers received copyright payments for the use and loan of their books in libraries. He asked why it was only citizens of countries members of the European Economic Area (EEA) who benefited from that measure. Furthermore, he enquired as to the measures taken to facilitate the participation of children of disadvantaged families, migrant children, older persons and persons with disabilities in cultural life.
16. **Mr. Kerdoun** requested further information concerning the new law on education adopted in 2011. He enquired as to the consequences of the budgetary restrictions imposed on the education system since 2008 and the measures taken to mitigate the adverse effects on children enrolled in education. Raising the issue of the causes of school dropout, he asked whether students could interrupt their schooling and resume their education at a later date. Furthermore, he requested additional information on the training of primary and secondary schoolteachers, and on the number of students with an immigrant background and their countries of origin, as well as any measures taken to prevent such students from dropping out of school. Finally, he wished to know the number of universities in Iceland, whether all subjects were taught at those universities and in which language or languages instruction was provided.
17. **Mr. Schrijver** enquired as to the existence of indigenous peoples in Iceland.
18. **Mr. Kedzia** asked what measures had been taken in order to guarantee that people living in the most disadvantaged conditions had access to the Internet.
19. **Mr. Riedel** (Country Rapporteur) requested further information concerning the implementation of article 15 (3) of the Covenant, relating to scientific research and creative activity.
20. **Mr. Olgeirsson** (Iceland) said that children with disabilities, the only group unaffected by school dropout, were integrated into the education system at all levels. Significant progress had been made over the previous few years and special departments had been set up for disabled students at the level of secondary education, with those students benefiting from extremely active support. Specialized establishments catered for children with multiple disabilities or serious behavioural problems. However, 99.5 per cent of disabled children attended mainstream educational establishments. The budget allocation to that group had remained constant despite the economic crisis. Immigration being a recent phenomenon in Iceland, second-generation immigrants represented less than 1 per cent of

the population. Immigrants had the same rights as Icelanders in terms of education. All immigrant children attended school on a compulsory basis from the ages of 6 to 16 years but the school dropout rate among that group was high at the upper secondary education level. The reasons for that trend were unclear, but it was obvious that the schools had not been properly prepared to welcome such students. Consultations had recently been held with all stakeholders and the results of that process would serve as the basis for the preparation of an action plan that would, in particular, make provision for advisory and orientation services for immigrant students and their parents, as well as for a programme for the teaching of Icelandic and the languages spoken by the immigrant population. There were no indigenous peoples in Iceland, nor was there any other language apart from Icelandic. Sign language was recognized by law as being the mother tongue of the deaf and was taught in schools and universities.

21. There were six independent universities which taught all subjects to bachelor's degree level and increasingly to Master's degree and PhD level. Many Icelandic students took part in exchanges with foreign universities, in particular within the framework of the Erasmus programme. A major process of reform of the education system, scheduled to be completed in 2015, had been launched prior to the economic crisis and included the complete overhaul of the teaching programme, in particular teaching at the upper secondary education level. The new Government which had come to power following the 2009 elections had continued to implement that reform, which was based on a number of fundamental pillars – literacy, durability, health and well-being, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity. For the first time, the teaching of human rights was included in school curricula in Iceland. That initiative had been supported by students, parents, teachers and municipalities.

22. It was true that, formerly, almost half of all teachers had been unqualified. Although that was still the case in some remote rural areas, teaching staff had acquired a certain amount of experience and had access to training courses geared specifically to them. Since the adoption of the law on teacher training, all teachers, including those working at the preschool education level, must hold a Master's degree-level qualification. In the past, teachers had refused to address issues relating to sexuality and sexual health in the classroom; however, those subjects currently formed an integral part of school curricula. Concerned at the growing consumption of pornographic films and images by young boys, the State had provided schools and teachers with sex-education manuals, hoping, in that way, to give children healthier material concerning the issue.

23. Cultural life in Iceland was very rich, with culture in all its forms constituting an integral part of the daily lives of most Icelanders. A large number of initiatives had been implemented in order to involve schoolchildren in various cultural projects in collaboration with artists, music schools and drama groups. Furthermore, known authors came to give readings of their works in schools. Culture was also increasingly accessible through the Internet. Iceland, which allocated considerable funds to the translation of national and foreign writers, was proud to have been the Guest of Honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair, an accolade which had led to the resurgence of literary translations into German. The aim of the new cultural policy currently being examined by Parliament was to ensure that all social groups, including migrants and the poorest and most marginalized groups, had access to culture.

24. **Ms. Bjarnadottir** (Iceland) explained that certain artists received an honorary salary for their contribution to the world of the arts, while others, professionals, could submit an application to a specialized committee for a monthly salary paid by the State, which exceeded the salary of an unqualified worker. Access to the Internet was almost universal, with 94.6 per cent of all households being connected. Internet use was only low among elderly persons (21.7 per cent).

25. **Mr. Olgeirsson** (Iceland) said that the public authorities had always been concerned at the low level of education of the population, with more than 30 per cent of adults not having pursued their education beyond completion of compulsory schooling. One of the most ambitious aims of the “Iceland 2020” strategy was to reduce that figure to 10 per cent by 2020. In order to achieve that goal, secondary education establishments would offer refresher courses to interested adults. Immigrants, around 50 per cent of whom dropped out of education before having obtained the secondary education graduation diploma, felt that the Icelandic education system was too different from their own system and that the language represented a real obstacle. Accordingly, associations offered immigrants evening and weekend courses in their mother tongue that were designed to allow them better to acquire knowledge of Icelandic. Distance learning courses in immigrants’ mother tongues were also available over the Internet.

26. **Mr. Sadi** asked whether the high rate of school dropout among children of immigrants might be linked to bullying at school.

27. **Mr. Olgeirsson** (Iceland) noted that Poles made up the largest minority group (2 to 3 per cent of the population). Aware of the fact that bullying, which had long been ignored, was a reality in Iceland, not only in schools but also in the workplace and within all population groups, the Government of Iceland had carried out an awareness-raising campaign in that regard, which had received extensive media coverage. The Government had further decreed that a day of awareness concerning bullying in schools and in the workplace would be held on 8 November of each year. Moreover, Internet users were invited to sign an online petition calling for action to tackle the issue.

28. **Ms. Thorsteinsdottir** (Iceland) said that her country had been seriously affected by the international financial crisis, which had brought about the devaluation of the Icelandic currency, pushed inflation up and led to an increase in the rate of unemployment from 1 per cent to 10 per cent. The Government had had to cut public expenditure but had been able to preserve its social protection system, in particular taking measures in favour of the very poor and encouraging job creation. She thanked the Committee members for their useful observations, which would assist efforts better to define the national human rights action plan that was currently being prepared.

29. **The Chairperson** thanked the delegation of Iceland and announced that the Committee had completed its consideration of the report.

The first part (public) of the meeting rose at 5.35 p.m.