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Summary record of the 31st meeting

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Chair: Ms. Crăciunean-Tatu

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The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Consideration of reports

(a) Reports submitted by States parties under articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant

Fifth periodic report of Iceland (E/C.12/ISL/5; E/C.12/ISL/Q/5; E/C.12/ISL/RQ/5)

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Iceland joined the meeting.*
2. **A representative of Iceland**, introducing his country's fifth periodic report (E/C.12/ISL/5), said that, over recent years, as the world had witnessed a pandemic, an increase in armed conflicts and a backlash against human rights and gender equality, Iceland had been hit by natural disasters that had caused the internal displacement of almost 1 per cent of the population. Such challenges highlighted the fundamental importance of safeguarding human rights, and Iceland had taken a significant step in that direction when, in June 2024, Parliament had enacted a law to establish a national human rights institution. The new institution, which was due to begin operating in January 2025, would have a broad mandate to promote and protect human rights, in line with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles). Moreover, in July 2024, Iceland had ratified the revised European Social Charter, accepting six additional articles and thereby reinforcing its commitment to social and economic rights.
3. Icelandic law provided comprehensive protection against discrimination and, although full equality had not yet been achieved, the country was proud to have ranked first on the Global Gender Gap Index for 15 consecutive years. Particular emphasis was placed on promoting the rights of LGBTQI+ persons, and Iceland came second on the 2024 Rainbow Europe Map and Index. In recent years, Iceland had been at the forefront of international efforts to develop "well-being economies", which sought to pursue human and ecological goals rather than simply material growth. Forty well-being indicators had been identified that focused on social, environmental and economic factors. They were linked to the Sustainable Development Goals and were used to guide government policy.
4. Despite State efforts to promote gender equality in employment, there were persistent challenges, due in particular to gender segregation in the labour market and the undervaluation of jobs predominantly held by women. The focus of government efforts was therefore shifting from equal pay to pay equity, which involved the comparison not only of the same or similar jobs but also of different jobs that had equal value in terms of skills, responsibility and effort. Steps had also been taken to improve the right to work of persons from outside the European Economic Area by granting unlimited work permits to those holding a humanitarian residence permit and increasing the labour rights of foreign students.
5. Significant reforms to the pensions system were due to enter into force in 2025. Their purpose was to mitigate early reliance on permanent disability pensions by making it financially advantageous to work part-time, even for benefits recipients. More than 95 per cent of current benefit holders would receive higher payments following the reform. In addition, the new national housing policy and action plan aimed to ensure that all persons had access to safe, affordable and high-quality housing. Although proud of its health-care system, Iceland was affected by the global shortage of health-care personnel. One recent measure to address that challenge had been to increase the number of medical students accepted for enrolment at the University of Iceland.
6. A special domestic violence team had been established in order to provide better support for survivors of gender-based and sexual violence, which regrettably remained one of the country's most pressing human rights issues. The registration of such cases was being integrated into the electronic medical record system.
7. Laws and social frameworks that affected children and their rights had been extensively revised following wide-ranging consultation with key stakeholders, including children themselves. The Act on the Integration of Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity had been passed in 2022, a new education policy had been adopted in 2021 and significant efforts had been made to ensure that students at all levels received inclusive and

equitable education. Climate change – the greatest collective challenge ever faced – was a core concern for the Government of Iceland, which had introduced a new and updated climate action plan in June 2024. It had also rolled out a new sustainable development strategy that was based on the Sustainable Development Goals.

8. **Mr. Amarti** (Country Rapporteur) said that the Committee had been pleased to learn that there had been widespread consultation with civil society during the drafting of the periodic report. However, although economic, social and cultural rights were protected under the Constitution, it was nonetheless disappointing that the Covenant was not part of national law, in keeping with the Icelandic tradition of adapting its domestic laws to incorporate the norms of international treaties. In that regard, he hoped the delegation could explain why an exception had been made for the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Convention on Human Rights), which had been given force of law. He would also be interested to know whether all the rights enshrined in the Covenant would be included in forthcoming amendments to the Constitution and whether the State had any intention to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Covenant and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

9. He would be interested to learn more about the mandate of the new national human rights institution that was due to begin work in January 2025. He wished to commend the State party for the progress it had made towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda. However, it was important not to lose sight of the challenges, notably the country's carbon dioxide emissions, which remained disproportionately large.

10. The apparent lack of recourse being made to complaints mechanisms might indicate that the legislative framework to combat inequality was poorly understood. It was necessary, therefore, to raise awareness in that regard, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities and migrants.

11. There seemed to be a worrying lack of disaggregated statistics concerning migrants in the State party, as had been highlighted by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance. He wished to know if the labour rights of migrants were protected under the Act on Equal Treatment Irrespective of Race and Ethnic Origin. More generally, the Committee looked forward to receiving information that would enable it to evaluate the impact of all the country's anti-discrimination laws. Did the Government intend to adopt any overarching anti-discrimination legislation?

12. Given the absence of a single anti-corruption authority, he wondered what action was taken to coordinate the activities of the various bodies responsible for combating corruption. The Committee would be interested to learn more about the enforcement of laws against corruption and bribery and the outcome of any cases that had come before the courts. The delegation should also provide information on the results of steps taken to combat extreme poverty, which affected up to 2 per cent of the population, particularly retired persons, persons with disabilities, single parents and migrants.

13. He wished to know what measures the Government intended to take to address the continued worrying problem of gender-based violence, notably with regard to enforcing recent laws against digital sexual violence, and whether any specific steps had been taken to protect migrant women, who were more exposed to gender-based violence. Lastly, although important progress had been made towards reducing wage inequality, he wished to know if there were any sectors where wage inequality, gender stereotyping and sexual harassment still persisted.

14. **A representative of Iceland** said that, in the period since the presentation of the country's previous periodic report in 2010, Iceland had faced and overcome a serious economic and financial crisis, which had also served to underscore the importance of economic, social and cultural rights. The new national human rights institution was a fully independent body that reported to Parliament and was compliant with the Paris Principles. It held a mandate to address a wide range of human rights issues, including advising the Government, monitoring compliance with international obligations, reporting to the treaty bodies and promoting awareness about human rights. Although it would not deal directly with individual complaints, it would provide guidance and assistance to all individuals who

contacted it on human rights issues. Eminent legal scholars consulted as part of the ongoing process of constitutional reform had suggested the addition of environmental rights to the Constitution's existing human rights provisions, which otherwise were consistent with international human rights treaties.

15. **A representative of Iceland** said that the tradition in Iceland was to adapt domestic legislation to international human rights treaties rather than to incorporate the treaties in their entirety. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Convention on Human Rights were exceptions because of the particular priorities of the Government at the time of their ratification. It was, moreover, a general principle in Icelandic law that all legal and constitutional provisions should be interpreted in accordance with international obligations.

16. **A representative of Iceland** said that a new sustainable development strategy to 2030 had been issued in June. The strategy – which was coordinated by a council consisting of representatives from national and local government, industry and civil society – aimed to align development with the Sustainable Development Goals and with the country's own well-being indicators, which had first been rolled out in 2019 and which sought to transcend traditional economic markers. The Government's five-year financial plan contained priorities based on a number of the well-being indicators including, inter alia, mental health, secure housing, improved work-life balance and a shorter working week.

17. Almost all the energy generated in Iceland came from renewable sources. In addition, the country had great potential for carbon sequestration, notably through afforestation and reclaiming drained wetlands. Overall, Iceland aimed to cut its greenhouse gas emissions by 40 per cent by 2030 and to achieve carbon neutrality before 2040. An action plan had been developed to tackle the biggest sources of carbon emissions: industry, road transport, agriculture, fisheries and waste management.

18. **A representative of Iceland** said that, despite having decided not to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Covenant at the present time, Iceland remained committed to ensuring that all individuals who believed that their rights had been infringed had access to domestic remedies. The analysis of the potential impact of ratifying the Optional Protocol would be resumed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, to which competence for the policy area of equality and human rights had been transferred only a few days previously. While Iceland had not ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, many of the provisions of that treaty had been incorporated into national law.

19. **A representative of Iceland** said that the cross-sectoral work on the formulation of a national anti-corruption policy was expected to be completed by the end of 2024 and that the Government was considering expanding the mandate of the steering committee on money laundering and financing of terrorism to include corruption. Furthermore, the codes of conduct for public servants and for government ministries had both been revised in 2023 and were in line with the code of conduct for government ministers. Officials and ministries must disclose any gifts they received and record them in a public register.

20. Welfare Watch – the special committee set up following the economic crisis in 2008 – held regular meetings and was currently focused on the issue of housing. Its findings had led, for example, to policy changes in the work of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.

21. **A representative of Iceland** said that the Government had, for some years, focused on the prevention of gender-based violence through legislative amendments, including pursuant to ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) in 2018, parliamentary resolutions, fully financed action plans and awareness-raising campaigns. A steering committee consisting of representatives of six ministries had been appointed in September 2023 to develop, by the last quarter of 2024, a national action plan for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention. In addition, services of the national emergency helpline had been strengthened and were available by telephone or online 24 hours a day.

22. In June 2022, Parliament had passed a bill significantly improving the treatment, legal status and participation of victims in criminal proceedings. A new action plan on sexual violence for the period 2023–2025 had been adopted, with an emphasis on crime prevention

and efficient processing of cases by the justice system. Most of the eight actions under the plan were funded through the State budget, and a dashboard had been created on the website of the Ministry of Justice to monitor and assess implementation of the actions. Furthermore, a law clarifying the role of health-care professionals in reporting possible cases of domestic violence had been adopted in May 2023. A brochure explaining the rights of foreign women in Iceland, including in cases of violence, was available in print and digital form in eight languages through public entities and civil society organizations that provided services for persons of foreign origin.

23. **A representative of Iceland** said that the two anti-discrimination laws guaranteed equal treatment of individuals irrespective of race, ethnic origin, religion, belief, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual characteristics or gender expression. The laws also applied to migrants. The Equality Complaints Committee was autonomous and, while most of the complaints it received concerned gender-based discrimination, it had also dealt with cases of discrimination on other grounds and cases of multiple discrimination.

24. Cognizant of the fact that the laws were only useful if they were known to the public, the Directorate of Equality was taking steps to raise awareness of them. For example, an information poster in Icelandic, English and Polish had been distributed to some 250 businesses, institutions, municipalities and schools, and an online meeting had been held with labour unions and other key stakeholders to present the legislation and the complaints mechanism. The Directorate was also developing additional promotional materials for its website and social media platforms.

25. Several measures were being taken to create a more gender-equal labour market. In 2018, Iceland had become the first country to require employers to obtain equal pay certification. The gender pay gap had steadily decreased from 20.5 per cent in 2008 to 9.1 per cent in 2023. Nevertheless, women's work continued to be undervalued in some areas, and wages were generally lower in heavily female-dominated occupations. Therefore, a working group, which included representatives of social partners, had been tasked with developing a pilot project to assess the value of jobs with the aim of identifying and addressing the aspects of women's work that might be undervalued and, ultimately, of creating a system that embodied the equal value approach to pay equity.

26. **Mr. Windfuhr** (Country Task Force) said that he wished to hear more about the reasons for the State party's apparent reluctance to ratify optional protocols in general. Further details would also be welcome concerning the content of the national action plan being developed on business and human rights. Might the State party consider adopting a law mandating that companies conduct human rights due diligence?

27. Amid reports that sexual harassment continued in the workplace, in particular for immigrant women, he would be interested to learn about the sectors where such conduct was most prevalent, any assessment that had been conducted of the situation and any measures the State party had taken in response, including to remedy the gap between its excellent legislation in that area and reality on the ground.

28. **Mr. Hennebel** said that the delegation's replies gave the impression that the State party's legislation was so complete that it had no need to draw from international human rights law and its domestic remedies functioned well enough not to warrant it ratifying the Optional Protocol. If that was the case, it might consider whether any harm could be caused if it were to accede to more human rights instruments and provide victims with additional international safeguards and remedies.

29. **Mr. Fiorio Vaesken** said that he would welcome more information regarding the steering committee on human rights mentioned in paragraph 10 of the State party's report, in particular its mandate, to what degree it was participatory and how the report was prepared.

30. **Ms. Rossi** said that she wished to know whether adaptation of national legislation to the provisions of the Covenant ensured the full expression of those provisions at domestic level, how the State party ensured effective access to mechanisms and remedies in the event of violations of economic, social and cultural rights and what the role of the judiciary was in effectively protecting those rights. She would like to hear whether the State party considered

its taxation system to be sufficiently redistributive and how gender issues were taken into account in its macroeconomic decisions.

31. **A representative of Iceland** said that the Government took the view that the individual communication procedure was not necessarily the best way to promote economic, social and cultural rights because it was often difficult to pinpoint the time when an infringement of the rights under the Covenant had occurred; domestic remedies might therefore be more effective. Ratification of the Optional Protocol was nonetheless being considered. Even where international conventions were not incorporated into national law in their entirety, they remained highly impactful. Legislation was adopted or amended as necessary before an instrument was ratified. There were no data on the number of cases in which the courts had invoked the Covenant, and legislators and the Government had a margin of appreciation in upholding rights; however, individuals could also raise claims with a number of administrative authorities free of charge.

32. **A representative of Iceland** said that progress on creating a framework on business and human rights was slow, partly because of changes at the ministerial level that had taken place since Iceland had accepted the relevant recommendation during the universal periodic review. A national focal point was working with stakeholders, including State entities and the private sector. Efforts in that area were largely reliant on the guidelines produced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which were being translated into Icelandic.

33. **A representative of Iceland** said that, while the steering committee on human rights was made up entirely of representative of government ministries, it cooperated with other bodies and civil society in preparing reports, including the report to the Committee. The preparation process included posting drafts on a public consultation forum to collect suggestions.

34. **A representative of Iceland** said that combating sexual harassment in the workplace was part of the remit of the Administration of Occupational Safety and Health, which had launched an online campaign to raise awareness among the Icelandic and the immigrant population of what constituted sexual harassment, what behaviours could be problematic in the workplace and how to report cases. The country's first policy on matters affecting immigrant groups, together with an action plan, would be submitted to Parliament in the coming two months. There had been considerable consultation with immigrant communities during its development, and the matter of the vulnerability of immigrant women in particular had been raised.

35. **A representative of Iceland** said that the taxation system in Iceland was progressive insofar as the rate increased with each tax bracket while State benefits decreased. The highest tax rate was 47 per cent of personal income. The Gini coefficient for Iceland was the third lowest in the European Union, meaning that income distribution was relatively equal.

36. Iceland had come a long way in the 15 years since introducing gender budgeting, which was henceforth mandatory at the national level and was provided for in the Public Finance Act. Efforts in that area were framed by a five-year plan on gender budgeting and were overseen by a steering committee composed of representatives of all ministries. Targets and activities relating to gender equality were highlighted in the strategic planning for each expenditure area. Line ministries accounted for the gender impact of their budget proposals, while the overall gender impact of the annual budget was assessed and the results published in the Budget Bill. All ministers discussed the progress achieved on their respective targets and activities in their annual report.

37. The actions were having a definite, if difficult to measure, impact, even in some highly male-dominated industries where progress had initially not been straightforward, and there were clear indications of greater gender awareness in the administration.

38. **A representative of Iceland** said that the lack of data regarding immigrants in Iceland had been identified as a problem during the drafting of a new policy on migration and refugee issues and in an in-depth review conducted with OECD. The new national action plan on migration issues would contain measures aimed at ensuring that information on nationality

and immigration status was recorded and published on the Statistics Iceland website and its accessibility ensured.

39. **A representative of Iceland** said that the recent sharp increase in immigration was the reason behind the lack of data on migrants. Over the previous decade, Iceland had witnessed the greatest relative increase in migrant population of any of the OECD member States, of almost 15 per cent in seven years. However, while it was true that population growth had put pressure on social welfare systems, the employment rate and labour force participation rate among immigrants in Iceland were the highest in those States. Further data collection would allow the Government to adapt its approach to the new reality.

40. **Mr. Windfuhr** said that he would like to hear about steps taken by the State party to address barriers to advancement in the labour market resulting from a lack of language proficiency among many immigrants. He would welcome updated data on the disproportionate number of complaints concerning wages and labour rights violations lodged on behalf of foreign workers, especially in the hotel, restaurant, tourism and construction industries, as well as information on measures taken to address the different problems arising in those sectors. He wished to know how the State party planned to reduce unemployment among people belonging to ethnic minorities, immigrants and people with immigrant backgrounds and improve language proficiency among children of workers with immigrant backgrounds through the national education system.

41. Information on plans to help people aged over 50 years to re-enter, and enjoy equal access to, the labour market would be appreciated. The delegation might wish to provide information on the incorporation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities into domestic law, on the effectiveness of existing legislation on the rights of persons with disabilities and on the status of the national plan of action to advance the implementation of that Convention, including how it would drive structural change.

42. He wished to know whether minimum wage agreements covered all workers, including those who did not belong to trade unions. It would be interesting to hear why the gender pay gap persisted despite the enactment of legislation to combat pay discrimination and the introduction of an equal pay certification scheme.

43. The Committee had received reports that migrant workers in the construction, tourism and catering sectors had been subjected to labour exploitation. In addition, it appeared that, under Icelandic legislation, foreign citizens holding temporary work permits did not have the right to unemployment benefits and that work permits were valid only if the holder was employed by the employer specified, leaving some workers reluctant to seek assistance or leave exploitative situations. It would be helpful if the delegation could comment on those allegations and explain how the State party planned to address the situation.

44. He would like to know whether the State party planned to take further steps to prevent, detect and combat trafficking in persons for the purpose of labour exploitation and to punish wage dumping and failure to pay victims of trafficking for their labour. He wondered whether there were plans to amend legislation and relevant instruments, such as the national action plan on combating trafficking in human beings and other forms of exploitation, to lower the burden of proof in cases of trafficking in persons. Was it true that the manner in which work and residence permits were issued made it difficult for victims of trafficking to lodge complaints?

45. The Committee had learned that members of certain trade unions were prioritized in some recruitment and termination processes, which infringed the right not to join trade unions, and that 60 per cent of cases of workers' rights violations processed in 2023 had involved foreign employees. It would be useful to know whether, when and how the State party planned to address those issues.

46. The Committee had received reports that the assistance provided through the social benefits system did not meet the needs of the most vulnerable people, including persons with disabilities and those at risk of poverty, and the old age pension had not kept pace with the rising cost of living. He would be grateful to learn how the State party sought to tackle those problems. Lastly, he would appreciate an update on any plans in place to ensure that people

who had not lived in the country for a total of 40 years between the ages of 16 and 67 years could enjoy entitlement to a full retirement pension.

47. **A representative of Iceland** said that language training had been incorporated into labour market programmes, as many immigrants had reported that lack of language proficiency was a significant barrier to securing employment. To address the skills gap among immigrants, steps were being taken to simplify the foreign qualification recognition process and tackle the backlog, including through the launch of a platform to facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications.

48. Several changes had been made to the rules governing the right to work among foreign nationals in line with recommendations issued by a working group appointed by the Prime Minister. In general, all foreign nationals wishing to work in Iceland required a work permit and a residence permit. However, some groups had been exempted from the requirement to hold a work permit: they included immigrants from the European Economic Area, who constituted 80 per cent of the immigrant population, as well as foreign nationals granted residence permits on the grounds of marriage, cohabitation, international protection, humanitarian considerations or special ties to Iceland. Individuals working for companies with branches in Iceland could be granted residence and work permits enabling them to transfer to Iceland on the grounds that they had special expertise. The upper age for the issuance of temporary permits for young workers in the scope of reciprocal bilateral agreements had been raised from 26 to 31 years where permitted by those agreements. The maximum full-time hours that foreign students could work had been increased from 40 to 60 per cent of the standard and they had been granted the right to stay in the country for three years after graduation while seeking work.

49. In April 2023, a list of skilled occupations with worker shortages had been published to allow the Directorate of Labour to issue temporary work permits to foreign nationals with the relevant skills. The validity of skilled worker permits had been extended from two to four years and that of temporary work permits for athletes from one to two years, and the period for which temporary work permits could be extended in response to shortages in qualified employees had been increased from one to two years. Spouses and cohabiting partners of foreign nationals who had been issued skilled worker permits and had dependent children aged under 18 years were exempt from the requirement to hold a work permit. The Government had removed the requirement for foreign nationals holding skilled worker permits to leave Iceland for a continuous period of two years on expiry of their permit before they could be granted a new permit.

50. There was a shortage of teachers of Icelandic as a second language. In February 2024, the Government had announced a series of measures to support migrants, including by allocating additional funding for language learning and offering increased support to shift workers and persons without access to reimbursements for language classes through trade unions.

51. **A representative of Iceland** said that the language barrier was compounded by the fact that most Icelanders spoke English and by the difficulty of the Icelandic language, the lack of funding available for language learning and the teacher shortage. Nonetheless, the ability of the Icelandic labour market to adapt to new circumstances had been demonstrated on several occasions. It was hoped that immigrants would join trade unions and pension funds.

52. **A representative of Iceland** said that, in May 2024, the Minister of Education and Children, the Mayor of Reykjavik and the Director General of the Education and School Services had signed an agreement to develop a project entitled “Education, Reception and Culture”. Its aim was to promote the inclusion and active participation of children with diverse language and cultural backgrounds in Icelandic society, including by establishing procedures for supporting children of foreign origin through preschool, school and leisure activities and by providing educators with study materials and assistance in addressing complex situations. The Ministry of Education and Children had allocated grants to fund projects at preschools, schools and after-school clubs focusing on children of foreign origin and to projects implemented by Icelandic non-governmental organizations targeting children in vulnerable situations, including children with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

53. A steering group appointed by the Minister of Justice was responsible for implementing the national action plan on combating trafficking in human beings and other forms of exploitation. A new national action plan was currently being developed by a dedicated working group. Public funding for measures to tackle trafficking in persons and to support victims was agreed on an annual basis and included budgets allocated to the police, public prosecutors, the courts, social services and the Directorate of Labour for that purpose. In 2022, a working group on trafficking in persons had been established within the Nordic Council of Ministers. The working group met twice a year and was composed of national coordinators from all the Nordic countries. In 2023, the Icelandic authorities had organized a conference and two training sessions for professionals from the Nordic countries on combating trafficking in persons. A mechanism had been set up to enable police officers to share information and best practices in tackling trafficking in persons.

54. **A representative of Iceland** said that the equal pay certification process had prompted organizations to re-evaluate factors such as gender ratios in different job categories, the number of female managers and gender-based differences in salaries and benefits. Software had been developed to simplify job categorization and pay analysis, making it easier for companies to implement equal pay systems. The gender pay gap persisted despite those efforts because of gender segregation in the labour market and the undervaluation of women's work. The Government was therefore focusing on eliminating gender bias in the valuation of work and had appointed a working group to develop a comprehensive value assessment system with the goal of closing the pay gap.

55. The Government intended to incorporate the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities into domestic law during the autumn 2024 parliamentary session. The first comprehensive action plan on the implementation of that Convention had been developed and was divided into six categories, one of which was employment and education. The Directorate of Labour was responsible for the 11 areas of action in that category, including one relating to the provision of assisted work for persons with disabilities.

56. **A representative of Iceland** said that, following consultation with the social partners, the Government had decided not to incorporate Directive (EU) 2022/2041 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on adequate minimum wages in the European Union into domestic legislation, as doing so would significantly decrease minimum wages in the country. The existing collective bargaining system ensured that all workers were assured of a minimum wage regardless of trade union membership. The Directive was controversial in the Nordic countries, where the social partners played an important role in collective bargaining in the labour market and in setting minimum wages. The Wage Guarantee Fund ensured that workers would receive any wages due in the event of their employer's death or bankruptcy. Comprehensive guidance on applying to the Fund was available in Icelandic and English.

57. Each municipality was required to ensure that social security payments covered the minimum cost of living. Amendments had been made to legislation on social security and social assistance to simplify benefit payments for people with a limited capability for work. Older persons who did not have the right to a full pension could now receive an income supplement. Legislation had also been passed to assist employers and employees who had been evacuated from the town of Grindavík due to the ongoing volcanic eruption, such as by guaranteeing the salaries of affected staff and offering support to self-employed individuals.

58. **Mr. Windfuhr** said that he would be grateful if the delegation could explain how Icelandic citizens perceived the dramatic increase in immigration in recent years and how the Government had responded to the resulting challenges, such as the greater variety of language levels among students. He also wondered whether the downward trend in the trade unionization rate seen in other European countries was a matter of concern for the State party.

59. **Ms. Rossi** said that she would like to know how many victims of human trafficking had been recorded in recent years and how many investigations had led to a conviction. Did the State party have a system for collecting data on victims of human trafficking?

60. **A representative of Iceland** said that, while many people had expected the dramatic increase in immigration in Iceland to be difficult for what had previously been such a homogenous society with a relatively stable culture, the atmosphere had remained

remarkably calm. The employment rate among immigrants was high and they contributed to highly valuable industries for Iceland, such as construction and tourism.

61. **A representative of Iceland** said that recent surveys conducted by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour had found that Icelanders' perception of immigrants was largely positive, despite a rise in xenophobic views in public debate. Following the OECD review on immigration in Iceland, the Government planned to address low language proficiency to reduce discrimination against immigrants and promote a more inclusive society. Although public debate had often focused on individuals seeking international protection, only 2 per cent of the Icelandic population had refugee status. The Government would continue to monitor the views of Icelanders on immigration and planned to conduct a survey to understand immigrants' perception of their interactions with Icelanders.

62. In view of the fact that 9 out of every 10 people in the labour market in Iceland were members of trade unions, the possibility of seeing a significant decrease in trade union membership was not a major concern at present, although the situation would be monitored.

63. **A representative of Iceland** said that, over the period 2015–2021, 36 confirmed cases and 90 suspected cases of human trafficking had been recorded by the Icelandic police. More detailed data on victims of human trafficking would be submitted in writing. While people generally viewed the increase in diversity in school classrooms positively, changes would need to be made to the school system to guarantee inclusive education for all.

64. **A representative of Iceland** said that a steering group had been established to address the issue of human trafficking. The ability to detect and respond effectively to cases of human trafficking relied on cooperation between a range of stakeholders, including the Directorate of Immigration, the Directorate of Labour, local law enforcement services, social services and shelters assisting survivors of human trafficking.

65. **Mr. Abdel-Moneim** said that he wished to emphasize the importance of maintaining a distinction between immigrants and asylum-seekers. He wondered whether the description of Iceland as a "previously homogenous society" with a "stable culture" implied that immigrants represented a threat to Icelandic culture.

66. **A representative of Iceland** said that immigrants were not considered a threat to Icelandic culture. On the contrary, the Government's policies were aimed at creating an inclusive society where people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds could live together in harmony. To that end, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour actively sought the views of immigrants and refugees living in Iceland to guide its decision-making.

67. **Ms. Ravenberg** (Country Task Force) said that she would like to know how the Child Protection Act, and any other relevant pieces of legislation, guaranteed the right of children with disabilities not to be subjected to violence or other forms of degrading treatment, including through the implementation of special protective measures. She wondered how that issue was addressed in the national policy, whether the policy had been evaluated and what protective measures had been implemented in cases involving violence against children, in particular children with disabilities.

68. It would be interesting to learn what efforts had been made to implement the housing policy and the five-year action programme mentioned in the State party's replies to the List of Issues. She would welcome information on the eligibility requirements for housing support, particularly in relation to migrants seeking accommodation. She would be curious to know whether the State party had a specific policy on migrants' access to safe, decent and affordable housing, whether there was specific Government funding to meet the housing needs of migrants and whether the average income of migrants had been taken into account with regard to rental prices.

69. She would be grateful if the State party could indicate the reasons for which general Government expenditure on health still fell below the European average. It would be useful to know what measures were being taken to increase the number of qualified medical personnel in order to reduce waiting times for elective surgical procedures. She wondered whether the State party had developed an action plan to eliminate waiting times for preventive health care and whether a policy was in place to strengthen mental health services, particularly for children.

70. The Committee would be interested to know whether the issues of overweight, obesity and suicide were included in preventive health-care programmes, and what measures were being taken to combat the increase in cases of overweight, obesity and suicide. The Committee would also be interested to hear the State party's views regarding the 30-day limitation on asylum-seekers' access to economic and social rights following a final rejection of their application for international protection. In view of the amendment made to the Foreign Nationals Act in March 2023, she wondered how the State party intended to guarantee asylum-seekers' right to the highest possible standard of physical and mental health.

The meeting rose at 5.50 p.m.