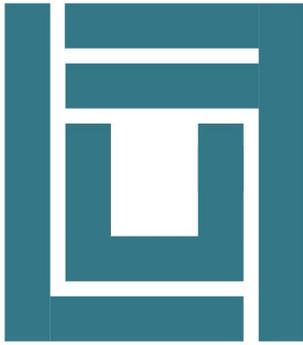


**THE ICELANDIC
YOUTH COUNCIL**

Embracing YOUTH Migration



- A report about the project 'Empowering Young Immigrants' in Iceland
2016-2017



LANDSSAMBAND
UNGMENNAFÉLAGA



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The Icelandic Youth Council (*Landssamband ungmennafélaga - LUF*), formerly *Landssamband æskulýðsfélaga (LÆF)* is the National Youth Council (NYC) of Iceland, founded in 2004 and has 29 member organisations (MOs). LUF's vision is a society where young people enjoy equal rights, are free from discrimination and respected as active democratic citizens where they are included in all policy and decision-making processes. LUF's mission is to be committed and to ensure that the voice of young people is heard - as LUF is the only existing body that serves the role of being a platform of cooperation and consultation for youth-led NGOs in Iceland. LUF advocates for the common interest of youth and we jointly act as a stakeholder for young people in Iceland, including representing them abroad - both as a member of the Nordic Baltic Cooperation and the European Youth Forum.

Projekt Polska (or formally *ProjektPolska.is*) was established in 2012 and is a youth-led non-governmental organisation (YNGO) composed of young Polish people who want to participate actively in social and cultural life of Iceland. The aim is to build a cultural dialogue between Iceland and Poland. The mission of *Projekt Polska* is to introduce and support initiatives to improve the conditions of immigrants in Iceland. The members of *Projekt Polska* believe that building a better future for Iceland also lies in the hands of its migrants and requires their active engagement - learning from each other fosters mutual knowledge that enhances intercultural understanding and facilitates integration. *Projekt Polska* became a member of LUF in 2016 and is the only YNGO led by and for young migrants - ensuring their inclusion and active participation within the structure of LUF.

Preface

This report was written to raise the voices of young immigrants in Iceland, to give an overview of the project to learn from it and give recommendations from icelandic youth to the icelandic government - not only with a hope of being heard, but also with hope that our ideas will be taken seriously, cherished and implemented.

We would like to thank the ministry of welfare for supporting us, the young immigrants that contributed greatly to the project by sharing their opinions, the speakers for enlighten us with their expertise and last but not least the volunteers who participated in the organisation of the project.

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1. Introduction

The collaborative project 'Empowering young Immigrants in Iceland' was led by The Icelandic Youth Council (hereinafter LUF) after receiving a grant from the ministry of welfare. The main goal of the project was to provide young immigrants in Iceland with an unprecedented platform to discuss their societal concerns and find ways to tackle the limitations and challenges that they are facing in Icelandic society. The project took place between the period of 3rd of November 2016 - February 4th 2017 and consisted of one consultation meeting and a youth conference.

2. Background

The prelude of the project can be traced back to the General Assembly of LUF in 2016 where amendment to the statutes was approved, allowing LUF to have observer members that do not fulfill the requirements of a full member - ensuring a more inclusive structure. With this adaption, the application of Projekt Polska as a member of LUF was approved with the applause of the entire assembly. The same year, Matthew Deaves the former Vice President of LUF was the first immigrant to be elected to the Board. This constructive development of the Council was a step forward in ensuring the diverse voices of young people living in Iceland.

Considering that immigrants are now 10,6% of the population, the number is rapidly growing (Statistics Iceland, 2017) and that statistics have shown a lack of resources available for young immigrants; resulting in more drop-outs of secondary education than their native peers (Multicultural and Information Centre, 2012). Thus, young people are less likely to vote (Statistics Iceland, 2016; LUF & SÍF, 2016) and young migrants even less (LNU, 2017), the new elected board of LUF that served the mandate 2015-2016 decided to make the affairs of young migrant as one of the main emphasis in their work plan.

The work was led by Ásta Lovísa Arnórsdóttir the former Equal Rights Officer of LUF and the first act of the board was to establish an Equal Rights Committee and to recruit more young volunteers that were interested in working on the topic. The second effort was to submit comments on the proposal for parliamentary resolution about the implementation plan in the affairs of immigration to Althingi.¹ LUF supported the proposal in order to ensure equal rights of the citizens of Iceland, regardless of their personal characteristics, backgrounds and circumstances with five main pillars stated in the plan. However, LUF raised a concern about the section on youth work in particular, where the goal is to increase the participation of children and youth, but the desired result only concerned children. Furthermore, LUF

¹ See: <https://www.althingi.is/alttext/erindi/145/145-1778.pdf>.

highlighted the importance of respecting the different needs of children and youth as well as calling attention to the fact that young migrants above the age of 18 are a marginalised group that do not enjoy the legal protection of the Convention of the Right of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and should therefore be given more care and attention. As they certainly are taxpayers and voters and contribute to society in many different ways, young migrants should be empowered in order to enjoy their rights to the fullest.

As a result of the LUF submission of comments on the proposal, LUF was invited to a meeting of the General and Education Committee of Althingi to further discuss the submission. LUF's suggestion was well received and taken into account by the Committee and eventually, LUF's amendment on the desired result was approved that now also concerns youth, not children only. The resolution (nr. 1692/2015-2016) was adopted by Althingi September 20th 2016.

LUF also submitted an application to the development fund for immigration issues of the ministry of welfare and received the grant to implement the project 'Empowering Young Immigrants in Iceland'. After that announcement, LUF created an action plan and started the preparation in a close cooperation with its most relevant member organisations; Projekt Polska, the Equal Rights Youth Association and the Upper Secondary School Student Union (SÍF) as well as The National Union for Icelandic Students (LÍS). The collaborators decided to organise a consultation meeting in order to develop the idea in more detail in a cooperation with a diverse group of young migrants living in Iceland.

3. Consultation

The meeting 'Rights of Young Immigrants in Iceland: 1st Consultation Meeting, What Next?' was held on the 3rd of November 2016 in the main office of the National Agency for Erasmus+ Youth Programme in Iceland. Around 30 young migrants participated at the meeting that consisted of ten nationalities (Iceland, Brazil, Macedonia, Albania, Georgia, Germany, Serbia, Croatia, Poland and England) with diverse backgrounds; asylum seekers, exchange students, workers, job seekers and some of them had been living in Iceland for years e.g. after following a family member that had settled some time before.

The goal of the meeting was to develop the project based on the consultation of young immigrants of different nationalities. The objectives were to create a platform for young migrants to gather informally and collect information, opinions, concerns, questions and conditions concerning their rights. In a form of a workshop, using the structures dialogue and conclusion method, the participants made attempts to come up with ideas for solutions of the main hindrances and challenges of being a young

migrant in Iceland. In each focus group was one secretary that documented the discussions with the permission of the participants and a promise of anonymity.

A standard discourse analysis was conducted where 3 problematic and interlinked themes were identified, prioritized and summarised: The participants reported most often about **(1) language barriers** as their main hindrance as a young person living in Iceland and as the main challenge when it comes to integration. The term 'language discrimination' was used and one participant reported 'when you don't get to know icelandic it is hard to communicate with natives' - to give examples. **(2) Lack of information** came second and is, of course, very related to theme number two. One participant mentioned that for newcomers would be helpful to get information about how the bus system works as well as where it is most reasonable to buy groceries. It seems to be common that the informational source for newcomers are often migrants themselves via social media groups and the information received is often not very reliable. The participants discussed the lack of 'basic' information about e.g. health services, the labour market and information concerning legal status, residence and work permits which falls under the code family of the third most discussed and mentioned theme: **(3) Legal problems:** 'How to get kennitala' came up several times, legal assistance and access to public offices.

During the structured dialogue it was important to look at the reasons for their motivation to contribute to the project. Some participants attended for social reasons, hoping to connect to locals and some, e.g. asylum seekers hoped for information about their rights rather than providing us with their consultation on how Iceland can improve. They expressed their 'bad conditions at asylum camps' and their frustration with that they are 'not offered to communicate with icelandic people. Just refugees living together. It's all.' The different motives were probably the main challenge of reaching the objective of the meetings, although it certainly gave useful insights.

The participants came up with ideas for solutions that is numbered according the prioritisation: It did not take us by surprise that most of the participants consider **(1) better, affordable and accessible icelandic courses** to be a key solution to the most difficult challenges for them. Thus, the importance of the opportunity to 'practise' was raised, with meetings that serve the purpose or some kind of organised 'conversation groups/classes'. This result is in line with the same demand practitioners in the field that have raised their concerned about lack of policy.² In order to respond to the lack of information the participants agreed upon a concept of **(2) 'all basic information in one place'** that could be a leaflet for newcomers, website and/or welcoming meetings where the culture of the icelandic society is also

² See [article](#) by Vísir about Immigrants calling for more coherent policy on education and training in the Icelandic language (Visir, 2017).

explained/presented. The third solution that answers the legal problems was identified as a amalgamate of legal protection/assistance, advocacy, integration and inclusion: act to connect natives and migrants, can be with meetings, projects in schools in a relation to children and connecting their parents could be a one way of many. But despite all, to meet the need for above, a **(3) strong NGO to defend the rights of immigrants** and give young migrant a voice is crucial.

A summary of the discourse analysis

Problems	Solutions
(1) Language barrier	Better, affordable and accessible Icelandic courses.
(2) Lack of information	All basic information in one place.
(3) Legal problems	A strong NGO to defend the rights of immigrants.

The interest of the participants to further jointly work towards their common issues as young migrants was expressed and a suggestion was made to create a platform in a form of a Facebook group 'Young immigrants in Iceland' for the participants and other interested in working to promote and strengthen the rights of immigrants in Iceland. The purpose of the group is to consult an exchange information, it now has over 200 members involved and the Icelandic Red Cross has been using the platform to share their events and work related to immigration.

A decision was made by the participants to organise a conference as a next step of the project where the main results and the outcomes of the consultation meeting would be used as guiding principles during the preparation and when it comes to the emphasises of the contents.

4. Conference

The culmination of this project was the conference titled 'Embracing YOUTH migration' that took place on the 3rd of February at Árnagarður, University of Iceland. The conference was organised mainly by LUF, LÍS and Projekt Polska among other stakeholders that greatly supported the promotion of it, such as SÍF - to reach out to upper secondary students.

Young immigrants in Iceland as a group, lack a strong stakeholder and opportunities to be involved in policy and decision making processes. In order to empower, integrate and unite young immigrants in Iceland, the parties involved called for a dialogue with this conference - a platform for young immigrants to raise their opinions and learn from each other to map out their realities, define the challenges and act. The purpose was to gather divided groups and strengthen the joint voice of

young people as well as to unite them with members of NGOs, academic experts and representatives from the government. The goal was to make an attempt to empower and unite young immigrants in Iceland with different nationalities with hope to contribute to integration, strengthen their voice and encourage cooperation towards common goals.

The conference aimed to answer questions such as: What are the main societal concerns of young immigrants in Iceland and what kind of challenges and limitations are they facing? How can young people in Iceland work together to improve the situation of young immigrants in Iceland, encourage more active participation and ensure their full inclusion in society? The themes of the lectures were social and structural conditions concerning the rights of young immigrants in Iceland: recent studies on the social conditions of youth migrants, the structural procedures of the government and personal stories about how it is to be a young immigrant in Icelandic society today.

The chairman of Projekt Polska Tomasz Chrapek was the moderator and made a welcome note followed by a speech made by Ásta Lovísa Arnórsdóttir the former Equal Rights Officer of LUF, addressed on behalf of the Council. She introduced LUF to the conference guests and highlighted the role of youth organisations and the importance of participation in society in a relation to integration and she quoted in the first immigrant to be elected to the board of LUF: 'my mum always stressed the importance of having a skill or a hobby so that wherever you went in the world you could make friends, I don't think she thought my hobby would be politics or that place would be Iceland, but there you are. When I moved to Iceland, firstly as a student, I got involved in "Ungir Jafnaðarmenn" [Social Democratic Youth - the youth branch of the Social Democratic Alliance of Iceland] and immediately found a great group of friends. NGO's or sports group or something similar is a great way of making friends, it's a pre-existing friend network which actively wants new members and wants new people to be welcome. From this, I found, integration followed. That would be my single piece of advice for new immigrants. I think integration is important, it benefits the individual and it benefits the community.' - Matthew Deaves, the former Vice President of LUF.

Among the speakers was Þórhildur Ósk Hagalín the External Relations Officer of The Icelandic Directorate of Immigration. She gave the conference guests an insight into the role and tasks of the Directorate, e.g. implementation of the government's immigration policy and the processing of applications regarding residence permit, Icelandic citizenship and international protection.

Juan Camilo Roman Estrada, a Specialist in Immigration at the Human Rights Office of Reykjavík gave a lecture on 'Plural identities and the difference between

assimilation and integration'. He explained the nature of identity and how each person in reality manifests multiple identities that change according to the cultural context in which he or she finds him/herself. Juan emphasised the transformation of identities that immigrants experience when changing social environments. He pointed out that the harmonious integration of multiple identities depends in great measure on the attitudes towards immigration by the host society. He gave an insight to the two main approaches that have been predominant in Western countries. Assimilation is the one approach that is based 'when foreigners come to live in a new society they must try to adopt as much as possible the behaviors and cultural features of the predominant group and avoid all that does not fit into such frame.' The other approach is integration, seeing that 'cultural diversity enriches society and is therefore looking for ways of increasing dialogue and sharing of ideas, interests and ways of life.'

Jovana Pavlović, Political Science Student at the University of Iceland talked about 'Immigrants: Differences and Similarities' and described herself being stuck between two cultures. She explained the process of integration from the perspective of anthropology, different state policies and law frameworks that do not reflect the reality. Jovana talked about the importance to acknowledge that the term 'immigration' or 'migrant' has a different meaning in different societies. The definition tends to be broad and problematic because we need to take into account how the 'immigrant' understands 'immigration'.

Sema Erla Serdar, a Project Manager at the Icelandic Youth Forum discussed 'The Multicultural Society of Iceland: Forms of Prejudice and Hate Speech'. She highlighted the fact that societies all around the world are constantly developing and changing in origin (e.g. languages, culture and religion) due to migration. Considering that in 2015 at least 244 million people lived outside their country of origin and there is nothing that indicates that migration might slow down. It might instead increase due to wars, conflicts and global warming. Because of migration, most societies have developed into multicultural society where diversity must be embraced. Because of this, Sema underlined the importance of focusing on what unites us instead of what divides us, saying that 'there should be no room for discrimination, xenophobia, fear or hate.' She asked 'But is that the reality in Iceland in 2017?' and followed with examples of the opposite, with her personal experience. Sema truly shed a light on the importance of the conference.

Dr. Ahn-Dao Tran, researcher at The Educational Research Institute of the University of Iceland gave a presentation about her research 'Youth of immigrant background strength and vulnerabilities in the Icelandic school system'. She discussed the resources youth of immigrant background brings with them to navigate and progress in the educational system in Iceland. She pointed out that research

findings have shown 'that students, despite their warm feeling towards their teachers and their belief that their teachers were trying to do their best, understood that they were perceived to be deficient due to their lack of Icelandic language proficiency.' That is in line with the results of the consultation meeting about 'language discrimination'. Ahn-Dao explained that this 'limited perception of schools overlooked the students' academic and heritage resources that could have advantaged them in the learning process and contributed to their motivation and attainment'.

To continue with the Icelandic school system, Gunnhildur Gunnarsdóttir, The Secretary of WOMEN in Iceland talked about 'Paths towards higher education for young immigrants'. She was born in Iceland and is a second-generation immigrant. She talked about school dropouts and showed statistics on school enrollment of foreign students in Iceland. Gunnhildur encouraged young immigrants to use the opportunity to get a higher education in Iceland and discussed ways to motivate them.

Last but not least, Fida Abu Libdeh, Entrepreneur and the CEO of geoSilica Iceland was the last speaker and gave a motivational speech, using her personal experience in the Icelandic school system and her accomplishments to answer the question 'Does equality lead to success?'. Fida arrived in Iceland in 1995 with limited access to information of the Icelandic system. With her perseverance and determination to do better, she became one of the inspiring entrepreneurs in Iceland with recognition such as the VF-Person of the Year 2014 and Ingenious and Innovative Achievements 2015 given by the European Union Women Inventors & Innovators Network. Fida discussed why it is difficult to finish college in Iceland and what support is needed for true equality. She explained what one can accomplish with the required support that eventually will be beneficial for society as a whole.

The lectures were followed by a panel discussion where the participants could ask questions and contribute to the debates. The conclusion was that it was evident that this kind of platform is needed and the desired continuation of the project was expressed and recommended.

5. Continuation

Initially, a workshop was supposed to be followed by the conference with the aim to explore the need and/or the will to establish an association for young immigrants in Iceland. One that meets the requirements of becoming a member of LUF, to ensure their inclusion and visibility - but most importantly to guarantee that their voice will continue to be heard. That was aimed before Projekt Polska became a member of LUF. However, Projekt Polska constitutes mostly of young Polish people and although the organisation focuses on building a dialogue between Iceland and

Poland, it also emphasizes to improve the conditions of immigrants in Iceland. Therefore, other nationalities are not excluded from participating in their work.

Nevertheless, immigrants tend to congregate with people who share similarities cultural values, religion, language etc. and form social/cultural/interest clubs, associations and NGOs. According to the Multicultural and Information Centre (n.d.), immigrants in Iceland have 36 such NGOs and the majority of them are established on the basis of nationality³.

In order to consolidate and amplify voices of immigrants in the public debate, there is a need to establish a national umbrella for NGOs working in the field of immigration in Iceland to unite all the various existed structures of different nationalities. The umbrella would include as many member organisations as possible to cover all the different NGOs and nationalities. The kickstarting event will be organised by The Multicultural Council of Reykjavik City and is scheduled for spring 2018. The objectives of the establishment would be to:

- Represent and defend rights of migrants in all aspects of public life in Iceland;
- Create a platform for the member organisations to collaborate and communicate with each other;
- Relay immigrants' problems, needs and their point of view on the variety of issues to the authorities, media and the public;
- Have a body for immigrants to turn to when seeking help or assistance when in Iceland;
- Have a real influence on the issues concerning immigrants like: schooling, housing, and the rest of services provided by the local authorities;
- Be able to interact and make comments on any law change (both on municipal and national level) concerning immigrants;
- Serve as a consultative body for authorities and institutions;
- Take part in organising events promoting diversity on local and national level.

Instead of following the initial aims of this project, we made adjustments according to the current grass-root developments in the immigration field of Iceland. We decided to follow the lead of The Multicultural Council and support their ongoing work - hoping that youth NGOs, such as Projekt Polska will become a members of the umbrella that can cooperate with LUF in the field of youth migration in the future. Since several member organisations of LUF focus largely on fostering multiculturalism and integration, such as Projekt Polska, SÍF, AFS, AIESEC, Changemakers, Icelandic Red Cross Youth (URKÍ), Nordic Youth Council (UNF), JCI, AUS (International Youth Exchange), SEEDS and UNICEF's Youth Council - the cooperation can be fruitful.

³ See further: <http://www.mcc.is/english/multiculturalism/immigrants-ngos-in-iceland/>.

To give an example, SÍF received the ‘Seeds for integration’⁴ grant from its umbrella NGO, Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU) that among other things, provides funding to secondary school students who care about building an inclusive school environment or national education system for all. The project consists of short videos where students with backgrounds talk about their experiences of living in Iceland, educationally and socially. The main objective is to raise the voice of students, promote inclusion and pinpoint opportunities for improvement. For this kind of project it is extremely important to work together to succeed and the umbrella could surely work as a key in reaching out to participants with different backgrounds as well as promoting the project.

Moreover, this project can continue to evolve and will, with the establishment of the umbrella, further partnerships between YNGOs in Iceland as well as via international cooperation within the Nordic Baltic Cooperation and the European Youth Forum (YFJ). Most recently LUF has participated in the formation of the ‘Det Nya Norden’ Declaration - introduced to the Nordic Presidents and Royal families by Magdalena Maria an immigrant from Iceland (Hanaholmen, 2017). Also, LUF has a member of the Committee of Representatives of LUF, Ragnheiður Kristín Finnbogadóttir, both as a member of the Migration and Human Rights network of the YFJ as well as a member of the Expert Group on the Agenda 2030 to the Nordic Council of Ministers. The International Officer of LUF, Laufey María Jóhannsdóttir has been elected to the board of the Advisory Council on Youth to the Council of Europe. Therefore, the Icelandic experience of the project ‘empowering young immigrants in Iceland’ can be shared internationally and LUF can bring best practises from abroad to improve our work methods.

6. Recommendations

To evaluate the discussion above, LUF and Projekt Polska suggests the following recommendations for improvement to the government, local authorities, NGOs and other stakeholders:

1. Revise the youth law (nr. 70/2007), policy on youth work (2014) and develop a national youth policy for Iceland with democratic methods and ensured participation of young people that reflects the diversity of Icelandic youth - considering ‘Youth Policy - “The Essentials”’ (Lavchyan, Williamson & Retore, n.d.) and ‘A Toolkit for Quality Standards of Youth Policy’ (Burrowes et al., 2017).

⁴ See further: <https://seedsforintegration.org>.

2. Support youth organisations and acknowledge their value of promoting inclusion. Give the umbrella to be established a consultative role and embrace their perspectives, not only concerning migrants, but on society as whole.
3. Create a website for newcomers that contains all basic information stored in an accessible way and in the languages needed. Including registration in affordable language courses.
4. Change 'The Multicultural Day of Reykjavik' to 'Reykjavik's Diversity Days' that promotes interculturalism via multiple channels like cinema, theatre, university lectures, media and etc.
5. Establish a center for immigrants in Reykjavik, where access to internet and all basic information will be provided together with a common space for cultural dialogue (could be a cafeteria or exhibition space).

7. Conclusion

This report has been written about the work of youth organisations in promoting the rights of young immigrants in Iceland and from the perspective of youth. The Background of the project 'Empowering young immigrants' has been introduced as well as the implementation and the outcome of the main activities: the consultation meeting and the conference. Considering the solutions of the main problems identified by the young people that participated in the project, the recommendations above is the contribution of LUF and Projekt Polska towards a better multicultural society.

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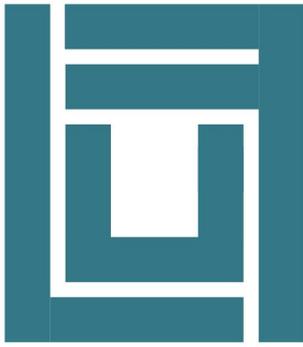
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Æskulýðslög nr. 70/2007.



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