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**“How can you be against children’s rights?”**

Margrét María Sigurðardóttir

July 1st, 2007 was a magical and frightening day for me. I became the third Ombudsman for Children in Iceland. I was humbled by the honor but at the same time I was afraid. This was the job of my dreams but at the same time the responsibility was enormous. I had many doubts in my mind. How do I protect the least protected children in Iceland? How will I do a good job? How do you prepare yourself for a job like that? Today I still cannot answer these questions, but I was determined when I started: I would work hard and at the end of my work as the Ombudsman for Children I would give some tools to my successor to have when they would take over. The Ombudsman for Children in Iceland was established by law number 83/1994 and has been operating since January 1st, 1995. The Ombudsman for Children is appointed for five years and can serve a maximum of ten years in office. I was in office for 10 years and concluded my term on June 30th, 2017.

I would like to start this essay by telling you a bit about my country. Iceland is an island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and is on Mid Atlantic Ridges. It sits on two plates: The North American Plate and the Eurasian Plate. The country's geography and culture are influenced by its highly active volcano system, including active place volcanoes, earthquakes, and geysers. For the year 2019, the country's population consisted of more than 350,000 inhabitants; over 90,000 of those inhabitants are children. Iceland is a constitutional republic with a multi-party system. It is a welfare state with good health care and educational system for all. It is a relatively young nation compared to nations around us in Europe. Until recently, Iceland was isolated with few inhabitants and therefore homogenous. Today, Iceland is becoming more diverse with the increase of immigrants and asylum seekers.

One of the roles of the ombudsman is to be the public spokesperson for all children in Iceland. To reach this goal, as Ombudsman for Children in Iceland, I quickly discovered that it is very important to involve children in our work. Shortly after taking office, I placed emphasis on reaching out to young people and seeking their participation and guidance. It came as a surprise when I started that children had rarely visited the office. Consequently, we systematically undertook to involve young people and educate them about our work. I started to think about strategies. I thought the best and easiest way to reach out to young people would be through places where young people spend time and that are established and administered for children. Because all children in Iceland attend school in an organized setting, our initial efforts concentrated on schools. I found it especially important to build trust between the Ombudsman Office and schools all over the country. Through mutual trust with schools' administrators, teachers, and students, we could start collaborating with them and get our message across to children. All primary schools and kindergartens in Iceland were invited to take part in a project called, "What is it like to be a child in Iceland?" Through this process, we invited participants of the project to nominate members to our newly established Youth Advisory Council, a crucial step in involving children into our work. We learned so much from it all. My colleagues and I sometimes felt as if we were part of a difficult experiment because of the things we learned from this work.

Members of the new Youth Advisory Council were between the ages of 13 and 18. The Council's role was to give the Ombudsman for Children advice and take part in the decision

making of the office. They worked on several different projects relating to children's rights. We would ask for and receive their opinion on legislation, action plans and other things regarding children. We worked toward making the Council more independent so they could make decisions and influence the focus and work of the office. Since the Council's establishment, members have met many different decision- and policy-makers in Iceland, including the former and current President of Iceland, several Ministers and members of parliament. The Council became stronger and more focused and their members more determined to have an impact.

Only one year after I became the Ombudsman for Children, the finance crisis hit Iceland and we became a spotlight all over Europe and even the world. Many sectors experienced cutbacks. The political landscape was very complicated. Mistrust pervaded Icelandic society and demand for transparency was strong. People called for a more democratic society.

In retrospect, this climate was in many ways helpful to our cause of increasing child participation, as children are also members of the society and should have a say in the democratic development of the country like all other groups of people. We used this momentum towards influencing society to make sure children would be involved in decision making processes in Iceland. The Ombudsman was also under the threat to be shut down or merged with another institution. The media attention was very intense, and a lot of paranoia was noticeable in society. I told my staff that our main obligation now was to keep our office running through these difficulties and focus on the future as we remained committed to our work. We were fighting for the existence of the office and for the protection of children's rights.

During the crisis, people were talking about the importance of changing and improving the Constitution. The Icelandic Constitution is from 1944 when Iceland declared independence from Denmark during the Second World War. Denmark was, at that time, occupied by Germans. There was a worldwide crisis and Iceland decided in a hurry to declare independence. There was no time for making a new constitution. Small changes were made like changing King in the Danish Constitution into the President in the Icelandic one. The Government decided to establish a constitutional committee to work on proposed amendments to the Constitution. Nearly all Icelandic people could run for and take part in an election to choose the members of this committee. The only people in society who could not take part were children. UNICEF and the Ombudsman for Children decided, in cooperation with the city of Reykjavik, to sponsor and host our own event involving children.

Our team prepared six educational videos about the Constitution and invited children from all over the country to take part and make proposals to authorities about the Constitution. This effort turned out to be a big success. I was so impressed with how the children talked about the Constitution with such deep understanding. Our team received an international award for this project in 2011 - the National Committee for UNICEF Special Achievement Award. This project has received recognition as an exemplar of how to support and foster children's participation.

The Ombudsman for Children survived the crises despite cutbacks. Office staff and physical size remain small, with only four employees. Many things changed after the crises. The public sector was more aware of their obligations of sharing important information. The

Ombudsman for Children took on this responsibility by attempting to communicate all information we received and ensuring that decision makers knew what was happening.

During my time as Ombudsman for Children, we visited all the primary schools in Iceland, lots of Kindergartens, Secondary schools, after school programs and more. We put high pride in meeting with children all over the country to educate them about their rights. We tried to support children in their roles within schools and other places. Changes in schools had occurred designed to increase democracy in school. As Ombudsman, I tried to assist children in these new roles so they could push the boundaries for democratic changes within schools. We tried to spread the knowledge of the UN Convention of Right of Child, here CRC, as much as we could to all people. The Office of the Ombudsman for Children received many visitors and we visited many places. We invited all newly elected members of parliament to a seminar, with nearly 1/3 of all members of parliament attended the seminars two elections in a row. It was helpful to have politicians with some understanding of children's rights when debating what decisions were taken within the Parliament. We held the seminars as soon as we could after an election to make more of an impact on the politician. We offered several seminars and meetings. The office concentrated on NGOs with the goal of educating their leadership about employing a rights-based approach when arguing about children's rights. We wanted as many people we could to come on board and fight for children's rights.

At the same time, we worked very hard on projects about the CRC. Many different educational materials were prepared about the CRC. We worked very closely with UNICEF and Save the Children. We made posters and brochures and a new webpage and interactive games for children about their rights. These same partners collaborated with the Ombudsman to work diligently on projects regarding 25th anniversary of the CRC. We started working on toolkits to Implement the CRC in cooperation with UNICEF and municipalities for child-friendly cities.

I can hardly express how important I found that children's right should be above party politics. I found it very important that no political party "owned" the CRC. Children's rights go beyond politics and political affiliations. When the CRC was incorporated into Icelandic law, all members of parliament supported the CRC. To more actively involve members of parliament, the Ombudsman for Children established "Child's Rights Champions" in co-operation with UNICEF and Save the Children, where each party from Parliament nominated a member to be a special child rights advocate and sign a child rights manifesto. All parties in parliament nominated one and took part in this advance and signed a manifesto.

The Ombudsman for Children listens to children's voices in different ways. As previously stated, we held presentations about the office and children's rights in schools, youth councils, after-school programs, and elsewhere. We received messages from children through our website – [www.barn.is](http://www.barn.is). We hosted, with the National Broadcasting Service of Iceland, special school elections at the same time as adults were voting in both the presidential elections and elections for parliament. Children were educated about different candidates and then they voted, and they took this very seriously. The results were presented election night. We wanted to train children in a

democracy and offer a deeper understanding of how democracy works. We hoped to encourage young people to focus more on the election. wanted This turned out to be very successful.

We developed different methods to support children's participation. I learned through time that children were the best people to talk about their own rights. When they had been educated and received training, no one was better in helping adults listen. Young people were excellent in peer-to-peer education as well. We managed to collaborate with municipalities to establish a group of young people to educate one another about their rights. In Iceland the municipalities have many different roles when it comes to children's after school activities and schools, as stated before. We collaborated with them and made educational videos about schools, student councils, and more with UNICEF and Save the Children. This was very helpful for children because they needed ways to get information to do their work. The network for children was also important. They could learn from one another. Every other year, the Ombudsman for Children wrote to municipal officials to inquire whether they had established Youth Councils and more and more of them were doing so.

Toward the end of my second term, I established the goal of ensuring that children would take part in choosing the new Ombudsman for Children in Iceland. I was very pleased when that happened. I found it important that the Ombudsman for Children knew and felt that the mandate for this job comes from children. They should be the focus. I assisted the children taking part in this effort and taught them about the work and role of the Ombudsman for Children. I am very pleased to say that legislation on the Ombudsman has changed and now states that the when appointing an ombudsman, the opinion of the Children's Youth Advisory Council shall be examined.

In the beginning of 2013, the CRC was incorporated into Icelandic law. It was a dream on which we had been working so hard. With this we were hoping that the CRC would become well known. In Iceland, a research center, The Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analysis (ICSRA), sends questionnaires' about how children are doing in school and much more. I persuaded this center to ask if children knew about the CRC. The center's results indicated more and more children know about the CRC and their rights, of which I am very proud.

Even considering the progress made over ten years, as Ombudsman for Children, I remained highly concerned about a variety of issues affecting young people and their rights. Mental health of young people continued to be an important issue, such as behavioral problems or drug problems. For many young people, the situation was very serious and in some cases life threatening. I was very pleased when young people stood up in 2016 and protested how little money and empathy have been placed on mental health. In response, a group of young people, made a campaign about the issue online and in the media.

The last year I was in office I put lot of focus on what I would have liked to have when I started as the Ombudsman in 2007. I decided to make materials for future the Ombudsman for Children that included a report about the main concerns of the Ombudsman for Children when I finished my term. I wanted to put my effort into assisting the new Ombudsman with tools that I thought would benefit the new Ombudsman and make the work better and take it further. I hosted a seminar about the past, present, and future of the Ombudsman for Children, where the candidates

applying for this important role could come and learn about the office. I discussed the current projects and current challenges of the office, and the children from the Advisory Council presented their views on the future of the office. I talked about the present and children about the future and the first ombudsman about the past. I am very pleased that there have been more improvements since my term ended. For instance, every other year, a children assembly is held with children from all over Iceland and the Ombudsman for Children has more funding, which is very important.

I am very excited to see what the future holds for children's rights. I find it fascinating what influence Optional Protocol 3 will have on children's access to justice. The Committee on the Right of the child has made three Optional Protocols and the Icelandic Government has ratified the first two but not the third. This third protocol gives children the possibility to complain to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child if a State does not secure their rights. As children's rights become increasingly respected and validated in society, demands for complaint mechanisms will strengthen. I believe that we cannot picture how this will develop over the next decades or so. For me, this is very exciting. As Ombudsman, I tried to do my part in ensuring children's access to justice through seeking establishment of complaint committees and mechanisms on whether they would accept claims from children. The answers were very diverse. Some would not take a complaint from a child; some were open to it and a few said they would take the complaint further like the Althing Ombudsman (parliamentary ombudsman). This is an area of rights that is still in development, but in my opinion, this will change, and children will demand changes so they can take their cases further by themselves. In the last months we have watched Greta Thunberg demand changes that will impact the whole world. I believe we will see much more of that in the future. Children want to be a part of the society and active members of it.

In my 10 years as the Ombudsman for Children in Iceland I have learned to be prepared and do my homework. I found that involvement of children was crucial to our work. Great changes happened in all areas of life, but you can really feel the shift when it comes to the attitudes towards children's rights – it is now difficult to be against children's rights. "How can you be against children's rights?" is a sentence that I often used, and one that colleagues abroad quote when arguing in their home countries about children's rights. The discussions here are in favor of children's rights. Politician as a rule talk in favor of children's rights.

As I look back, I feel like our work was somehow guided and our progress was big. I cannot thank enough all the great people, children, and adults who entered our lives and helped us to push the work forward. They were guiding lights that came at the right time with new information, ideas, and more. The staff of the Ombudsman's office were so inspiring and pushed us forward when I was starting to settle. I was pleased to pass on the torch when my term was over. I feel very blessed and grateful for this opportunity, but it is important that there is renewal in this work.