

Three of the biggest Icelandic banks, which had been privatized in the late 1990s and early 2000s, collapsed and were taken into public ownership. An economic collapse was a fact and the former Prime Minister Geir H. Haarde asked God to bless the Icelandic nation at a press conference in October 2008. Certainly, the crisis (kreppa) was not a nightmare we would wake up from, but a reality that had to be dealt with. The next step was when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was called in to organize a crisis management program. Then the currency collapsed. The unemployment rate has since been on the increase; from 1.5% in September 2008 to 8.7% in May 2009 with others taking wage cuts and/or cuts in working hours.

Although the everyday life of the Icelandic general public was in some way perceivably paralyzed in the fall 2008, people began to revive themselves. It was at this time that “The Kitchenware Revolution” was conceived in Iceland. The general public started a massive protest against the government. Icelanders, who have no great tradition of political resistance, rallied in the streets with their pots and pans. In front of Althingi (the national Parliament) people knocked upon their household utensils. January 2009 witnessed masses of people who gathered everyday, aiming to disturb the operations of the parliament, demanding that the government resign. For the first time since 1949, when Iceland’s entry into NATO was objected to, the police used tear gas to keep protesters back from the Althingi. Icelandic society was experiencing formerly unknown turbulence.

The Kitchenware Revolution won its first victory on the 23rd of January 2009, as the government resigned. New elections were called for and took place on the 25th of April 2009. The new government elected confronted the great task of “saving” Iceland from bankruptcy without jeopardizing its rather strong welfare system. For that to be possible it is obvious that the prosperous population of Iceland has to adjust to a new way of living. During these times of kreppa and turbulence both the national government and the municipalities have been facing huge decline in their annual budgets and the undertaking of cutbacks in services has been the biggest task ever since.

It was, and still is, a huge project to restructure the welfare system during these times of great cuts in national budgets. During such difficult times a book like [‘Human rights in crisis: Economic and social rights during an economic crisis’](#) is greatly appreciated. Not only

is it the first research conducted after the economic collapse focusing on human rights issues; it also provides valuable guidelines for those working in the public sector and raises the issue of the importance of awareness of human rights in it.

By outlining some of the main issues of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights, the authors provide valuable guidelines on how the national and the local governments can avoid infringing the human rights of the citizens when cutting down expenses. As the authors Aðalheiður Ámundadóttir and Dr. Rachael Lorna Johnstone point out, it is more important than ever to appraise human rights during financial decline.

The main aim of the book is twofold; firstly to serve as a guide for Icelandic politicians, officialdom and the general public on economic, social and cultural human rights during times of economic crisis, as it outlines what these rights are and how they can be secured and accomplished through laws and policy making. Secondly, to increase the nation's general knowledge in the field of economic, social and cultural rights. As the authors of the book recognize clearly, it is during times of kreppa that the task of protecting human rights may very well be more important than ever. A primary reason is that during such difficult times the economic situation tends to overshadow every other aspect of society, and the commonly heard phrase "it is not the right time to focus on this now" tends to distract people from other pressing issues and important accomplishments such as first and foremost protecting the actual human rights of the citizens.

Although Iceland has been a country of prosperity, human rights issues can be argued to have rather been in the shadow of public discourse on citizen's wellbeing. The focus has been on the 'welfare' of the citizens, which of course is deeply related to human rights, but does not coincide with it. Indeed, the book casts light on how one of the main issues of past Icelandic governments has been to protect the general public's welfare, sometimes in conflict with human rights considerations. The book's body is built around the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights and Ámundadóttir and Johnstone argue convincingly why they choose to build on this specific covenant rather than the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights.

The aim of the book to increase knowledge and educate about the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights and human rights issues in general is well conceived. The book starts with very informative chapters on the Covenant; its genesis and its role within the nation states and the work of its UN committee. Iceland's legal obligations are also extensively discussed, since the covenant has been long ratified. Also, there is a chapter that outlines the essence and intentions of the commitments undertaken by the member states.

Since the book is designed for people working in the public sector with very diverse backgrounds and knowledge of the existing laws, these chapters are very enlightening and essential for further understanding the foundations of the covenant and, no less importantly, how it can be applied to policy and planning during times of restructuring and retrenchments in public services. The authors manage to explain the ideology of and the key-concepts pertaining to economic, social and cultural human rights clearly and in a helpful way, also for persons with no legal background. The reader obtains a good overview of the central tenets of the covenant and is likely to be better informed on how retrenchment has to be considered with regard to protecting human rights during economic decline. Good examples of these are the clear explanation of 'progressive realization of rights' and 'progressive-regressive measures'.

Chapters engaging with specific issues of the Covenant in the Icelandic perspective follow these first instructive chapters. Ámundadóttir and Johnstone explain their choice of using the examples of employment rights, social rights and rights to education to outline the implementation of the covenant in Iceland before and after the economic crises. It can be argued that they could have taken different examples from the Covenant, or that it would have been helpful to use more than just three specific fields. However, it can also be argued that the authors manage to give a very concrete representation through their choice of specific fields, especially concerning the aim of the book to serve as a guide for national and local government and officialdom.

As stated above, the unemployment rate in Iceland has risen enormously since the fall of 2008. The chapter on the right to employment gives important insights on how governmental policy and regulations impact human rights and what has to be taken into

consideration to keep the commitments under the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights. The authors give examples about certain things that have worked out well despite decline in budgeting; and they very well advise on what has to be taken into improved consideration in respect of the economic, social and cultural rights. The standpoint of the book is very relevant for the public sector and easy to learn from as it is summarized in a very resolute manner and without any preciousness.

A good example is when Ámundadóttir and Johnstone point out how changes in regulations concerning the rights of students to unemployment benefits greatly affect their possibilities to make a living during the summer months, since the Icelandic Student Loan Fund only lends funds to students during a nine-month period each year. Therefore these changes in regulation concerning unemployment benefits leave students that do not have a summer job out of their right to enjoy the benefits of the welfare system. This is just one example on how the authors provide constructive illustrations on the subject matters, which gives the reader an idea of what kind of problems they can expect to approach during cutbacks in the public sector and in what ways they might be solved without violating human rights.

The book is in general written in an approachable language suitable for any reader. My conclusion is that Ámundadóttir and Johnstone reach the aims of their book, which is very enlightening and informative and manages to clear the line between 'welfare' and 'human rights'. But as the authors state in the book, the Icelandic focus on 'welfare' has somehow shrug off the great importance of respecting human rights. The difference between those two concepts has not been clear enough, neither in political nor in public discourse. The book does deepen the understanding of the importance that the people who participate in the decision-making process with regards to economic, social and cultural rights. As well as it underlines the importance that the citizens themselves be aware of their rights.

This book is also an important contribution to human rights education in Iceland, a field which has been neglected by the educational system. Therefore this book is treasured even more for politicians, public officials and the general public. As Ámundadóttir and Johnstone underline correctly, there is great need to increase human rights awareness in Icelandic society, not least during these times of crisis, in order to enable politicians and public officials to make decisions based on enlightened knowledge of human rights, thus avoiding

violations of basic rights of the population. It is also in the interest of the citizens to be more knowledgeable about their human rights, as it helps them to experience themselves as rightful owners rather than receivers of charity and enjoy human rights with dignity.

Today's demand is resting on open, transparent and trustworthy administration; this book can help to direct us toward that path. It has to be distributed widely among officials and politicians in national as well as municipal governments for the benefit of the wellbeing of all Icelandic citizens and in order to minimize the negative effects of the crisis during times of retrenchment.

### **Share this:**

- [Share](#)