

# Redefining Utopia: Lessons from Iceland on Progress and Sustainability

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Last week, I had the privilege of providing a keynote address at [Loyola University Chicago's Center of Digital Ethics & Policy \(CDEP\) Annual Symposium with the theme, \*\*Accessible Intelligence: designing for a more ethical present.\*\*](#) During my address I shared thoughts on a topic that has captivated me lately—utopia. Specifically, those idealized visions of cities rendered by AI. These images are mesmerizing. Gleaming skylines bathed in soft light, neighborhoods brimming with promise, and a serene sense of balance that feels like a long-awaited breath of fresh air. On the other hand, there's our current reality supported by a troubling history. It's heavy, complicated, and for many, deeply unsettling.

I want to be very clear, even before the results of the last election cycle, America was not utopia. There were still deep divides across every quality-of-life indicator, driven by significant disparities in factors like race, gender, socio-economic status, geography, and governance. Research demonstrates how these inequities manifest in starkly unequal outcomes. For instance, disparities in health-related quality of life persist along racial and gender lines, shaping life expectancies, access to care, and overall well-being. Similarly, the intersection of race and gender critically influences the quality of end-of-life care, highlighting systemic inequities in the way our most vulnerable populations experience crucial stages of life. These divides not only reflect troubling dimensions of inequality but also underscore the pressing need for structural change in addressing these pervasive inequities.

Right now, it feels as though we're moving through an emotionally charged storm. Some people are flustered, angry, afraid, and every shade of uncertain. Others are leaning into apathy, pulling back from the fray and sitting the fight out.

And then, there's the surprising camp of those who feel overjoyed with the way the world is unfolding. I consider their joy a clarifying force, though not necessarily in a comforting way. It serves as a bold reveal of who I must protect myself and my loved ones from. But the ones who alarm me most aren't the vocal dissenters or even the joyous disruptors. They're the quiet operatives who speak publicly about equity, inclusion, libraries, culture, justice, and all those values we hold dear, while secretly plotting against everything and everyone they say they uphold.

It's in this paradox that I sometimes wonder if we're simply walking in circles. On the surface, there can be moments that feel like progress, yet as the loop closes, we're left staring again at the same starting point. The cyclical betrayal by systems or movements we trusted is disheartening and exhausting. And when that weight gets too heavy to bear, sometimes escaping to a new environment is the only way to recalibrate. And honestly, I needed it.

After the CDEP Symposium, I went to Iceland to celebrate my birthday. It was just five days, but they left a lasting impression. Despite being surrounded mostly by people who didn't look like me, I felt safe, welcome, and at peace. The calm in Iceland feels deeply entrenched, as though it's interwoven into the fabric of its society.

While Iceland's history is undeniably shaped by its Viking founders—who, true to their reputation, engaged in the often-brutal practices of their time—it is remarkable to see how the country has transformed from those tumultuous beginnings into a place known for its peace, inclusivity, and forward-thinking values.

### **Iceland's Connectivity and Digital Innovation**

What struck me most about Iceland was its remarkable ability to harmonize its breathtaking natural environment with sophisticated digital infrastructure. Iceland has an internet penetration rate of 99%, with fiber-optic infrastructure reaching nearly 93% of households (DataReportal, 2025). This ensures high-speed connections across much of the country, supported by initiatives such as the Icelandic Broadband Fund (*Ísland ljósvaki*) and the Universal Service Obligation (USO), which guarantee that even those in remote rural areas have access to essential telecommunications services (Statista, 2025).

Free public WIFI is accessible in many public institutions, libraries, and government buildings, and some town centers and schools provide free access to internet services to support digital learning. Iceland's ongoing commitment to enhancing digital equity is exemplified by initiatives like [Digital Iceland](#), which works to simplify public services and make them more accessible to all citizens. The OECD emphasizes Iceland's strides in digital equity, noting its commitment to bridging the gaps often found in rural areas and ensuring inclusivity for all (OECD, 2021).

Iceland's policies symbolize a key principle of utopia—not perfection, but deliberate action to ensure connectivity and equity in a way that lifts every part of society.

### **Leadership and the Pursuit of Societal Well-being**

Iceland's success is no accident. It is the result of intentional leadership that values sustainability and equity while fostering public trust. The country ranks consistently as one of the most gender-equal societies in the world, a position underscored by reports from the World Economic Forum (2023). It was also the first country to elect a woman president, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, in 1980, shattering barriers long before much of the rest of the world, including the United States.



Vigdís Finnbogadóttir-First Female President

Vigdís once said, *"If we want to change the world, we must start with ourselves."* Her wisdom resonates deeply as we think of Iceland's leadership in fostering equity, sustainability, and innovative governance. This quote reminds us that collective progress is built on individual responsibility, and Iceland's transformation is a testament to how lives can change when values align with action at every level.

The Icelandic government not only enforces gender equality but has also spearheaded cutting-edge solutions for sustainability. Nearly all of Iceland's electricity comes from renewable resources, with around 73% originating from hydropower and 27% from geothermal energy (Government of Iceland, n.d.). This makes Iceland one of the world's largest producers of green energy per capita. The country's approach not only reduces environmental stress but also ensures energy independence, shielding it from global market fluctuations.

While Iceland is often viewed as a model of progress, it is not without its challenges. Racism, residual gender inequality, and political corruption do arise. However, Iceland's robust public accountability ensures that these issues are confronted directly. Icelanders are quick to demand action when problems come to light, whether it is through grassroots movements or public campaigns for transparency. Their ability to tackle these

systemic flaws head-on is an inspiring example of societal resilience and speaks volumes about their collective commitment to justice and fairness.

This commitment is deeply rooted in Icelandic history, exemplified by figures like Sigríður Tómasdóttir, Iceland's first environmentalist. Sigríður famously walked to Reykjavík to protest the proposed construction of a hydroelectric power plant that would have destroyed Gullfoss waterfall, even threatening to throw herself into the falls to prevent the destruction of this natural wonder. Her protest not only saved Gullfoss but also set the foundations for Iceland's ongoing dedication to protecting its environment and natural heritage.

Play

Gullfoss Waterfall-Golden Circle Iceland

### **Lessons for Utopia**

I don't know what utopia looks like for everyone, but for me, it's more than gleaming cities or perfect aesthetics. It's about safety. It's about the ability to exist without constantly scanning your environment for threats. It's about trust—not just in your neighbors, but in the systems meant to protect rather than betray you. Iceland may not be a flawless utopia, but it's a place America could draw lessons from. Maybe it's their emphasis on peace, their focus on community, or their ability to avoid the polarizing battles that so deeply fracture us. Whatever it is, it's worth studying.

When I think back to those AI-generated utopias, I now realize why they feel so hollow to me. Despite their glossy appearance and their ability to prompt us to reimagine what is possible, they lack the soul of a true society. There is no spark of human connection, no foundation of trust, and no shared sense of purpose that binds people together. These crafted visions may dazzle with their symmetry and perfection, but they forget that utopia is not built on aesthetics alone.

By contrast, Iceland's example demonstrates that while utopia may remain an idealized concept, the deliberate and sustained pursuit of equity, sustainability, and trust-building systems can create a compelling model of progress. Iceland doesn't embody a literal utopia, but it provides a powerful source of inspiration for what is possible when values guide action and collective well-being take precedence.

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