

**Report International Professional  
Exchange Programme (IPEP)  
in Finland 01.05. - 25.05.2025**

**CIF - Council of International Fellowship**

**written by Philip Richartz  
from CIF Germany**

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	- 1 -
2. Programme description with objectives and priorities .....	- 2 -
3. Insights to the Finish society .....	- 4 -
3.1. Welfare System in Finland.....	- 6 -
3.2. Discipline and Profession of Social Work .....	- 8 -
3.3. Agencies – Services/ NGO’s/ Private Sector.....	- 11 -
3.3.1. Clubhouse in Porvoo.....	- 12 -
3.3.2. NGO – Mental Health Work for Men .....	- 13 -
3.3.3. Field of interest – People with disabilities .....	- 13 -
3.3.4. Visit to the Peace Union of Finland.....	- 15 -
3.3. Host Family Life and Leisure Activities .....	- 16 -
4. Experiences and Cognitions.....	- 18 -
5. Conclusions and Future Perspectives .....	- 21 -

## 1. Introduction

The Council of International Fellowship organization is a privately-run, non-profit, politically- and religiously- independent organization.

Its purpose is to promote professional, cross-cultural and educational exchanges for those working in the field of social services. The learning and sharing experience, generated by the exchange, provides opportunities for broadening professional as well as personal development and so contributes to peace and understanding.

The organization works in collaboration with other entities, sharing the same core values and respecting Human Rights, guaranteeing equal treatment to all as agreed upon in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (cf. CIF International Website)

Up until recently, Finland had been an unknown region for me, but my fascination for the country was constantly awakened through research, presented in podcasts and documentaries. Also, Finland is known for their high results in the PISA-Study (Programme for International Student Assessment) in the education of students. Finland is also known worldwide for its Housing First concept, in which homeless people are provided with housing, in some cases without any conditions. The aim of the concept is to combat homelessness in the long term. Finland has made a name for itself in recent years, particularly through the World Happiness Report because Finland has been in first place for the last seven years in a global comparison of people's life situations and happiness. So, what is it that contributes to the happiness of the Finns?

The idea of combining my profession as a social worker with a trip to Finland to help me understand this and how their political system works was particularly motivating for me. I saw the exchange programme as a special opportunity to engage with social-work topics outside of my usual professional routine.

## **2. Programme description with objectives and priorities**

The period of the international professional exchange programme was from 01. May until the 25. May 2025. Six participants from Switzerland, Viet Nam, Spain, Turkey, India and Germany were selected for the international programme. The background of social-work and the fields of interest of the participants was very diverse. A full description of this diversity would go beyond the scope of this report. However, it can be said that most of them had a Master's degree in social sciences and some of them had already had some experience in an international field of work.

After the commitment in December 2024 to be part of the exchange programme, the anticipation was huge. From this point of time, I had five months for the preparation to the start of the programme. The group was regularly informed via mail updates about the planned programme and how to prepare for a longer trip in May to Finland. We also received an overview gallery of the participants. One week before arrival we had a Teams Meeting to clarify final questions.

Like everyone in the group, I arrived on 1. May. The time-zone is CET + 1hrs. We were picked up from the airport in smaller groups and taken by car, by the CIF Finland members, to a place around 40 minutes outside of Helsinki. The building in which we spent the next four days belongs to a former headmaster and is built on the grounds of an educational institution.

The event started with a team-bonding experience in Lohja. This was an ideal setting for getting to know each other and learning about the expectations of the programme. We got an overview about the programme, an introduction to life in the host families and to the history of CIF. It was very impressive to learn, that CIF Finland started their first programme in 1986 and has had more than 240 participants from 50 different countries, since then. All of the participants learnt more about each other from the presentations that everyone was required to give about themselves and about their professions. Some participants brought local food from their countries. The longer weekend was rounded off by a brunch with some of the host families.

Afterwards, the participants were taken to their first host families.

Without going into too much detail, I will now give a short summary of the three weeks. In the next chapter, the agency visits and life in host families will be shown in more detail.



Sea Hormajärvi in Lohja

The programme was designed so that visits to the facilities took place during the week and we had time with our host families at the weekends. The first week started with a sightseeing tour through Helsinki. Over the next few days, we visited the Swedish School of Social Science, where we were introduced to the education system for social workers, the welfare system, and social policy. The rest of the week consisted of field visits to NGOs, integration services, the youth welfare office, the emergency social service, and the social services authority.

In the second week, different field placements in Finland had been organised for all six participants. For some participants, this meant long journeys to northern Finland, to cities like Turku, Porvoo, Tamisaari, Tampere and Oulu.

My focus for the programme was on the work with people with disabilities. I was closely involved with the disability service center in Porvoo. I was able to accompany the two social workers, Susanna and Hanna, from the service unit for three days. We had very enriching and inspiring conversations about the inclusion of people with disabilities in Finland. We visited day-care facilities and looked at housing options for people with disabilities. I visited an open meeting place, founded by the European Union, for people with addiction experiences from the Porvoo region. In this week, the visit of the Club House, a daily communal activities center for people with mental health problems was also on the agenda. In the city Porvoo, I gained

an insight into the facility of a “safe house” for survivors of domestic violence and the psychiatric unit at the HUS hospital.

The third week started with a visit to the disability service. After lunch, we went to Talentia, the Union of Professional Social Workers in Finland. During the week, we had an inspiring visit to the Peace Union of Finland, which included a lecture on peace education. We also attended lectures about the Nordic welfare state and had enriching discussions about the challenges and opportunities facing the welfare state in the future. The week ended with a visit to an inclusive music school for people with disabilities. On the last Friday, we conducted an evaluation at home with a CIF Finland member. The programme ended with a farewell party in the centre of Helsinki. Many CIF members and host families attended the party, which ended with speeches, homemade food and goodbyes.

### **3. Insights to the Finish society**

Finland has a population of 5.6 million people. The capital, Helsinki, is located in the south of the country, close to the Baltic Sea, and has a population of around 686.000 people. Finland has roughly the same land area as Germany, but is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the European Union. Consisting of 17 municipalities, Helsinki is the northernmost capital in the European Union. Approximately 85% of the Finnish population lives in urban areas. In addition, around 40% of the population lives in the southern part of Finland bordering the Baltic Sea. Finland has been part of the European Union since 1995 and has used the Euro as its national currency since 2002. The country has borders with Sweden, Norway and Russia. Finland has been part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since 2023. The official language is Finnish and the second official one is Swedish. Finland is divided into 19 administrative regions.

The political system is a parliamentary republic comprising nine parties. The parliament building is in Helsinki. The government is currently led by a four-party coalition consisting of the National Coalition Party, the Finns Party, the Swedish People's Party and the Christian Democrats. Alexander Stubb is the elected president. The Finnish government is positioned on the conservative right of the political spectrum.



Parliament building in Helsinki

During the programme, we had the opportunity to meet two members of parliament from the Social Democratic Party of Finland. We discussed demographic challenges in the Finnish society, how the current right-wing government parties are handling things, and Finland's relations with Russia. Interestingly, despite being a small country, Finland also as in Germany faces significant challenges in caring for its elderly population in the future. The members reported on the so-called 'salami tactic' of cuts from the government to the social sector. The current government is focussing on a strong anti-immigration rhetoric.

Finland's population-structure can be described as highly homogeneous. Around one tenth of the population has an immigration background. Finns make up the majority of the population, followed by Swedes, who form a significant minority. There are also smaller groups such as the indigenous Sami people who live in northern Lapland. The largest immigrant groups come from the former Soviet Union, Estonia, Sweden and Iraq. At the same time, however, studies have shown that Finland is perceived as one of the most racist countries in the European Union. Contact with other cultures is rare in Finland's vast and sparsely populated country. Whether this encourages racist behavior is a matter of speculation.

On the other hand, Finland is the second most gender-equal country in the world. The Nordic welfare model results in high equality and low poverty. This also means a high level of wellbeing and trust in the state for the Finnish society. In one lecture, the topic was that the income differences of the working society are not extremely different. This also contributes to an equal society. The Finnish tax system is progressive and the tax rate depends on the level of income.

### **3.1. Welfare System in Finland**

The Finnish welfare system is one of the most comprehensive social-security systems in the world. It is based on universal rights to social welfare and health care services for all residents. It is mostly funded through taxes and tax-like payments and through employer and employee contributions. The Finnish social security system constitutes of social insurance benefits, welfare-type services and income transfers, health services and social services.

Many Finnish people told me that they are happy to pay taxes because they know what they get back from the public sector. It was also interesting to see this kind of approach in a society that values hard work. For many people, work is an important factor in life. That is one characteristic of the Nordic welfare model that full employment within the labour market is the most importance. In addition, the health sector is another topic in this discussion. The private health sector plays a crucial role in general medical care. Around ten percent of Finns have private health insurance to get a faster medical appointment.

A huge reform of the organizational structure of the welfare system took place in January 2023. The reform was needed to ensure the equal availability of services, counteract the ageing of Finnish society, and increasing costs in the public sector. Now, there are 23 “wellbeing” counties in Finland. The duties of the “wellbeing” counties include the provision of health, social, and rescue services. The reform was a main topic in many agency and service visits. The funding that the wellbeing service counties receive from the central government is universal. This means that the counties can decide

themselves how to use the funding. During the visit, it was repeatedly reported that responsibilities were not well-defined when assistance needed to be provided across the Wellbeing Counties structures.

The Social Insurance Institution of Finland (KELA) is the public social insurance institution, supervised by the Finnish Parliament. For example, there is the baby box, officially called the maternity package, which is provided by the Finnish welfare system. It was introduced in 1938 as part of Finland's social security system and is provided by the Finnish social insurance institution, KELA. The maternity package contains essential items for newborns, such as clothes, bedding, and hygiene products, and it can also be used as a baby's first bed. Most of the Finns sleep during their first weeks/months in this box.



KELA office building

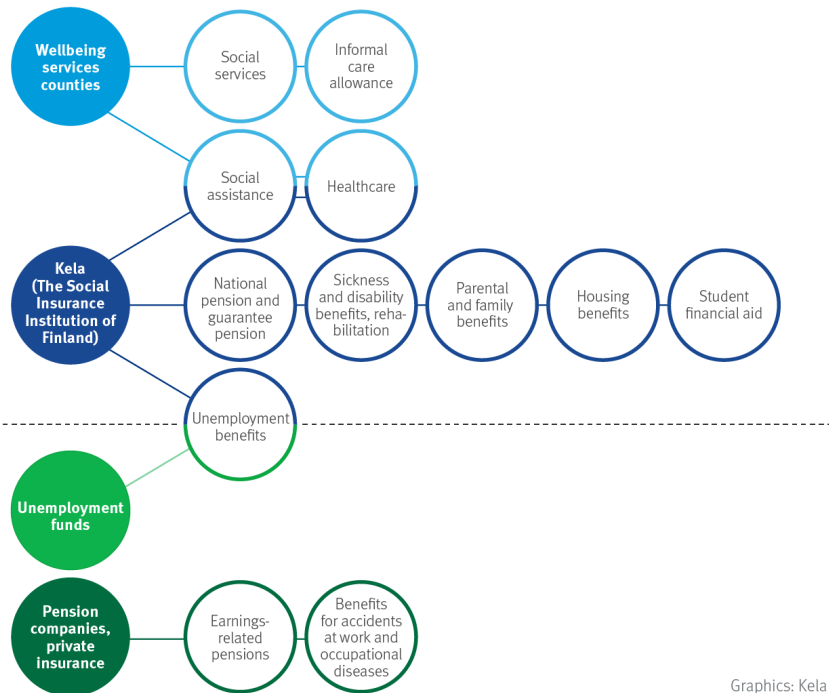
The KELA building in Helsinki, which we visited, was designed by one of the most important Finnish architects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Alvaro Aalto. He was a pioneer of modern architecture and design. His design for buildings was all about functionality. This is the idea that a building should be designed for its purpose and function.

The basic principles are that the right to welfare benefits are universal for Finns, but benefits are only paid for residents. The KELA institutions are located in 23 “wellbeing” counties and are responsible for the basic social security and health insurance sector. The graph shows an overview of how the social security is organized and which benefits are paid by KELA.

## Social security in Finland

○ Based on residence

○ Based on employment



Graphics: Kela

### Overview Social Security Systems in Finland

The KELA Card is a customer ID card given to everyone who is part of Finland's social security system. It is sent automatically to all newborn babies. The card shows that a person has National Health Insurance in Finland. People use it at pharmacies and private health services to immediately get medicine reimbursements. It also works as an ID at health centers and proves that the person has the right to use public health services.

### 3.2. Discipline and Profession of Social Work

In Finland, the general education system provides equal opportunities for everyone. Education at all levels is usually entirely free of charge. The majority of the system is funded by advertising and local authorities. There are also some private educational institutions, but they do not differ greatly from the main system in terms of content. As Finland is officially bilingual, the authorities are required to provide services in Finnish and Swedish. As part of the exchange, we had the opportunity to attend lectures at the Swedish School of Social Work in Helsinki.



Group visit with lectures at the Swedish School of Social Work in Helsinki

During the lecture, we learnt that there are three types of social-welfare professionals in Finland: They are divided into social workers, social counsellors and social care workers. These types differ in terms of their education and daily working tasks. Social care is a vocational training course, for example, for nurses. Social counselling is studied at a university of applied sciences (UAS degree) at bachelor's degree level. It's also possible to study the Master of Social Services. Social workers are the only professionals within the social welfare system required to have a master's-level university education. After completing their education, social workers must apply for an official licence to practise. The Social Work degree programme is offered at six universities in Finland, and includes Bachelor's and Master's studies totaling 300 credits. In comparison, the German education system allows social workers to obtain state recognition either through universities or local authorities. The requirements for state recognition of social workers can vary from one federal state to another. The aim is to provide proof of professional qualifications.

From this point onwards, the focus of the report will shift towards the practical tasks and societal role of social workers, rather than the content of the studies.

As part of the exchange, we visited the Union of Professional Social Workers in Finland, Talentia. The Union has been in existence for more than approximately 70 years and has around 26.000 members (University Master degree and UAS bachelor degree). The membership fee is 1,35 % of the wage and covers, for example legal advisers and services and an unemployment fund for Social Workers. Talentia is nationally involved in lobbying to policy makers and networking. Internationally, Talentia is, for example, part of the International Federation of Social Workers and the Council of International Fellowship.

Due to the high level of education required to work as a social worker, the social recognition is very high. Social workers are employed for activities in which they can make far-reaching decisions, for example about financial payments to compensate for clients' debts. In the discussions, it also became clear, time and time again, that social workers are recognized by society on an equal footing with doctors. A powerful mandate has been created for them in the welfare system. Social work in Finland is currently in a very comfortable position as, with a few exceptions, there is no shortage of skilled labour. During our visit to Talentia, we also discussed how the role of social work will change as a result of demographic change. The Union for Social Workers repeatedly made it clear that there should be no lowering of standards to secure skilled labour. The question also arose, as to what extent social workers from other European countries can have their professional qualifications recognized in Finland. Due to the two-tier training system for professionals, it seemed to be much more difficult to be recognised as a social worker with a Bachelor's or Master's degree from European countries. During the exchange, I met a social worker who had completed her bachelor's degree in social work in Germany. It was not possible for her internationally recognised degree to be recognised as being equivalent to a social worker qualification in Finland.

### **3.3. Agencies – Services/ NGO's/ Private Sector**

In general, social and health policy is regulated by law, with councils responsible for providing comprehensive services to their populations. The social policy system comprises four different types of actors who provide the following services: The public sector provides services based on the law through non-profit organizations. On the other hand, the private sector provides social and health services that are publicly funded and can operate on a profit-oriented basis. Family, friends and relatives also provide practical support at home. Civil society provides voluntary activities that citizens undertake to build the common good. In civil society, citizens organize activities and services for themselves and others on a voluntary basis. Participants determine what they want to do and how. Civil society includes non-governmental organizations and the social services of churches.

The welfare state is a combination of services from the public, private sector and non-governmental organizations. To help to understand social work in Finland, a few individual agencies visits will be described, in the next section.

### **3.3.1. Clubhouse in Porvoo**

As part of the exchange we visited the Clubhouse Porvoo which is a “low-threshold” community for those who have faced mental health challenges during their lives. The goal of the Clubhouse activity is to support members' strengths, their social participation and social relationships. The Clubhouse activities are based on international Clubhouse quality standards and networks. The common dream of all Clubhouses is that each and every member could fulfil themselves within terms of their skills, and that they would be respected as equal citizens, friends, neighbours or students. The aims of Clubhouses for community activity is to support those who are recovering from mental health problems, towards living an independent life and to become “equal” society-members.

The Clubhouse’s activities are structured around a work-oriented day. During the work-oriented day at the Porvoo Clubhouse, you can participate in office, kitchen and administrative work. The work-oriented day commits members and staff together, side by side, to taking care of the Clubhouse’s operations. The Clubhouse focusses on the strengths and abilities of its members. Everyone has the opportunity to participate in the work-oriented day, regardless of their ability. The Clubhouse operates via the work of its members, everyone is needed and even a small task is meaningful to the community. The work-oriented day at the Clubhouse includes internal training activities that utilize the skills and abilities of its members.

My research led me to discover that there are two Clubhouses in southern Germany, a social work approach that is used less frequently. This kind of approach was new to me outside of the clinical view of people with mental-health problems. In the Clubhouse movement, people are not referred to as patients or clients, as this would be stigmatising, but as members. I therefore realize that, compared to psychiatric day centres, this is a more lifeworld-oriented and cost-effective approach. During my visit to Porvoo, individual members reported their positive experiences at this location.

### **3.3.2. NGO – Mental Health Work for Men**

As a group, we visited Miessakit, a Finnish non-governmental organisation (NGO) that supports men in various life situations. The organisation was founded in 1990. It focusses on providing group support and education for men, as well as raising awareness of men's issues in society. It is structured into three main sectors: support and peer activities; training and development; and social advocacy. All staff members are men. This makes it easier for clients to feel understood. Before joining a group, each man has an initial counselling session and assessment. They can then join a group with others who face similar challenges. The organisation's values include a male-specific approach, peer support, protection and the promotion of men's mental and emotional health. There are nine programmes in total. Some focus on violence, fatherhood and alcohol or drug problems. Others help with significant life transitions, such as navigating a midlife crisis. Miessakit also provides online courses and web support. Around 160 volunteers work in 30 cities across Finland. Men can easily reach out to Miessakit independently - no referral is needed. The organisation receives most of its funding from the Finnish government. A smaller amount comes from EU project funding. As half of Finland's population lives in the south, many services are focussed in that region. In order to promote their work, Miessakit collects data and uses the results to demonstrate to the government how helpful their work is.

### **3.3.3. Field of interest – People with disabilities**

During the second week, I was staying in the wonderful smaller city of Porvoo, which has approximately 50.000 inhabitants. Porvoo is located 50 kilometres to the east of Helsinki. It's famous for being the second oldest city in Finland with its historical wooden and storage house in the centre and the river. Another participant, who came from Spain was staying in a host family close to Porvoo. We therefore had the opportunity to undertake joint activities. During the week, I had a busy schedule. In the next section, various institutions and the living conditions of people with disabilities in Finland will be presented.

A map of the European Union shows a higher proportion of people with disabilities in the population compared to Germany. Approximately 35 percent of people in Finland and 28 percent in Germany have a disability. On the one hand, this may be due to how the term 'disability' is interpreted and how data is collected. On the other hand, social and cultural factors, such as the stigmatisation of disability, may also be playing a role. During the second week, I spent three days travelling with a member of staff from the disability service centre in Porvoo. Before my trip, we had already held an online meeting to discuss our interests and plan the itinerary. The focus of the programme provided valuable insight into rural and bilingual social services for people with disabilities.

What is special about the Porvoo region is that the population structure is more strongly influenced by Swedish speakers. This means that services for people with disabilities in the region must be provided in both Finnish and Swedish. Therefore, we first visited a facility that is located in a rural area and is Swedish-speaking. The facility is a place where people with physical and mental disabilities are offered a daily structure. At the same time, there were also various types of accommodation on the premises. The head of social services showed me the farm where the clients took care of the animals. At the same time, I got a glimpse into a residential building where people with severe physical disabilities and autism live. I was surprised by the challenge of running a facility in Swedish. All staff members must speak Swedish, which makes it more difficult for the facility to recruit personnel.

The director reported that there are difficulties with accessibility to the historic buildings. The facility is financed by government funds. Upon inquiry, it was reported that additional financing for construction measures is difficult to acquire. Compared to Germany, there are no foundations or other sources of financing.

In comparison, we also visited Finnish-speaking institutions. In Porvoo, we visited a workshop for people with disabilities that focuses on structuring their daily routine. Individual clients were employed on a daily or weekly basis and supported by professionals in companies in the region. It was interesting to note that the association for people

with disabilities in Finland has campaigned to ensure that the institutions do not carry out work and assignments for companies, as is the case in Germany. The intention was to eliminate economic cost pressures on institutions and strengthen the idea of inclusion in the labour market.

I got the impression that the facilities were slightly better than those of the Swedish-speaking institution. Unfortunately, I was unable to ascertain the reasons for this. Time and again, I heard that people with disabilities are also very much supported by their families within their social circles.

In Porvoo, I saw various types of residential facilities for people with disabilities. While this is not unusual for Finland, it is still special for visitors to see that individual facilities have barrier-free saunas. These facilities are often located in rural areas. Mobility is crucial for people with disabilities in this system. Susanna from the centre showed me their department that coordinates taxis and buses. People with disabilities are therefore entitled to certain free taxi rides in order to participate in society.

I received a very warm welcome at all the facilities. The staff were delighted to show me their work. I was particularly impressed by the openness of the clients. Some of them asked me why I was visiting and where I was from. One client has stuck in my memory. He had taught himself a few words of German from television. He was overjoyed to show me his German skills. Another client played us his own song on his keyboard.

#### **3.3.4. Visit to the Peace Union of Finland**

On a rainy day in May, we visited the Peace Union of Finland. The headquarters is in the working district, Pasila, surrounded by office towers. The interesting fact about the Peace Union's Building is that it's an old railway building. My impression was that this contrast of the buildings in the area was also a kind of negotiation of power structures.

The Peace Union of Finland is an umbrella organisation of sixteen Finnish associations working for peace. On the one hand, the organisation addresses a whole range of peace and disarmament issues by lobbying and advocating for better peace policies. They work at national and international levels.

On the other hand, they are running an education programme called Peace School. We got an introduction to the pedagogical approaches and methods. The target group of the programme are young people and students, as well as youth leaders and teachers. The fascination of the programme was to see how the teaching methodology of a process drama is working. Students learn to think beyond their own points of view and consider multiple perspectives on a topic through playing different roles. The operation of the Peace School is value-based. They are concentrating on global topics respecting peace, human rights and democracy, equality, mutual solidarity and global responsibility. The Peace School has more than 20 process drama scripts for global education. One new aspect for me was to understand via a pedagogical approach how participants can learn the ability to understand and reflect on different perspectives in role-playing.

It was enriching to visit the Peace House. Afterwards I found inspiration for the question of what kind of peace work we do as social worker, every day. Later, we discussed the questions with the international exchange group.

### **3.3. Host Family Life and Leisure Activities**

Living with a host family is an important part of the professional exchange. During the first days of the exchange, there was a lecture introducing host family life. One point that was covered, was that participants would be given a key to the house or apartment. However, my experience has shown me that in some cases, keys are not needed. I have learned that there is a high level of trust in Finnish society when it comes to respecting other people's property. No one simply enters someone else's property. We also learned, from a statistic, that young Finns are the first in the European Union to leave

their parents' home, at an average age of 21. I was able to benefit from this with my first host family, as their daughter had already moved out and I was allowed to use her room. Thank you very much once again.

During the three weeks, we had several gatherings with CIF Finland members, host families and the other participants. One of the highlights was visiting the island of Suomenlinna, upstream from Helsinki, with the group. Whilst there, we had a group picnic and played the traditional outdoor game M\"olkkyy.

We had beautiful picnic- and barbecue-spots, several times during the exchange, like at the Archipelago of Porvoo region. At the weekend, I did some wonderful activities and took part in some great tours with my host families. We went to see the



M\"olkkyy at Suomenlinna

sights in Helsinki, and to historical places and markets in Loviisa and Kotka. Due to Finland's geographical location, I was able to experience spring a second time in Finland and compare it to Germany. Nature showed itself at its most beautiful. Fortunately, May is not yet mosquito season in Finland.



Hike in the nature

One special and famous meal the host families cooked was the reindeer meat from Finland. It was cooked with mashed potatoes. It was interesting to see how different the meat can be prepared. Staying with the Spanish participant, during the second week, in Porvoo was a truly

enriching experience. During our free time, we explored the town together, shared stories and enjoyed leisure activities.



Historical old town of Porvoo

I was really excited to be part of three different host families, especially because there were people of all age groups. This made me see life differently and change my opinions. I learned something during the exchange that I only realised after my stay. Because of where it was, I kept crossing the oldest Scandinavian traffic route for three and a half weeks. The King's Road is an old route used by traders that goes through southern Finland. The King's Road, dating back to the 14th century, stretches from Bergen, Norway, through Oslo, Stockholm, and the Åland Islands,

continuing via Turku, Southern Finland, and Vyborg to St. Petersburg, Russia. Originally a trail for travelers and couriers, it later served as a postal route with inns and guesthouses providing rest along the way. It also goes through the areas of Espoo, Vantaa and Porvoo, where my host families were. I really enjoyed living with my host family and they all took really good care of me.

The exchange ended with a party where the host families and members of CIF Finland joined in. There was a nice supporting programme and one highlight was the presentation of certificates to all the participants.

#### **4. Experiences and Cognitions**

My exchange experience in Finland provided me with valuable insights into the structure and values of the Finnish welfare state. The constellation of the programme was designed such that there was a gradual introduction into the social welfare system.

Overall, I was deeply impressed by the close-knit support network that forms the foundation of social services. For example, I encountered crisis centres and shelters for victims of domestic violence, which

represented new and innovative areas of social work for me. The Finnish welfare system places a strong emphasis on data-driven approaches, with a close connection between the social and health sectors. I gained the impression that, due to these data-based methods and the country's relatively small population, new services and projects can be developed and implemented more quickly than in larger countries. The outcomes of the Nordic welfare model - low poverty, high equality, and a remarkable level of trust in the state - clearly reflect the strength and stability of Finnish society.

One of the most surprising discoveries for me, was that social work in Finland can only be studied at a university, not at universities of applied sciences. Based on my professional background, I had always associated social work education with applied sciences institutions. Another unexpected observation was that, despite facing similar demographic challenges to Germany, Finland does not experience the same shortage of skilled professionals in the field. This might be linked to the high social reputation and attractiveness of the profession in Finland.

While Germany struggles with a severe shortage of social housing, this issue seemed less pressing in Finland. Although rents are high in major cities, there does not appear to be a comparable housing crisis. Nevertheless, Finland faces other social challenges. People with disabilities face challenges despite having legal rights to certain services. Although Finland has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the state sometimes struggles to provide adequate services, especially in rural areas. I also heard criticism regarding the everyday life situations of people with disabilities, which highlighted gaps between policy and practice.

At the same time, I was inspired by several positive examples of inclusion and innovation. One of them was the Music Resonaari School, which offers music education for people with disabilities and serves as a symbol of creative inclusion. I also visited an inclusive café in Helsinki, where the open and welcoming interior design, combined with the friendliness of the staff, created an atmosphere that truly reflected Finnish hospitality and social awareness.

Helsinki itself impressed me with its thoughtful use of public space. The city offers many free, accessible places for people to rest, work, or connect with others. The most striking example is the Helsinki Central Library, Oodi, a modern, open cultural hub that goes far beyond the concept of a traditional library. Oodi provides not only books but also a cinema, recording studios, 3D printing facilities, and spaces for events and creation. Located next to the central station, it serves as a meeting place for everyone and symbolizes the Finnish understanding of public space as a shared and inclusive environment.

Finally, my experiences in Finland revealed a deep trust in society and the state, something that seems to be a cornerstone of the Finnish way of life. This trust, combined with social equality and innovation, shapes a society that strives to balance individual wellbeing with collective responsibility. My time in Finland not only broadened my professional horizons, but also gave me new insights into how social work and social systems function and how they work in individual cases.

## **5. Conclusions and Future Perspectives**

During our time with the international group, we shared many enjoyable activities that fostered collaboration and friendship across cultures. Living conditions in Finland were remarkable; the clean environment, balanced work-life culture, and close connection to nature all contributed to a sense of well-being. The happiness of the Finns seems to stem from strong, supportive relationships, both within the community and across borders, as seen in our meaningful exchange with CIF Finland. They perform well in essential indicators such as poverty reduction, income distribution, social policy, investment in human resources and education, housing conditions, health outcomes and access to public healthcare. Or perhaps the truth lies in the fact that people in Finland are so happy because they have the highest per capita consumption of coffee in the world. It is well known, that even the smell of coffee is said to make you happy. Either way, I can highly recommend a trip to visit the happiest people in the world. I can not agree with the stereotype and mythos that Finns are more socially-distanced than in other European countries, because I had the experience of having spontaneous conversations with people in public. I am already looking forward to returning one day to the happiest people.

The CIF programme offered me the chance to gain a deeper understanding of peace as something that grows through relationships, mutual respect and shared experiences. Through cultural exchange and group interaction, I learned that peace means building bridges and practising diplomacy in everyday life. Visiting the Peace House, inspired deep reflection on the role of social workers in creating and sustaining peace. Social work plays a vital role in maintaining social peace by promoting inclusion, equality, democracy and participation. In this sense, peace becomes an umbrella concept, rooted in understanding, connection and the willingness to learn from one another.

The European Union as a Peace project Union gave me the feeling that Finland is more than 1000 km away from my home and at the same time so close. Through staying with host families and

discussions about societies I gained an understanding of the values which are the same within the western world. At the same time, I had to learn that due to the war in the Ukraine, the boarder with Russia has been closed since 2023. A kind of approach that the participant from Vietnam was presenting is the bamboo diplomacy which smaller countries are using in foreign affairs. Maybe it's a way to learn and to have peace and open borders in Europe again one day.

The IPEP is more than a pure exchange programme. It contributes to intercultural understanding, which I was able to experience during my three weeks in Finland. A key aspect, for me, was also the opportunity to combine the path of exchange with a sustainable perspective. In view of the current challenges in connection with climate change, I think it makes sense to integrate a trip of this kind into a professional context.

Many thanks to CIF Finland for the great programme and the lovely host families who made the exchange possible. I would also like to thank the agencies we were able to visit. Finally, thanks to the other participants for the inspiration and enriching conversations.

You are welcome to send an email to [pr94@web.de](mailto:pr94@web.de) for further information or feedback.