



“Council of Europe, National Human Rights Institutions,
Equality Bodies and Ombudsman Offices
Promoting Equality and Social Inclusion”

Speech by Gianluca Esposito, Council of Europe

Thank you, Carlien. Madame President, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today to open this important Conference which brings together the Council of Europe, National Human Rights Institutions, Equality Bodies and Ombudsmen offices, from across Europe and beyond.

I would like to thank the National Human Rights Institution of Finland and all the Finnish authorities for having invited us to Helsinki to reflect on how we can better work together to bridge the gap between international Human Rights standards and the Human Rights situation on the ground.

The economic crisis has taken its toll on Europe. Billions if not trillions of Euros have been spent to stabilize the economies of the countries mostly affected by the crisis. Financial, fiscal, legal, social reforms have been called for in the short term to address the structural causes of the crisis.

But, most probably, the biggest impact of the crisis will be felt in the medium to long term. Jobs lost, school drop outs, greater poverty and social exclusion, fear for diversity and tendency toward the extreme, may generate discrimination and violence, even more so in an increasingly multicultural and diverse society.

In such an environment, the temptation to put Human Rights on the side is strong. But the reality is that, in fact, we need more, not less Human Rights. We need more, not less social inclusion. History has taught us that we succeed when we put our values first. This is when we prosper – socially and economically.

These are the same values which have kept Europe together for over 60 years - equality, respect for Human Rights and dignity, social inclusion, must be at the core of our action and of our concerns.

And we need to do that leaving no one behind. We have to make everyone participate, engage and contribute without fear. These efforts take time and we have a collective responsibility to manage the expectations of our populations. Social inclusion cannot be achieved with a click or a tweet.

As we promote social inclusion, we remind ourselves that the ECHR applies to "everyone" on our Continent: adults or children, women or men, LGBT or not, European nationals or not, old or young, no matter the color of the skin, the culture, the religion, and so on. Everyone means everyone.

But international treaties alone, as important as they are, are not enough. National Human Rights Institutions, Equality Bodies and Ombudpersons all have their role to play in promoting equality, fighting stereotypes and monitoring the implementation of Human Rights at a national level. This is the core of their work, their *raison d'être*.

These bodies not only have a key role to play domestically, but also in their interaction with international organizations. They are well placed to provide information and advice about the human rights situations on the ground in their respective areas.

I am glad to see so many participants today and such a distinguished set of speakers. During this conference, we will be looking at:

- ways in which national bodies can break their internal and external boundaries and remove stereotypes existing in societies in order to enable access to **all** Human Rights by **all** persons.
- how national bodies can help international and regional intergovernmental organisations, and *vice versa*, in our efforts to improve the state of Human Rights in Europe;
- the importance of human rights education;
- How to prepare, implement and monitor national human rights action plans, which can be general and overarching, or more specific related to a topic, such as the rights of the child, the Human Rights of persons with disabilities, minorities, elderly persons, LGBT persons;
- Multiple discrimination.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude.

We must not give Human Rights for granted. We must nurture, cherish and promote them every day. This event is really about looking for effective synergies amongst all of us – united, we have a better chance to make Human Rights even more a reality on the ground. I look forward to our discussions during the next two days.

Thank you for your attention.