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**“Bridge the gap through inclusive and transparent work for human rights”  
*Rights Work! International Conference on Systematic Work for Human  
Rights Implementation***

*Speech by Thomas Hammarberg, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights  
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**Opening Speech**

The objective in our work for human rights is to build a society which takes human rights seriously: a society which endeavours to ensure that all its members can fully enjoy their rights. In short, such a society can be described in the following way:

- citizens have an understanding of their human rights and access effective remedies when they are violated;
- authorities at national, regional and local levels have a rights-based approach in their work;
- the judiciary is independent, impartial and effective;
- the government and the parliament give due consideration to international human rights standards in their decision-making including the budgetary process;
- civil society and the media can scrutinize political decisions and decision-makers in a safe and enabling environment;
- national human rights structures, including ombudspersons, are independent and adequately resourced to receive complaints from individuals and monitor the national human rights situation;
- human rights defenders are supported and protected in their work.

In reality, we are confronted with a gap: a gap between the rights proclaimed in international and regional human rights instruments and how these rights are respected in individual countries. In fact, all states encounter challenges in their work for the full realisation of human rights. Scarce resources are often invoked as the main obstacle. Corruption, internal tensions, racism and intolerance are other obstacles for real progress. Yet, serious violations of human rights take place also in countries that are considered stable and non-corrupt. Disregard for human rights norms in the fight against terrorism and in the field of data protection are clear examples of this.

Even without such sad set-backs we know that human rights are *never fully implemented*. There are and will always be improvements to be made. One reason is that human rights enforcement relates to attitudes and that minimum requirements change with economic and social developments.

Perhaps too little attention has been paid to the more practical, every day problems that public administration encounter when dealing with human rights. These problems include lack of knowledge and awareness of human rights, problems with coordinating

different actors and levels of society when working for ensuring human rights and lack of human rights perspective within some standard political and administration procedures, such as budgeting and planning processes. These factors can, alone or in combination, lead to human rights violations.

Council of Europe member states have manifested a growing interest for methods for systematic human rights implementation and monitoring. Most countries have developed strategies or action plans targeting specific problems, such as gender inequalities, racism and discrimination, rights of children or trafficking in human beings. Azerbaijan, Lithuania, Norway, Moldova and Sweden have adopted comprehensive action plans seeking to address the human rights situation in a coherent manner. When anchored on a thorough baseline study such plans have proved to be useful tools for clarifying the authorities' responsibilities and for identifying and addressing gaps in the protection of human rights protection.

Such developments have been inspired by the UN World Conference on Human Rights which met in Vienna in 1993. The Conference declared that human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated and called on member states to fulfil their human rights obligations through systematic work, including national action plans. Only coordinated actions can ensure that the broad range of human rights are implemented in an even manner. The Vienna Conference also highlighted the importance of human rights education in empowering people to exercise their rights.

The first step in developing a systematic approach to human rights is to collect information from different sources on the human rights situation. A baseline study is a description of the current human rights situation in a country. It is essential to actively seek information from various parts of society in order to get a thorough and comprehensive view.

Participation and inclusiveness are key principles for carrying out a baseline study. All stakeholders should be invited to contribute. This includes politicians from the ruling parties and the opposition, representatives of the authorities at national, regional and local levels, national human rights structures and civil society in a broad sense, including trade unions, immigrant and minority associations, the disability movement, advocates for refugee rights and associations of older persons. Such a process will also lead to the identification and activation of a broadly-based human rights network which is necessary for keeping the human rights agenda alive in a continuous way.

Through the findings of the baseline study, work for human rights can be systematised and its priorities defined. A human rights action plan or a series of more specific action plans can then be drawn up to set out the objectives and tasks required to achieve them. Observations and recommendations from international human rights bodies on the country's compliance with the international human rights standards should also be taken into account. As financial and human resources constraints make it impossible to address all human rights problems at once, priorities and solutions to human rights problems must be discussed in an open and inclusive way. If an area is not given priority despite problems revealed by the baseline study, an action plan should clearly explain the reasons behind such decisions.

Experience demonstrates that the implementation phase poses the greatest challenges to countries working with action plans. An overly ambitious plan may lack funding or high

level support within the government and the public administration. Proper mechanisms for coordination and follow-up may not be in place making it difficult even for those committed to the plan to implement it effectively.

One of the purposes of actively involving politicians and representatives from the authorities at different levels during the whole process is to create support and ownership for the planned activities. To get authorities on board they must perceive this process as relevant for their work. In the long term, a human rights perspective should be mainstreamed in the day-to-day activities of different authorities and budgetary decisions. Active participation by representatives from the political opposition during the drafting process also contributes to the continuity of the work.

Human rights work involve many, or most, authorities in any country. Coordination and cooperation within the government and among different authorities at national, regional and local levels is thus essential. One tested method is to establish a coordinating body consisting of representatives from all relevant ministries and agencies. Such a mechanism provides a forum for the exchange of experiences and information, discussion and cooperation. It is also useful for reporting to international human rights monitoring mechanisms and may in fact save resources when overlap in reporting obligations can be minimised. Other stakeholders than authorities should also be involved in the continuous work for human rights. Focus groups for the representatives of civil society, indigenous and national minorities, national human rights structures and enterprises can be established for this purpose.

Human rights action plans should be subjected to an independent evaluation upon their completion. It is equally important to assess the process, in terms of participation, inclusiveness and transparency, as it is to evaluate the end result. The conclusions should be openly presented and encourage a debate about the effectiveness and value of the process. All stakeholders that have participated in the planning process should be able to contribute to the evaluation. The evaluation will give the foundation for the renewal of the process, where a new baseline study is developed with an equally inclusive, transparent and participatory approach. If well designed, benchmarks and human rights indicators can be valuable tools for follow-up and evaluation, taking both quantitative and qualitative aspects into consideration.

Systematic work for human rights means a continuous and persistent process. Baseline studies, action plans and evaluations are tools for clarifying and assessing the steps to be taken to reach our objectives. They also serve as communication tools for stakeholders and societies at large. The inclusiveness and transparency of the process coupled with a priority on human rights education for all will ensure that we bridge the gap again and again.