



Local authorities can make the difference for human rights

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I am happy and honoured to be able to discuss with you the intersection of the work of my office and that of the Congress in promoting human rights.

This intersection has become more evident to me in recent months. On country visits to date, I have become acutely aware of the role of that local and regional authorities have in protecting and promoting human rights, as well as in implementing practices that run contrary to human rights. Indeed, what I have seen so far is a very contradictory picture.

For instance, in Portugal, local children's rights commissions are critical in monitoring the impact of austerity on children, including alleviating child poverty, preventing the re-emergence of child labour, and combatting domestic violence. At the same time, some local authorities are dragging their feet in implementing decisions to improve Roma housing, in spite of decisions adopted by the Committee of the European Social Charter.

In Austria local authorities play a critical role in establishing patient's rights ombudsmen to defend the rights of the elderly. At the same time, some local authorities have been slow in implementing nationally mandated measures to promote accessibility for the disabled.

Many local authorities in Finland are implementing equality plans, though I also heard complaints there about widely varying levels of service in social care homes for the elderly.

In Italy some local authorities have created good dialogue mechanisms with Roma, while others ignore a national Roma integration policy framework, carry out forced evictions without prior consultations, and continue resettling Roma in segregated camps.

These are just a few examples from my first six months.

Why such a contradictory picture?

Different resource endowments provide part of the answer. Central governments often delegate functions to the local level without delegating resources. Different historical and cultural contexts provide another part of the answer. But much of the difference has to do with political leadership. In some locales, leaders are more aware of and interested in human rights based solutions than in others.

This means that both you and I have a lot of awareness raising work to do.

I see in particular three main issues where this awareness-raising work is most needed.

The first one is the human rights of Roma. Your work with the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion is a promising step. I intend to continue the work of my predecessor on Roma issues focussing in particular on the need to combat anti-Roma prejudice among the majority when implementing Roma integration plans. Two other areas of focus will be on combatting statelessness and promoting access of Roma to mainstream education. These are all areas in which the role of local authorities is essential.

The second issue concerns migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees. Migration affects European cities, particularly big cities, more than other areas. London, Paris and Moscow each have over 1 million migrants. Among the 85 cities in the world with between 100,000 and 1 million foreign born, 30 are in Europe. In Amsterdam, Brussels, Frankfurt and London, more than one quarter of the population is foreign born. Here the statements of local leaders and the policies of local authorities are absolutely essential. In my previous capacity as chair of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, I have already engaged with the European Coalition of Cities against Racism – and I hope to do so as Commissioner as well.

A third issue is human rights budgeting and local human rights action plans. Such budgeting has become all the more urgent in times of austerity, as vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly and disabled have often been disproportionately hit by budget and service cuts and tax increases. By involving civil society experts and national human rights structures in planning and monitoring the impact of austerity on human rights, local authorities can mitigate the negative impact of austerity and prevent the exacerbation of social exclusion.

As Commissioner for Human Rights, I intend to strengthen my dialogue with you on these and other human rights issues, especially during my country visits, when I hope to have meetings with local authorities as well as national authorities.

Though my recommendations are addressed to national authorities, often, improvements require the constructive involvement of local authorities as well.

I hope we can work together in these difficult times to bring to life the standards we are all bound by.