



COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
COMMISSAIRE AUX DROITS DE L'HOMME



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“Putting human rights at the heart of economic recovery plans”

Speech of the Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg,
at the

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE on
“LOCAL GOVERNMENT: RESPONSES TO RECESSION ACROSS EUROPE”

Strasbourg, 11 October 2010

The International Labour Organisation, ILO, issued a warning the other day. This body - representing not only governments but also trade unions and employers' associations – now estimates that the problem of unemployment will remain acute for several more years and will only return to the level prior to the economic crisis in 2015.

This is certainly bad news. Continued high unemployment means less revenue and more costs in state budgets. It limits the space for paying off the debts which were incurred when the banking system had to be rescued with taxpayers' money and the servicing of which is now such a heavy burden.

I understood ILO to be warning that austerity programs – radical and extensive budget cuts – now might both strangle the still weak recovery trends and also cause social unrest.

The pace with which we now re-establish balance in national budgets is of course an enormous challenge for governments in Europe today. In that discussion I do believe, like ILO, that there are human rights concerns to consider. We must aim at financial and social stability in parallel. The burdens must be shared in a fair manner – the weakest and most vulnerable must be protected.

Unemployment is in itself a human rights problem as spelled out in both ILO Conventions and the European Social Charter. It is worrying that young people have been hit on a disproportionate scale during the present crisis.

Reduced social programs have caused other inequalities. There is a tendency that the less wealthy suffer most, in particular the elderly, persons with disabilities, homeless people and migrants. Women and children too are deeply affected by the crisis. This is the consequence of reduced tax credits and family

support as well as aborted programs to construct extra schools, kindergartens or low-rent dwellings. Moreover, public services, in particular in poor communities, have been reduced at a time when needs are inevitably growing.

It also seems that the economic crisis has contributed to an increased use of racist, xenophobic and otherwise intolerant discourse in politics and the media all over Europe. Discrimination and exclusion appear to be increasing. There are signs that people are losing hope and trust and are becoming pessimistic regarding the possibility of improving their situation. The social gap risks being widened, with a growing number of people living in poverty and needing aid.

Local and regional authorities are at the forefront in facing this emergency. They are often directly responsible for services related to health care, education, housing, water supply, environment, policing and also, in many cases, taxation. However, many local governments are all too often not sufficiently equipped and resourced to deal with such pressing human rights issues.

It is evident that these serious patterns represent an extraordinary challenge for all European governments, at all levels. Wise leadership is therefore needed to find effective measures to come out of the crisis reinforcing our liberties and rights and ensuring to pass on to future generations a more just society.

Politicians should adopt human rights as guiding principles for their decisions. Multi-lateral co-operation built on human rights is a must – there is a need for political determination and solidarity beyond narrow financial and economic interests and party politics.

International rules to regulate the financial markets are in fact not sufficient alone. We need concrete national programs which promote social cohesion and prevent any watering down of the already agreed human rights standards.

These standards include economic and social rights, several of which are listed in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, such as the rights to social security, adequate standard of living, food, education, housing, health and work.

Such rights have since been legally recognised by the United Nations, ILO and the Council of Europe– the latter through the European Social Charter. Governments have the obligation to respect, protect and fulfil these standards.

Goals should be set and action plans developed through a genuine participatory budgeting process, which would involve different ministries, local and regional authorities, national human rights structures and civil society organisations.

Human-rights budgeting should therefore be seen as a potent instrument in the struggle for human rights. Budget review from a human rights perspective can in fact help make elected representatives and officials more aware of the consequences of their decisions and assist in allocating resources in a non-discriminatory manner.

This is a fairly new approach. In Europe, the most concrete work so far has been done in the area of gender equality. Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Finland, Norway, Spain and Sweden are among the countries which have already applied a conscious gender perspective in their national budgetary cycle.

Gender budgeting has also been used at regional and local levels, for example in the Federal State of Berlin or in the Swiss City of Basel, where gender concerns are an integral part of the budget process. The Council of Europe has also published a handbook on the practical implementation of gender budgeting.

Human rights budgeting in other areas is still in its infancy. However, an interesting project has been initiated by the Human Rights Centre at Queen's University in Belfast. It examines the effect of public expenditure on economic and social rights in Northern Ireland through a budget-based analysis. The aim is to identify international best practices as well as to analyse various examples of government resource allocation in areas such as housing.

These are just few examples. More can, and should, be done. Enhanced co-operation among all state levels is therefore crucial. International organisations also have an important role to play. The Council of Europe, in particular, is well placed to assist national and local governments in a variety of ways, for instance by helping elaborate, implement and monitor national strategies; facilitating information-sharing at all levels, including through the identification, collection and dissemination of good practices as well as information about materials, institutions and programmes available. It could also encourage the development of human rights-based policy networks as well as support training and research.

In this context, its array of standards, mechanisms and tools are of significant importance. The European Strategy for Innovation and Good Governance, for example, could be an effective tool to develop a comprehensive approach to human rights-based governance at local level. The Strategy promotes 12 principles which can foster local authorities' accountability and people's participation and could help link good governance and human rights more firmly.

Although dramatic, this crisis is a good opportunity to re-engineer our societies. Any plan or reform adopted to come out of these difficult times should be construed around the European system of human rights protection we have been building over the past 60 years. If we do so, we will be better equipped to reinforce people's protection and re-establish public confidence in the democratic system. The effectiveness and image of governments at all levels would also greatly benefit from such an approach.

Your discussions today and tomorrow are therefore a crucial step in the process which will lead to the 2011 conference of the European ministers responsible for local and regional government, where important decisions will be taken for our future.

Finding viable solutions to enable all people to enjoy equal access to rights should be a priority for international, national and local actors. Co-operation and solidarity between and within States is not only possible: it is simply necessary.