



**Rights and Rurality: challenges and opportunities for the full  
realisation of socio-economic rights for rural communities in Europe**

15th Meeting  
of the CoE-FRA-ENNHRI-EQUINET Collaborative Platform  
on Social and Economic Rights

**2-3 October 2025**

Scottish Parliament (Fairfax Somerville Room)  
Edinburgh, Scotland

***MEETING REPORT***

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## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	3
Background and Rationale .....	3
Objectives.....	4
Participants and Format.....	4
Opening session .....	5
Keynote speech - Rights and Rurality: challenges and opportunities for the full realisation of socio-economic rights for rural communities in Europe .....	7
Session 1: The State of Socio-Economic Rights in Rural Europe.....	9
Findings by the Commissioner for Human Rights on access to social rights in rural Europe .....	9
Rural Exodus in Europe: Creating Opportunities for Local and Regional Renewal: presentation of the upcoming report of the Social Inclusion Committee of the Congress for Local and Regional Authorities .....	10
Current challenges for rural communities in Scotland and Europe .....	11
Access to public services and healthcare for people living in rural areas in Croatia .....	12
Session 2: Legal Frameworks and Gaps – Effective protection of social and economic rights in rural areas .....	15
Part 1: Current Legal Standards .....	15
Part 2: Gaps and Challenges.....	16
Part 3: Solutions.....	17
Working group sessions wrap-up and discussion: NHRIs and Equality Bodies experiences and good practices in realising socio-economic rights in rural areas .....	19
Working Group 1: Access to essential services – Health, Education, Housing, Connectivity.....	19
Working Group 2: Employment, Inclusion, and Youth Opportunities in Rural Areas .....	19
Working Group 3: Local governance and rural participation in decision-making .....	20
Working Group 4: Strengthening rights monitoring through different mechanisms (Scottish report on Highlands and Islands) .....	20
Closing session .....	20
Conclusions by the Rapporteur .....	21
Closing message .....	22
Appendices.....	23

# Introduction

## Background and Rationale

The enjoyment of social and economic rights of people living in rural communities is a prerequisite for the enjoyment of a wide range of human rights. Despite the [European Social Charter](#) and the [EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#)' robust protection of economic and social rights, rural communities across Europe continue to face structural challenges in accessing and realising these rights. Issues such as income inequality, centralisation of services, economic disinvestment and lack of quality jobs, effective just transition, limited digital and transport connectivity, demographic decline and limited government support disproportionately affect rural populations. These issues are further compounded by intersecting forms of discrimination, notably gender, age, disability, socioeconomic background, and race and ethnic origin.

Several articles of the European Social Charter are highly relevant for the enjoyment of social rights of rural communities, as they directly or indirectly address issues related to living conditions, employment, education, health, social protection, access to services, and the enjoyment of these rights without discrimination – all of which are essential for rural communities who often face geographic, economic, and infrastructural disadvantages. In addition, the European Social Charter's emphasis on the protection of vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities, older people, children, and migrants and the promotion of gender equality and the principle of non-discrimination, make it an important instrument for ensuring the full and equal realisation of social rights in rural areas. In its conclusions and decisions, the Council of Europe's European Committee of Social Rights calls on decision-makers to take positive action to address existing challenges, thereby ensuring equal opportunities for all and full respect for social rights.

Similarly, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights sets out essential civil, social, economic, and cultural rights applicable to all EU residents, including in rural areas. The Charter's provisions on equality, social protection, access to services of general economic interest, and the right to education and healthcare provide a legal framework for addressing the persistent disparities faced by rural communities. These provisions reinforce the principles of social justice and inclusion. Furthermore, the Charter provides a binding legal basis to ensure that EU institutions and Member States consistently promote and protect these fundamental rights, thereby supporting comprehensive and equal access to social services and opportunities for rural populations across the Union. Together with the European Social Charter, the EU Charter is therefore a crucial instrument for ensuring that rural citizens are not left behind in Europe's social and economic development.

Based on the above, the 15<sup>th</sup> meeting of the [CoE-FRA-ENNHRI-EQUINET Collaborative Platform on Social and Economic Rights](#) explored how persistent barriers and challenges to the full and effective enjoyment of social rights in rural

areas intersect with States' obligations under the European Social Charter, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and other relevant human rights instruments. The event was inspired by the publication of the report on [Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands](#), published in November 2024, by the Scottish Human Rights Commission. It allowed National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) and Equality Bodies to discuss how to use the standards developed by monitoring bodies such as the European Committee of Social Rights (though the collective complaints procedure or the periodic state reporting) in their work.

Building on the identified challenges and existing standards, the event explored which areas of socio-economic rights remain unclear. Are there legal or practical gaps that hinder organisations from effectively supporting the realisation of these rights in rural settings?

The event also provided a platform for NHRIs, Equality Bodies, and civil society actors to share experiences and consider ways to strengthen the human rights-based approach to rural development and socio-economic justice.

This year's event also marked the 10th anniversary of the CoE-FRA-ENNHRI-EQUINET Collaborative Platform on Social and Economic Rights. To celebrate this milestone, the Council of Europe, in collaboration with the Scottish Human Rights Commission, organised a high-level round table discussion '10 years of collaboration – challenges, achievements, and the way forward' on 2 October 2025, followed by a cultural event. This milestone offered an opportunity to reflect on the progress made, assess ongoing challenges, and chart the course for future action. These events confirmed the Platform's role as a key vehicle for promoting awareness of the European Social Charter among NHRIs and Equality Bodies, and for advancing social and economic rights more broadly at the national level.

## Objectives

The main objectives of the meeting were:

- To identify the key challenges facing rural and remote communities in the equal enjoyment of their socio-economic rights.
- To examine the relevant legal frameworks, especially the European Social Charter, and how they apply in rural contexts.
- To explore the legal and practical gaps in protecting and fulfilling these rights in rural areas from an intersectoral perspective.
  - To showcase good practices from people living in rural areas as well as NHRIs and Equality Bodies.
- To build capacity and foster collaboration across human rights institutions and networks to promote rights-based approaches in rural settings.

## Participants and Format

The event brought together representatives of the [Council of Europe](#), including the [European Committee of Social Rights](#), the [European Union Fundamental Rights Agency](#), [ENNHRI](#) and [EQUINET](#). National Human Rights Institutions, National Equality Bodies, regional and local government representatives, members of

parliament, academics and legal experts, representatives of rural communities and civil society actors active in promoting and defending social rights.

The meetings were held in person only. The programme featured plenary sessions, panel discussions, working groups organised according to the key themes of the event and Q&A sessions. The working language was English.

## Opening session

In her opening remarks, **Margarita Galstyan**, Head of Cooperation Unit, Department of Social Rights, Council of Europe, underlined that the enjoyment of social rights by rural communities is a gateway to the effective realisation of human rights as a whole. She stressed the fundamental connection between rural well-being and broader social justice.

She explained that the meeting would explore the key challenges faced by people living in rural areas, as well as the existing legal and policy frameworks and examples of good practices for better protecting and promoting their rights. Her introduction set the tone for a discussion focused on identifying gaps, sharing experiences and developing practical solutions to advance equality and inclusion across Europe's rural regions.

**Rafael Benítez**, Director of Social Rights, Health and Environment, Council of Europe, warmly welcomed participants on behalf of the Council of Europe, expressing gratitude to the Scottish Human Rights Commission for co-hosting the meeting in the Scottish Parliament and for its long-standing partnership. He reflected on the symbolism of gathering in Scotland - a place deeply rooted in solidarity and community spirit - which resonated strongly with the meeting's theme.

Mr Benítez highlighted that the enjoyment of social and economic rights must not depend on geography, stressing that rural communities across Europe continue to face structural barriers in accessing healthcare, education, employment, transport, and digital connectivity. These challenges, he noted, are rooted in demographic change, disinvestment and policy neglect, often compounded by age, gender, disability and socio-economic inequalities. Ensuring that no one is left behind in Europe's development is therefore essential to realising equality and dignity for all.

The speaker emphasised the European Social Charter as a cornerstone instrument for securing these rights. The Charter, he said, provides both binding legal obligations and practical guidance for States, and the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) has repeatedly underlined governments' positive duties to make rights effective for everyone—including those in geographically isolated or disadvantaged areas. He also recognised the valuable contributions of other Council of Europe bodies, such as the Commissioner for Human Rights and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, in addressing rural challenges through equality, inclusion, and local governance.

Furthermore, Mr Benítez underlined the vital role of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) and Equality Bodies as bridges between international standards and local realities—monitoring rights in practice, amplifying community voices and holding governments accountable to their commitments.

Marking the 10th anniversary of the Collaborative Platform on Social and Economic Rights, the speaker commended its success as a unique forum for dialogue, learning and joint action. Over the past decade, it has raised awareness of the European Social Charter and advanced socio-economic rights at national level. Yet, he noted, much remains to be done to ensure that rural communities’ perspectives are fully reflected in human rights policy and implementation.

The speaker concluded by inviting participants to reflect on how existing mechanisms—such as state reporting, collective complaints and monitoring by NHRIs and Equality Bodies—can be used more effectively to close protection gaps, strengthen accountability and embed the lived experiences of rural communities at the centre of Europe’s human rights agenda.

**Angela O’Hagan**, Chair of the Scottish Human Rights Commission, began her speech by thanking the organisers, the participants and the Scottish Parliament representatives. She noted the symbolism of holding the meeting in such a distinctive and, at sometimes, controversial building. Stressing the importance of maintaining an international perspective on human rights in the face of growing racism, anti-migration sentiment and populism, she reflected on Scotland’s evolution from a history of small rural communities rooted in pastoral life to a modern nation where rural development is shaped by both national and European policy frameworks.

Speaking on behalf of the Scottish Human Rights Commission, the speaker presented findings from the Commission’s recent Report on the realisation of [economic, social and cultural rights in Scotland’s Highlands and Islands](#), describing the study as both a national case study and a reflection of broader European trends. The research revealed widespread and systemic shortcomings in the realisation of rights—particularly with regard to housing, food, health and participation in cultural life—with many communities experiencing retrogression in rights protection and the withdrawal of essential services.

Ms O’Hagan identified three key lessons from Scotland’s experience with clear European relevance:

1. The Risk of “One-Size-Fits-All” Policy – National and regional policies are often designed from an urban perspective, failing to capture the specific needs of rural communities. She called for place-based, differentiated approaches that recognise the geographic, social and economic realities of rural life.
2. Disempowerment of Rural Communities – Rural residents frequently feel unheard and excluded from policymaking. Consultation exercises are often tokenistic, constrained by short timelines and poor digital access. True participation, she emphasised, must be meaningful, inclusive and accountable, with mechanisms for co-design and community ownership.

3. The Shrinking State and the Overburdened Third Sector – Increasingly, core state responsibilities such as health and social care, food distribution and transport are being shifted to voluntary organisations and community groups. While these actors play a crucial role, the state must remain the primary duty-bearer for upholding human rights. Outsourcing must not become abdication.

In conclusion, the speaker stressed that rural communities need more than policy ambitions—they need rights-based, fully funded and locally tailored solutions that reflect their lived realities. She called for:

- Human rights-based budgeting to ensure fiscal decisions align with legal obligations;
- Monitoring frameworks grounded in international law to prevent retrogression; and
- Legal empowerment of rural residents, so that people know and can claim their rights.

Ms O'Hagan urged policymakers and institutions to move beyond the rural–urban binary, recognising the diversity of Europe's rural landscapes—from islands to mountain regions—and ensuring that rural rights are treated as human rights. Finally, she called for all actors present to ensure that the voices of rural communities themselves guide the way forward, grounding future work in both legal duty and lived experience.

## Keynote speech - Rights and Rurality: challenges and opportunities for the full realisation of socio-economic rights for rural communities in Europe

**Tatiana Puiu**, Vice-President of the European Committee of Social Rights, began by expressing gratitude to the hosts and underlining the spirit of solidarity that has characterised the Collaborative Platform over the past decade. She noted that the Platform's diversity is its greatest strength, enabling shared learning and coordinated progress in advancing social rights across Europe.

Turning to the central theme, the keynote speaker identified rurality as a pressing concern across the continent. Although rural life is part of Europe's long-standing tradition, rural residents continue to face structural exclusion. Ms Puiu highlighted a series of systemic challenges that impede the enjoyment of rights: long distances to essential services, lack of specialised healthcare, energy poverty, unreliable digital connectivity, shrinking economic opportunities and the pervasive sense among rural citizens that their future is decided elsewhere. The result is a growing rural exodus of young people, leaving behind communities that are older, poorer and more vulnerable.

The speaker also emphasised that discrimination often compounds rural disadvantage, with women facing triple burdens, and older persons, persons with disabilities, Roma and Travellers confronting multiple barriers.

Ms Puiu reaffirmed that the European Social Charter (ESC) remains the most advanced human-rights treaty protecting rural communities. Its provisions on housing, health, social protection and employment collectively guarantee a dignified standard of living. States' obligations to respect, protect and fulfil these rights apply without exception, and are reinforced by other international instruments, including the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Yet, she warned, implementation gaps persist—protection exists on paper but not always in practice.

Through its case law and monitoring, the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) continues to clarify states' duties. The speaker cited recent examples, such as the lack of access to energy in a [collective complaint decision against Spain](#), and a [decision concerning the segregation of Roma communities in Italy](#). The Committee has also found, according to the speaker, in its Conclusions that the absence of doctors in rural areas constitutes a violation of states' obligations under Article 11 of the Charter. Geography cannot justify discrimination, she stressed, adding that rural exclusion is not merely a policy failure—it is a human rights violation.

Looking forward, the speaker identified three key areas for progress:

1. Using complementary human-rights frameworks—international instruments should be seen as reinforcing, not competing with, one another to strengthen accountability.
2. Embedding human rights in rural development, energy transition and digital transformation policies, ensuring that climate and sustainability measures support rather than marginalise rural populations.
3. Enhancing cooperation with the FRA, the UN, and NHRIs, and using robust, disaggregated data to reveal and address hidden inequalities.

Ms Puiu also pointed to positive local practices—community-based initiatives, social enterprises and renewable-energy projects—as examples of how rights-based policies can succeed when grounded in lived realities. She underlined the vital role of NHRIs, which document rights violations, support individuals, advocate for systemic reforms and share good practices across borders.

In conclusion, the speaker called for closing the persistent practical gaps that hinder the realisation of social and economic rights, ensuring that protection is equally meaningful for rural and urban populations alike. Embedding a human rights-based approach (HRBA) across all policies and treating rural communities as partners in development are essential. As affirmed, the ECSR will continue providing guidance to make rights practical and effective, not merely theoretical.

## Session 1: The State of Socio-Economic Rights in Rural Europe

**Debbie Kohner**, Secretary General of ENNHRI, opened the session by reflecting on the symbolism of the venue. Surrounded by words such as integrity, wisdom and compassion engraved on the walls of the Scottish Parliament, she noted that these values—rather than power—should guide the collective pursuit of human rights.

She reiterated the objectives of the meeting and the key challenges highlighted by previous speakers, including the structural inequalities faced by rural populations and the urgent need to recognise that rural exclusion is not merely a policy failure but a human rights violation.

Ms Kohner concluded by underlining that the Collaborative Platform must translate these reflections into concrete action, and that the speakers' forthcoming contributions would help chart the way forward.

### Findings by the Commissioner for Human Rights on access to social rights in rural Europe

**Charlotte Altenhöner-Dion**, Adviser, Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe, presented the [findings of the Commissioner on access to social rights](#) in rural Europe, emphasising that social rights are among the Commissioner's top priorities, and that Public Defenders and NHRIs across Europe increasingly seek guidance on addressing rural inequalities.

The speaker provided a brief overview of the institution and mandate of the Commissioner for Human Rights—an independent, impartial and non-judicial institution established in 1999 to promote the effective observance of human rights, identify gaps in law and practice and support member states in implementing Council of Europe standards. The current Commissioner, Michael O'Flaherty, elected in January 2024, continues this mission through country visits, thematic work, cooperation with NHRIs and the protection of human rights defenders.

Drawing from the Commissioner's country monitoring and thematic work, Ms Altenhöner-Dion identified structural challenges in the enjoyment of social rights in rural and remote areas:

- Limited resources and infrastructure, particularly in isolated regions such as islands;
- Lower awareness of rights, due to weaker civil society presence and less political accountability at the local level;
- Reduced resilience of rural populations, who often depend on understaffed public services and have limited financial buffers;
- Persistent structural barriers, including poor transport, digital gaps, reliance on the third sector and language barriers.

She also noted that systemic factors—such as austerity measures, centralisation of decision-making, privatisation of essential services and a disproportionate burden on local authorities—have compounded rural inequalities. These trends have been highlighted in previous reports of the Commissioner, particularly regarding access to health care, including sexual and reproductive health and mental health services.

Turning to the situation of human rights defenders (HRDs), Ms Altenhöner-Dion observed that social rights advocacy is increasingly central to their work but that defenders in rural or remote areas face particular risks and isolation. Many lack safe spaces, solidarity networks and resources; some experience vilification or difficulty cooperating with international mechanisms. The Commissioner's Office continues to act on information received, engage with authorities and report on HRD protection, stressing the importance of intersectional approaches and stronger cooperation with NHRIs to improve safety and effectiveness.

The speaker concluded by reaffirming that people in rural areas are disproportionately affected by social rights violations, and that enhanced collaboration between the Commissioner's Office, national institutions and local actors is essential to strengthen both rights implementation and the protection of those defending them.

## Rural Exodus in Europe: Creating Opportunities for Local and Regional Renewal: presentation of the upcoming report of the Social Inclusion Committee of the Congress for Local and Regional Authorities

**Ana Winship**, Scotland's Rural College (SRUC), presented key findings from an upcoming Congress of Local and Regional Authorities report examining the phenomenon of rural exodus across Europe and its implications for local and regional authorities. Drawing on recent data and field research, she described how the departure of younger and working-age populations is reshaping rural regions, straining their ability to sustain essential services, infrastructure and local economies.

The speaker noted that many rural areas are experiencing demographic decline and socio-economic challenges, with widespread migration toward urban centres leading to reduced demand for public services, followed by service withdrawal and further depopulation. According to the speaker, this cycle risks deepening social inequalities, eroding trust in institutions and even fuelling political radicalisation among populations who feel left behind. Over the past two decades, rural populations in OECD countries grew by only 3%, compared to 13% in metropolitan areas, reflecting the scale of the imbalance.

Ms Winship emphasised that rural areas are far from homogeneous and that policies must reflect this diversity. She outlined several types of rural spaces—accessible rural areas, higher-amenity vs lower-amenity areas, sparsely populated regions and remote rural areas—each with distinct challenges and capacities to retain or attract residents. For instance, higher-amenity areas may experience

gentrification, while former mining or industrial communities face entrenched disadvantage and limited development prospects.

The drivers of rural outmigration, she explained, are multi-layered and interconnected:

- Limited employment and training opportunities;
- High cost of living and inadequate housing that often fails to meet policy standards;
- Infrastructure gaps—notably in transport, digital connectivity and healthcare;
- Top-down development strategies that overlook local needs and voices;
- And persistent social stigma, whereby staying in rural areas is perceived as a sign of limited ambition or failure.

Yet, the speaker also highlighted the strengths and opportunities inherent in rural living—such as strong cultural identity, community cohesion, safety and the potential for entrepreneurial innovation—if these are supported by inclusive and participatory governance.

To address rural depopulation and promote renewal, she proposed a series of practical measures:

- Conduct capacity evaluations and strengthen population recruitment and retention strategies;
- Develop the foundations for viable, diversified rural economies, including support for local enterprises;
- Include communities in decision-making and promote community wealth-building models;
- Design policies responsive to the diversity of rural contexts, rather than one-size-fits-all approaches;
- Improve infrastructure and essential services, particularly for young people;
- And importantly, acknowledge the specific limitations and constraints faced by different rural areas, rather than applying uniform expectations.

The speaker concluded that tackling rural exodus requires a place-based, participatory and rights-informed approach, where local communities are empowered partners in shaping their own futures, and rurality is recognised as a dynamic and diverse element of Europe's social fabric.

## Current challenges for rural communities in Scotland and Europe

**Theona L. Morrison**, Chair of Scottish Rural Action, delivered an inspiring and grounded intervention on the need to redefine rurality and shift the narrative that too often portrays rural and island communities through a deficit lens.

The speaker argued that language matters—the words used to describe rural life shape how governments act, how resources are allocated and how the future is imagined. To label rural areas as 'remote', she said, is to erase their strength, resilience and central role in Scotland's identity. Instead, she urged that rural

communities be seen as "rural, not remote"—dynamic places that contribute vitally to national and global well-being.

While acknowledging the demographic decline and practical difficulties facing rural areas—such as the need to travel long distances for healthcare, lack of local services, fuel poverty and unreliable infrastructure—Ms Morrison stressed that these realities should not define rurality as a story of failure or absence.

Key challenges she highlighted included:

- Depopulation and hollowed-out villages, where shops, restaurants and essential services have disappeared;
- Energy and fuel poverty, with outdated housing and markets designed for urban conditions;
- Centralisation, which removes local skills and capacity (for instance, engineers once based in rural hydroelectric plants are now sourced from distant cities such as Manchester);
- And economic and professional deskilling, where rural knowledge and jobs are replaced by external contractors and urban systems.

Yet, Ms Morrison also emphasised the strengths and resilience of rural communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they proved more agile and cohesive than many urban areas, mobilising strong social networks and community responses. She underlined the importance of community cohesion, local initiative and economic self-determination as essential assets for rural sustainability.

Rural areas, she reminded the audience, provide much of the world's food, energy and natural resources—they "hold the keys to the future." She called for a renewed focus on food security, local production and community-led economic development, instead of viewing agriculture and rural industries only through narrow measures of economic output.

Importantly, the speaker noted a growing generational shift: young people are increasingly rejecting the negative stereotypes of rural life and working to reclaim the narrative. Online platforms and local initiatives are being used to showcase that rural communities are "busy, vibrant, and innovative."

Ms Morrison concluded by urging policymakers and rights institutions to recognise rural and island places as powerful contributors to national identity and sustainability, not as marginal or peripheral spaces. Changing how we name, frame and value rural life, she said, is the first step toward achieving true equality and human rights for all.

## Access to public services and healthcare for people living in rural areas in Croatia

**Tatjana Vlašić**, Deputy Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia, presented the work of the Croatian Ombudswoman's Office in monitoring socio-economic rights

in rural and island areas, highlighting both progress and persistent challenges in ensuring equitable access to public services.

The speaker explained that the Ombudswoman's institution—an independent body accountable to the Croatian Parliament—serves as a bridge between citizens and authorities. Through its regional offices, it strives to reach rural communities directly, providing a local contact point for complaints and outreach. However, she noted that even with these offices, physical access remains difficult. To overcome this, her team regularly travels to rural and island areas, meeting with local residents, NGOs and authorities to gather testimonies and advocate for concrete solutions.

Her intervention underscored that rural poverty and exclusion are compounded by geography, lack of transport and unequal regional development. Local authorities in smaller municipalities often have the will but not the resources to provide adequate services. Moreover, prejudices persist, particularly in tourist areas, where low-income residents are often blamed for their poverty, rather than being recognised as rights-holders.

The speaker described the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which deepened existing inequalities. The Ombudswoman's investigations and annual and special reports documented significant barriers to healthcare, social protection and cultural participation in rural areas. Structural issues include a shortage of doctors and social workers, limited transport links and the absence of cultural or leisure opportunities.

Two practical examples illustrated how the Ombudswoman's Office addresses these gaps, while also engaging with the international legal system:

1. Post-disaster community engagement: In one rural area near Zagreb, severely affected by both the pandemic and an earthquake, the Office organised weekly visits, worked alongside NGOs and provided free legal aid and social support. This collaboration ensured that vulnerable residents—especially older people and national minorities—received essential services and that reconstruction efforts continued with community input.
2. Healthcare accessibility: The Office handled numerous complaints about transport reimbursement for patients and older persons in rural areas. An example was provided where a cancer patient lost eligibility for transport cost reimbursement due to a legal loophole. Persistent advocacy by the Ombudswoman led to a legislative amendment, improving access to healthcare for many rural residents.

Ms Vlašić concluded that institutions like Ombudspersons are uniquely placed to hear people's real experiences on the ground and to translate them into systemic reforms. Effective cooperation with civil society and local authorities, combined with sustained monitoring and adherence to international human rights standards may take time, but it is essential for ensuring that the rights of rural communities become a reality.

## Q&A Session

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During the Q&A session, **Piotr Sadowski**, Secretary General of Volonteuropa and Vice President of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe, emphasised the importance of using careful and respectful language when discussing rural communities human rights to avoid stigmatisation. He also emphasised the value of interinstitutional cooperation facilitated through civil society, and stressed the need to create safe spaces where civil society actors can come together to exchange ideas and coordinate action.

**Tanya Montanari**, Coordinator of the COE-FRA-ENNHRI-EQUINET Platform on Social and Economic Rights, asked about the timeline for publication and the next steps regarding implementation of the upcoming Congress of Local and Regional Authorities report examining the phenomenon of rural exodus across Europe and its implications for local and regional authorities.

**Ana Winship** responded that the final draft of the report had been submitted, and publication was expected by the end of October 2025. She also noted that additional reports were pending, including one on demographic change in rural Scotland examining migration patterns, and another exploring the community wealth building model.

**Santiago Cuervo Escobar** from the German Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency highlighted the issue of a lack of trust in local governments in rural Germany, linking it to limited provision of services and the rise of right-wing populism. He questioned how access to services could be improved in order to strengthen confidence in liberal democracy.

**Kristijan Kevešević**, Deputy Ombudsperson for Gender Equality in Zagreb, raised the gender dimension of rural rights, asking for examples of how research and policy initiatives could address gender-specific challenges in rural areas.

**Joseph O'Reilly**, representing rural communities in Ireland as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, reflected on how rural communities had been particularly affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. He asked how the expansion of remote working might transform rural areas and community life.

**Theona L Morrison**, Chair of Scottish Rural Action, noted that digital hubs in Ireland had enabled people to return to rural communities for university studies or remote work, which she observed contributed to greater equality and strengthened local communities.

**Ana Winship** added that in Scotland there are around 400 entrepreneurial hubs supporting local economic development. She also highlighted gender equality initiatives, noting that active local authorities, as seen in Swedish examples, were engaging with these hubs to support elderly care and health services.

**Charlotte Altenhöner-Dion**, Adviser at the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, cautioned that rural populations are highly diverse and that strategies often fail to reflect gender differences and other disparities. She

stressed the importance of avoiding stereotypes and populist narratives that portray rural populations as uneducated or backward.

Finally, **Tatjana Vlašić**, Deputy Ombudswoman of Croatia, highlighted that some rural areas lack digital infrastructure or the skills to access online services, making it essential to provide traditional, offline means of support as well. She stressed the importance of maintaining continuous engagement in rural communities, emphasizing that meaningful and ongoing dialogue with residents is crucial to ensure their needs are understood and addressed.

## Session 2: Legal Frameworks and Gaps – Effective protection of social and economic rights in rural areas

The second session was opened by **Tamas Kadar**, Co-Director of EQUINET, who framed the discussion by emphasising the crucial role of the European Social Charter (ESC) and the interpretative work of the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR), noting their significant influence on the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (CFREU). He pointed out, however, that the “*à la carte*” approach to the ESC—where states can choose which provisions to accept—creates uneven levels of protection, particularly regarding social protection and related rights.

The moderator stressed that, while social rights are in principle universal, it would be naïve to ignore the specific and intersecting challenges faced by certain groups and regions, especially in rural and remote areas. He called for the collection and use of clear, disaggregated data to inform targeted policies, strategies and legal frameworks. Above all, he warned against “one-size-fits-all” solutions, reminding participants that the real issue is not just the existence of rights on paper, but whether people can effectively access and exercise them in practice.

### Part 1: Current Legal Standards

**Tatiana Puiu**, Vice President of the European Committee of Social Rights, began by stressing that all provisions of the European Social Charter are relevant for rural communities — from housing and health to employment and education. However, she noted that the “*à la carte*” system of the Charter, which allows states to accept only certain provisions, continues to hinder its full application. Only 63 of the 98 provisions of the Revised European Social Charter are mandatory, and few states have shown willingness to expand their commitments. While this limits the Committee’s ability to assess all aspects of rural realities, there have been positive examples, such as Malta’s recent decision to accept additional provisions.

**Patrycja Pogodzinska** from the FRA followed by underlining the close link between the European Social Charter and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, explaining that the latter was largely inspired by the former. The EU Charter guarantees equality, health and education for all EU residents, not just nationals, but applies only when EU law is engaged. She highlighted the importance of the

European Pillar of Social Rights and the interpretative role of the Court of Justice of the EU, noting that although many rulings concern economic freedoms, they have indirect implications for rural and agricultural rights. FRA's research shows clear disparities between rural and urban areas, emphasizing the need for more disaggregated data and stronger implementation of rights-based EU funding instruments.

**Jamshid Gaziev**, Secretary of the UN Working Group on the Rights of Peasants, described the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants \(UNDROP\)](#) as a "normative innovation" that brings visibility to a group often neglected in international law. He explained that the Declaration complements regional frameworks like the ESC and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights by explicitly recognising peasants and small-scale food producers as rights-holders. It promotes agroecology, food sovereignty and sustainability, while also demanding meaningful and inclusive participation in decision-making processes. Mr Gaziev called for closer alignment between UN and European standards, and for using UNDROP as a tool to benchmark rural policies and strengthen accountability mechanisms.

Finally, **Luis Yanes** of the Scottish Human Rights Commission emphasised that NHRIs and Equality Bodies should "actively and creatively" use international instruments for advocacy and monitoring. He urged a more imaginative and strategic application of legal standards, even drawing on jurisprudence from other regions like the Inter-American and African systems, which have stronger traditions of protecting indigenous and rural peoples. Mr Yanes suggested focusing on three actions: partnering with local CSOs for rights education, conducting domestic and international monitoring that exposes urban-rural disparities and, where possible, pursuing strategic litigation.

## Part 2: Gaps and Challenges

In Part 2 of the panel discussion, **Tatiana Puiu** explained that rural issues arise regularly in the Committee's monitoring and collective complaints work. In 2023, half of the 800 conclusions concerned non-conformity, often due to insufficient or inaccessible services in rural areas. She stressed that the Committee's role is not punitive but constructive – engaging in dialogue with governments and advising them on necessary improvements. The ECSR's recent [Social Rights and the Cost-of-Living Crisis report](#) sought to identify common challenges rather than assess specific country violations. Yet, the speaker lamented that only 16 states have accepted the collective complaints procedure, significantly limiting the Committee's capacity to provide effective redress.

**Patrycja Pogodzinska** noted that the FRA's research has identified recurring challenges in rural Europe, including energy poverty and insecurity, and weak or uneven participation in environmental decision-making. She pointed to the lack of systematic human rights impact assessments in environmental and other projects related to rural communities, as well as barriers to accessing EU funds. According to the speaker, measures to tackle climate change, while necessary, can also deepen existing inequalities if rural perspectives are not considered. She stressed

that participation must be meaningful, not tokenistic, and that procedural rights remain under-enforced.

**Jamshid Gaziev** highlighted that UN monitoring mechanisms — through the CESCR, Special Rapporteurs, and UPR — often reveal rights concerns and normative principles that are overlooked in Europe’s rural policy debates. These findings can serve as strategic political leverage for domestic change, offering both guidance and advocacy tools. He underlined the need for stronger protection for rural activists, who frequently face strategic lawsuits (SLAPPs) and lack the means to litigate. Greater NHRI involvement in confidential complaints and country visits could help bring local realities to international attention, ensuring that rural people are not treated as secondary stakeholders but as primary rights-holders and interlocutors.

**Luis Yanes** concluded Part 2 of the discussion by identifying practical barriers that prevent rural populations from claiming their rights — most notably the absence of advice centres, limited awareness and insufficient funding. He questioned whether the current understanding of states’ “margin of appreciation”, “core obligations” and “progressive realisation” under international law adequately reflects the lived realities of rural communities. Mr Yanes also raised concerns about corporate actors’ growing role in delivering social services, warning that existing frameworks such as the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) do not yet fully protect rural communities from commercial exploitation or neglect.

### Part 3: Solutions

The final part of the panel discussion focused on how monitoring mechanisms could more accurately and systematically capture rural realities. **Tatiana Puui** called for increased use of alternative/shadow reporting at the national level, stressing that the ECSR relies heavily on such reports to verify government information. She confirmed that the Committee no longer issues deferrals — a state is now found either in conformity or non-conformity with the ESC — and encouraged continued cooperation from NHRIs and Equality Bodies in gathering reliable, on-the-ground data.

**Patrycja Pogodzinska** emphasised the need to improve data interpretation and address policy fragmentation within the EU. Stronger national action plans, targeted capacity building and systematic mainstreaming of human rights across all EU instruments are essential, she said, alongside guarantees of meaningful participation.

**Jamshid Gaziev** argued that the first step is recognition and inclusion — involving rural communities directly before decisions are made about them. He advocated for stronger links between local producers with authorities, supporting grassroots mobilisation and promoting *amicus curiae* interventions in relevant cases. He also stressed the value of cross-institutional dialogue like the one taking place in Edinburgh, which foster shared learning, mutual understanding and solidarity.

**Luis Yanes** concluded by reminding participants that sustainable solutions must be rooted in rural communities themselves. According to the speaker, international organisations and monitoring bodies like those present at the meeting should provide clearer, more operational guidance and help close the persistent normative and implementation gaps that persist within the international system. Real progress, he argued, depends on listening to, empowering and ultimately trusting those who live the realities of rural life every day.

## **Q&A Session**

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During the Q&A session, **Theona L Morrison** used the example of McDonald's fries, which are produced from a single variety of potato grown at industrial scale globally, to illustrate how industrial farming practices can undermine biodiversity. She contrasted this with the role of indigenous and rural communities, who act as long-standing stewards of biodiversity often in opposition to the interests of large oil-based and biochemical corporations. For Ms Morrison, this is not only an environmental concern but fundamentally a human rights issue — the erosion of rural life endangers the very foundation of agriculture. She further emphasised that "one-size-fits-all" policies must be culturally informed and context-sensitive, recognising that priorities differ from place to place, whether concerning access to land, digital connectivity or adequate housing.

**Tatiana Puiu** recalled the Martinique and Guadeloupe case to illustrate the limitations of current legal frameworks. In these French overseas territories, farmers were exposed to a pesticide banned since the 1970s, leading to severe health consequences, including cancer. Because of the territorial exception applied by France at the time, the European Committee of Social Rights could not act — the relevant collective complaint was deemed inadmissible. However, she noted that the case later prompted France to extend the application of the European Social Charter to these territories, showing how rights-related crises can drive legal reform.

**Patrycja Pogodzinska** added another example from France, where a farmer was poisoned by a Monsanto pesticide. Attempts to ban similar chemicals often face resistance from farmers themselves, who fear losing their harvests and livelihoods. Governments, under such pressure, sometimes reverse protective measures. Her intervention underscored the complex and often conflicting balance between environmental regulation, economic survival and human rights protection — demonstrating that without coherent, systemic support, rural communities are often left in impossible positions between sustainability and subsistence.

## Working group sessions wrap-up and discussion: NHRIs and Equality Bodies experiences and good practices in realising socio-economic rights in rural areas

### Working Group 1: Access to essential services – Health, Education, Housing, Connectivity

On behalf of Working Group 1, the moderator **Mariam Rechchad**, Policy Officer at EQUINET, underlined the need for institutions to proactively reach out to rural communities rather than waiting for citizens to approach them. Regular field visits, travelling regional offices and mobile services were seen as vital to overcoming geographical and infrastructural barriers. The group also stressed the importance of ensuring that rural communities are represented in policymaking, project design and research, so that their lived experiences inform institutional priorities.

As noted by the moderator, a “rural lens” must be systematically applied to data collection and analysis to capture intersectional dimensions such as gender, age and disability. Participants further highlighted the need to raise awareness of social rights at the local level, using clear and accessible language to empower rural citizens to understand and claim their rights. Finally, the group emphasised that meaningful participation is a human right in itself, urging institutions to hold governments accountable for involving rural residents in decisions that affect them.

### Working Group 2: Employment, Inclusion, and Youth Opportunities in Rural Areas

Working Group 2, moderated by **Sophie Hale**, Human Rights Officer (Capacity Building) at ENNHRI, examined how different national contexts shape employment realities in rural regions. Participants noted that challenges vary significantly across Europe — for instance, Malta’s compact geography presents very different dynamics from those of larger, sparsely populated countries. A recurring issue was the difficulty in keeping young people engaged and motivated to remain in, return to, or invest in rural areas.

Participants discussed how NHRIs and Equality Bodies can leverage their mandates to ensure rural voices are heard — through practical measures such as tailored leaflets, guidelines and awareness raising campaigns tailored to rural populations. Limited resources and the scarcity of regional offices remain major obstacles. Still, the group stressed the importance of cooperation, peer learning and institutional mobilisation through platforms like the Collaborative Platform hosting the event, as well as the value of support from the Council of Europe and the FRA in guiding and reinforcing this work.

## Working Group 3: Local governance and rural participation in decision-making

In Working Group 3, moderated by **David Reilly**, Head of Communities and Networks at Scottish Poverty Alliance, discussions centred on the erosion of trust in public institutions, which participants saw as directly linked to the erosion of social rights. This distrust makes fostering participation particularly challenging. The group reflected on the differences between direct and representative democracy, noting that both require adequate resources and early engagement to build genuine participation. They emphasised the need for stronger civic education and soft skills to enable rural citizens to meaningfully participate in local governance.

Participants also acknowledged that many of these issues are not unique to any one country, with Scotland's experiences mirroring those found across Europe. They proposed that sharing local success stories could help inspire and replicate effective participation mechanisms elsewhere.

## Working Group 4: Strengthening rights monitoring through different mechanisms (Scottish report on Highlands and Islands)

Finally, Working Group 4, moderated by **Alison Hosie**, Research Officer at Scottish Human Rights Commission, focused on grounding monitoring efforts firmly in lived experience. Participants agreed that meaningful monitoring must begin with actively listening to communities themselves — being physically present, visible and consistent. "Going to the communities" not only improves data quality but also builds trust, credibility and legitimacy for institutions. They rejected "one-size-fits-all" approaches, stressing that rural and island communities are far from homogeneous. Partnerships with local authorities were seen as key to ensuring accountability, using both incentives ("carrots") and requirements ("sticks") to foster cooperation.

The group called for continuous capacity building for NHRIs and Equality Bodies, especially on how to use and interpret data effectively. They also urged stronger and more strategic engagement with existing international mechanisms and proposed building a peer-learning network to exchange methodologies, ensuring that monitoring remains consistent, practical and community-driven over time.

## Closing session

The closing session, moderated by **Tanya Montanari**, Coordinator of the CoE-FRA-ENNHRI-EQUINET Platform on Social and Economic Rights, served as a concise yet reflective conclusion to the day's discussions. Ms Montanari warmly thanked all participants, including speakers, moderators and attendees, for their active engagement and valuable contributions. She highlighted the spirit of collaboration that had characterised the event, noting how the diversity of perspectives—from local practitioners to international experts—had enriched the

collective understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing rural and island communities in the realisation of social and economic rights.

The moderator reiterated the importance of continuing dialogue and cooperation across institutions and countries, emphasising that the insights gathered would inform the Platform's future work. With that, Ms Montanari handed the floor to the rapporteur for the presentation of the meeting's conclusions and key takeaways.

## Conclusions by the Rapporteur

The meeting's Rapporteur, **Nikolaos Papadopoulos**, Lecturer at European Law and Governance School (EPLG) and Council of Europe Consultant, opened his conclusions by warmly thanking the hosts and participants for their contributions and steady commitment to the protection of social rights over the past decade. He highlighted the personal as well as academic relevance of the meeting's theme, noting that, as someone originating from a small Greek island, he has witnessed firsthand how geography shapes access to rights and opportunities.

Mr Papadopoulos recalled Rafael Benítez's assertion that full enjoyment of social rights should never depend on where people live, yet emphasised that rural communities across Europe continue to face structural barriers to healthcare, housing, education, transport and digital access. He observed that rurality is often insufficiently recognised in human rights systems and policy discourse, and that geography can act as a structural inequality shaping access to rights, sometimes amounting to "ruralism", an unacknowledged form of discrimination.

The rapporteur recalled Angela O'Hagan's statement that Scotland's experience in the Highlands and Islands reflects a broader European pattern of rights denial and retrogression in rural areas. This, he noted, is closely linked to one-size-fits-all policies that ignore rural realities, the exclusion of rural communities from meaningful participation in policymaking and the shrinking role of the state.

Mr Papadopoulos also reiterated the fact emphasised by Tatiana Puiu in her keynote speech, that rural exclusion is not merely a policy failure—it is a human rights violation. European human rights treaties, including the European Social Charter, place binding obligations on states to respect, protect and fulfil rights throughout their territories. The European Committee of Social Rights has repeatedly clarified these obligations, while also highlighting opportunities: rural development, digital and energy transitions and local community initiatives can advance rights and close gaps if grounded in human rights law and local realities, rather than imposed top-down.

As noted by the rapporteur, the first session of the meeting focused on the structural challenges faced by rural communities. Charlotte Altenhöner-Dion highlighted how austerity, centralisation and privatization limit access to social rights and constrain human rights defenders. Ana Winship underlined the diversity of rural regions, noting both challenges like depopulation and opportunities such as cultural identity and entrepreneurship. Theona Morrison emphasised the importance of language and narrative, urging a move away from deficit models and recognition of rural areas as central to identity, resilience and innovation.

Finally, Tatjana Vlašić showcased Croatia's approach through regional hubs and cooperation with civil society, demonstrating the impact of long-term and sustained advocacy.

The second session examined existing legal frameworks and gaps that hinder the effective realisation of social rights in rural settings. The rapporteur recalled Tatiana Puiu's statement that all European Social Charter provisions are relevant to rural life, but that limited political willingness among states to fully adopt them remains a challenge. Patrycja Pogodzinska highlighted the relevance of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, secondary legislation and the European Pillar of Social Rights as tools to address rural inequalities. Jamshid Gaziev presented the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants, which makes visible groups often excluded from international law and emphasises meaningful participation. Finally, Luis Yanes stressed the important role played by NHRIs and Equality Bodies in making creative use of existing instruments through education, monitoring and strategic litigation.

Regarding gaps and challenges, the discussion highlighted, according to the rapporteur, limited monitoring capacity, procedural and practical barriers for rural communities, digital exclusion and uneven climate policy impacts. Participants emphasised the need for shadow reporting, grassroots mobilization and innovative approaches such as confidential complaints or country visits to ensure rural voices are heard. As all speakers agreed, solutions should prioritise listening to communities and integrating their knowledge and experience into monitoring and policymaking.

In the working groups, common themes emerged, per the rapporteur: the necessity of reaching rural communities, fostering trust through direct engagement, ensuring meaningful participation and applying a consistent "rural lens" in data collection, research and policy design. Raising awareness and education in accessible language, along with collaboration and peer learning among institutions, local authorities and communities, were emphasised as crucial for effective monitoring and rights realisation.

Mr Papadopoulos concluded that addressing socio-economic rights in rural areas requires recognising rural disadvantage as a human rights concern embedded in international obligations. Existing universal and regional instruments provide a normative basis, but the challenge remains to close gaps in recognition, monitoring and implementation, ensuring that rights are realised for all, in cities and villages alike, without discrimination.

## Closing message

In her closing message, **Angela O'Hagan** emphasised the importance of having clarity on next steps, noting that the meeting successfully achieved this objective. Gratitude was expressed to all participants for their contributions, highlighting the strong sense of community and collaboration that underpinned the discussions. Special acknowledgment was given to Scotland, recognising the significance of hosting the meeting there and the value of its experiences and insights in informing the discussions.

# Appendices

## PROGRAMME

3 October 2025, Edinburgh, Scotland

**09:00 - 09:30 | Registration of participants**

**09:30 – 10:00 | Opening session**

**Moderated by Margarita GALSTYAN, Head of Cooperation Unit, Department of Social Rights, Council of Europe**

### Welcoming remarks

- *Rafael BENITEZ, Director of Social Rights, Health and Environment, Council of Europe*
- *Angela O'HAGAN, Chair of Scottish Human Rights Commission*

**Keynote speech - Rights and Rurality: challenges and opportunities for the full realisation of socio-economic rights for rural communities in Europe**

- *Tatiana PUIU, Vice President of the European Committee of Social Rights*

**10:00– 11:15 | Session 1: The State of Socio-Economic Rights in Rural Europe**

**Objective:** Outline the structural challenges faced by rural communities in accessing socio-economic rights: access to services, employment, just transition, housing, digital divide.

**Moderated by Debbie Kohner, Secretary General of ENNHRI**

### Speakers:

**Findings by the Commissioner for Human Rights on access to social rights in rural Europe**

- *Charlotte ALTENHÖNER-DION, Adviser, Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe*

**Rural Exodus in Europe: Creating Opportunities for Local and Regional Renewal: presentation of the upcoming report of the Social Inclusion Committee of the Congress for Local and Regional Authorities**

- *Ana WINSHIP, Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)*

**Current challenges for rural communities in Scotland and Europe**

- *Theona L MORRISON, Chair of the Scottish Rural Action*

**Access to public services and healthcare for people living in rural areas in Croatia**

- *Tatjana VLAŠIĆ, Deputy Ombudswoman, Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia*

**Q&A Session (15 min)**

**11:15 – 11:30 | Coffee Break**

**11:30 – 12:45 | Session 2: Legal Frameworks and Gaps – Effective protection of social and economic rights in rural areas**

**Objective:** Discuss the scope and limits of current legal frameworks such as the European Social Charter, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and other relevant instruments and

identify legal and practical gaps that hinder effective realisation of social rights in rural settings.

**Moderated by Tamas Kadar, Co-Director of EQUINET**

**Speakers – Panel Discussion:**

- *Tatiana PUIU, Vice President of the European Committee of Social Rights*
- *Patrycja POGODZINSKA, Project Officer, Equality, Roma and Social Rights Unit, FRA*
- *Jamshid GAZIYEV, Secretary, UN Working Group on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas*
- *Luis Felipe YANES, Policy Officer – Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Lead, Scottish Human Rights Commission*

**Q&A Session (10 min)**

**12:45 – 14:15 | Lunch**

**14:15 – 15:45 | Parallel working groups - NHRIs and Equality Bodies experiences and good practice in realising socio-economic rights in rural areas**

**Objective:** Based on the identified challenges and the existing legal standards and monitoring mechanisms, the working groups will share and discuss good practices and solutions that support the realisation of social and economic rights of people living in rural areas. The working groups discussion will also foster peer exchange and practical recommendations on selected themes. Each group will have a facilitator, rapporteur, and will be asked to produce 2–3 key messages or recommendations.

**WG 1: Access to essential services – Health, Education, Housing, Connectivity**

*Moderated by Mariam RECHCHAD, Policy Officer, EQUINET*

**WG 2: Employment, Inclusion, and Youth Opportunities in Rural Areas**

*Moderated by Sophie HALE, Human Rights Officer (Capacity Building), ENNHRI*

**WG 3: Local governance and rural participation in decision-making**

*Moderated by David REILLY, Head of Communities and Networks, Scottish Poverty Alliance*

**WG 4: Strengthening rights monitoring through different mechanisms (Scottish report on Highlands and Islands)**

*Moderated by Alison HOSIE, Research Officer, Scottish Human Rights Commission*

**15:45 – 16:00 | Coffee Break**

**16:00 – 16:40 | Reporting back from Working Groups and discussion**

- Summary of key insights and proposals from each group (7 minutes each group)

**16:40 – 17:10 | Closing session**

**Moderated by Tanya MONTANARI, Coordinator of the COE-FRA-ENNHRI-EQUINET Platform on Social and Economic Rights**

- Invite participants to share their main takeaways
- Conclusions by Nikolaos PAPADOPOULOS, Rapporteur
- Closing message by Angela O'HAGAN, Chair of Scottish Human Rights Commission

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