

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

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

**2-3 October 2025
Edinburgh, Scotland**

CONCEPT NOTE

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, socio-economic 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’ emphasis on the protection of vulnerable groups, such as persons 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 combat existing challenges, thereby ensuring equal opportunities for all and full respect for social rights.

The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights complements the European Social Charter by enshrining 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, reinforcing the principles of social justice and inclusion. Furthermore, it 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. This makes the EU Charter a crucial instrument alongside the European Social Charter to ensure that rural citizens are not left behind in Europe’s social and economic development.

Based on the above, the event aims to explore how persistent barriers and challenges to full and effective enjoyment of social rights in rural areas intersect with States' obligations under the European Social Charter, the EU Charter for Fundamental Rights and other relevant human rights instruments. It will allow 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 will explore which areas of socio-economic rights remain unclear. Are there legal or practical gaps that hinder organisations from effectively supporting the realization of these rights in rural settings?

The event will also provide 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. The event follows the publication of the report on [Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands](#) by the Scottish Human Rights Commission.

This year's event will also mark the **10th anniversary of the COE-FRA-ENNHRI-EQUINET Collaborative Platform on Social and Economic Rights**, which has served as a key vehicle for promoting awareness of the European Social Charter among NHRIs and Equality Bodies and advancing social and economic rights more broadly at the national level. This milestone offers an opportunity to reflect on the progress made, assess ongoing challenges, and chart the course for future action. In this context, the Council of Europe is organising, in collaboration with the Scottish Human Rights Commission, a High-level Round table discussion '10 years of collaboration – challenges, achievements, and the way forward' and a cultural event on 2 October 2025.

OBJECTIVES

- 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

The event is designed to bring 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.

FORMAT / WORKING LANGUAGE

The meeting(s) will be held in person only. The programme will feature plenary sessions, panel discussions, working groups organised according to the key themes of the event and Q&A sessions. The working language will be English only.

PROGRAMME

2 October 2025

09:30 – 12:30 | Annual meeting of the ENNHRI Working Group on Economic, Social and Cultural rights
Venue: Scottish Human Rights Commission

This event is open to National Human Rights Institutions and to members of the ENNHRI Working Group on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. ENNHRI will provide further details and the agenda.

12:30 – 14:30 | Free lunch

14:30 – 16:00 | High-level Round table discussion ‘10 years of collaboration – challenges, achievements, and the way forward’
Venue: Godfrey Thomson Hall, Thomson's Land, University of Edinburgh

As the COE-FRA-ENNHRI-EQUINET Collaborative Platform on Social Rights marks its 10th anniversary, this panel will bring together high-level representatives and practitioners to reflect on a decade of joint efforts in promoting and protecting social rights across Europe. The discussion will highlight key milestones, assess the evolving role of equality bodies, national human rights institutions, and their partners, and identify how the Platform can continue to strengthen the implementation of the European Social Charter and other key social rights instruments. The event will also serve as a forum to discuss future priorities in a shifting socio-economic and political landscape.

Welcome and opening remarks:

- **Prof Kasey MC-CALL SMITH**, Director, Global Justice Academy, University of Edinburgh
- **Jan SAVAGE**, Executive Director, Scottish Human Rights Commission

Moderator:

Aaliya SEYAL, Member, Scottish Human Rights Commission

Panellists:

- **Rafael BENITEZ**, Director of Social Rights, Health and Environment, Council of Europe
- **Debbie KOHNER**, Secretary General of the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI)
- **Tamas KADAR**, Co-Director of EQUINET
- **Piotr SADOWSKI**, Secretary General of Volonteuropé & Vice President of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe

16:30 – 17:30 | Cultural event: Short tour of the Scottish Parliament
Venue: Scottish Parliament

17:30 – 19:30 | Buffet Reception – Celebrating 10 years of collaboration
Venue: Scottish Parliament, Garden Lobby

Welcoming remarks will be delivered by:

- **Annabelle EWING MSP**, Deputy Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament
- **Rafael BENITEZ**, Director of Social Rights, Health and Environment, Council of Europe
- **Rosemary AGNEW**, Member of the Scottish Human Rights Commission

3 October 2025

Venue: Scottish Parliament, Fairfax Somerville Room, Edinburgh

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