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Opening session of the High-Level Conference on the European Social Charter
organised under the auspices of the Lithuanian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers,
as part of the follow-up to the 4th Summit of the Council of Europe

Introductory speech by Michael O'Flaherty
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Ministers, Excellencies, Friends.

Many years ago, I was invited by a government to go to Iraq to train public officials in human rights. I was asked to talk about torture and freedom of expression. When I told the participants in the course about this, they were outraged, and they said: "We don't want to talk about that. We get that it is about human rights, but we want to talk about housing, jobs, access to health care."

That was one of many experiences I've had with rights holders. They appreciate that human rights are about civil and political rights, but that they are also about all the aspects of social justice. Or to put it in our jargon, people in our societies get the indivisibility, the co-equality, the co-dependence of all human rights.

We all accepted this once upon a time. Think of Roosevelt's four freedoms. Look again at the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Go back to the negotiations to establish the Council of Europe, which emphasised that social justice is essential to democracy. But we have fallen a long way from that today.

My own darkest experience of the decline was a meeting with a minister in a country a few years ago. I went there to raise some human rights issues. I made points one, two, three. Then I said, I'd like to talk about poverty now, Minister. She immediately cut me off and said: "You are here to talk about human rights. That has nothing to do with poverty."

It is clear from these experiences that we have a long way to go in reaffirming that social justice is about human rights.

Let me suggest **three actions at the Council of Europe level and three at the national level.**

First, **at the level of the Council of Europe**, we do need more ratifications of the revised Charter. And I have to say that it is highly problematic that we still have member states of the Council of Europe that have not even endorsed the original Charter.

Second, beyond ratification, states need to extend their commitments and accede to the Collective Complaints procedure and, with regard to the Collective Complaints procedure, I encourage states to follow Finland's good practice of allowing national NGOs to submit complaints.

Third, it is essential to support the work of the European Committee of Social Rights, including providing it with the necessary resources to allow it to develop its enhanced dialogue procedure.

Turning to the **national level**, I would first encourage states to embed a rights-based approach to social policy, and to mainstream it throughout government, on the basis of the Charter.

Second, I'd like to encourage states to explicitly link actions for social progress with commitments to social rights. Why is it that when we do something like reform the police force, we very instinctively say that it is in the context of standing up for human rights? But when we are in the area of social policy, let's say a new policy on job creation, we rarely link that explicitly to human rights. That has to change.

Third, and finally, in the development of social policy and law, states need to engage their national human rights bodies, such as national human rights commissions to a much greater extent than is presently the case. The record on such consultation patterns is very patchy indeed, as we saw in the context of state responses to the COVID pandemic, when the human rights expertise was quite often left out of the room.

Chairperson, Ministers,

Let me close with a memory from last Saturday. I spent last Saturday on the outskirts of Thessaloniki in Greece, meeting with Roma communities. I had a conversation with Roma children and asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up. One said a pilot, another said a mechanic, another said a beautician, and one boy said a lawyer. I don't know if these Roma children will achieve their dreams. I certainly hope they do. But what I do know is that if their social rights are not honoured, then it's highly unlikely. That is our responsibility.

Thank you.