

**International conference on the rights of the child**  
**“Redefining power: Strengthening the rights of the child”**

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**Power Talk 2: The power of inclusion**

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I would like to say at the outset that it is a little painful for me to talk to you today about child poverty in Europe, which can be seen even in the wealthiest countries of this continent. It is a little painful for me, who have been involved in the work of the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) for about 7 years, because over the years and in the reports on the application of the Social Charter, although – fortunately – we have witnessed improvements during each monitoring session regarding compliance with the relevant articles of the Charter, as Aoife has just mentioned, we are also obliged to note the slow pace of this progress, and sometimes even some backward steps. In the case of children, who are the future and whose well-being and decent living conditions must be a primary concern, it is hoped that they at least will be effectively protected against overly serious difficulties in growing up and developing in appropriate conditions, especially in states where the overall standard of living is satisfactory. However, this is not necessarily the case.

I cannot but agree with the statement made by our [former] Secretary General, Mr Jagland, in his last report that “the [European Committee of Social Rights](#) has insisted over the past years through its monitoring procedure that austerity measures have exacerbated the already severe human consequences of the economic crisis marked by record levels of unemployment, discrimination, social exclusion and poverty, including child deprivation.”

Today, we all know that 25 million children in the European Union live in low-income households where living conditions are unacceptable and hunger is common. This is the latest information revealed by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights in its most recent report “Combating child poverty: an issue of fundamental rights”.

But deep down, what is poverty? There is no mystery about how the “poverty line” is defined, the ECSR, like other international bodies, has adopted the prevailing definition of the minimum level of resources needed to stay above this line, and of course it uses this definition in carrying out its work.

But what does “living in poverty” mean for a child in particular, in everyday life, and for his or her future?

For many children in the 47 member states of the Council of Europe, what is most visible, what is most routine, is being excluded from the “normal” things that make up the lives of other children, such as having three good meals a day, appropriate clothing, activities outside school, birthday parties etc.

The European Committee of Social Rights has stated that while generally speaking living in a situation of poverty and social exclusion violates the dignity of human beings, it has also stressed that for children, being deprived of the legal and social protection to which they should all have access not only results in a less comfortable life, but also in obstacles to accessing high-quality educational facilities, health care and decent accommodation.

Such a situation of poverty also often means that they have to work to support the family, with the risk of growing up without having the chance to play and learn at school, and having been exposed to various risks relating either to their participation in dangerous or tiring work, or to the exploitation and dangers they may face if they live on the streets, as is the plight of far too many of them, or even, and this can have a detrimental impact on their future lives, to inadequate health care.

I will not repeat how the ECSR examines the articles relating to these rights and difficulties, except to remind you that at European level, the European Social Charter is the only legally binding instrument that requires states to take positive measures to protect children from poverty and to guarantee their rights.

In particular, it requires states to ensure access to high-quality services in education, health care and housing and to adopt measures to protect families.

The ECSR's primary task is not to award good and bad points in terms of respect for the rights protected by the Charter; above all, its task is to assist member states in applying the articles of the Charter relating to these rights, and in particular the rights of children. And for that reason, the Committee has identified some essential points that I would like to highlight, because they can really help to reduce poverty and especially poverty that is transmitted through the generations, not least because children are in no way immune to this.

- First, each state must have a clear understanding of the situation, through the continuous production over long periods of relevant indicators and statistics, relating for example to the distribution of income among the population, living conditions - especially those of adolescents, the homeless and all vulnerable groups, such as migrant families or single-parent families, or families and individuals belonging to vulnerable or discriminated minorities. Such statistics should be primarily intended for decision-makers to guide them in drawing up their strategic objectives.

- Second, they must put in place sustainable social transfers that rectify the distribution of income to assist the most vulnerable and help to reduce poverty. In particular, this means choices in terms of public spending, a significant proportion of which should be devoted to social welfare. And if this social welfare is to have a real impact against poverty, it must include the functioning of high-quality services in the field of those fundamental rights without which no progress is sustainable: health, education and training, and housing.

- In a period such as the present, when poverty is increasing, it seems advisable in parallel for there to be an increase in social welfare expenditure as a percentage of GDP over a sufficiently long period, such as that covered by national poverty reduction plans, which many member states have adopted.

- In such plans, it is essential to develop, as a number of member states are already doing, detailed and sustainable consultation procedures with various civil society organisations, research institutions, professional organisations, local authorities and the social partners.

- In order to improve monitoring of the situation, it is helpful for states to set up national instruments or institutions to monitor and assess poverty, which can, where necessary, send warning signals to the authorities.

The Committee has been pleased to note that when such measures are taken, they have a positive impact on improving access to fundamental social rights for the whole population, including the poorest sections.

There are still the basic problems that the Committee is working to resolve: First, too many countries have not adopted all the relevant articles of the Charter, including Article 30, which deals with all aspects of the fight against poverty. However, while in order to adopt the Charter, at least one set of specific articles must be adopted, Article 30 is not one of these articles. Helping countries that have not yet adopted it to do so is at the heart of the Committee's special relationship with member states.

In the same spirit, the Committee is committed to ensuring that more member states adopt the system of collective complaints, which has enabled significant progress to be made in the 15 states that have already adopted it. This system, which allows a number of NGOs and trade unions to raise particular difficulties before the Committee, and thereby discuss them with the state concerned, is a very relevant alarm system for identifying points that pose a problem in the application of the Charter. In the Committee's view, this system has the very useful effect not of singling out who is good and who is bad, but of preventing possible national disputes by drawing states' attention to sensitive points in advance. This is why the wish to extend the application of this procedure to more states is also at the heart of its work.

As you can see, we are making progress, but there is still work to be done, and the Committee is not faltering in its determination to do so. Working days like this one make an effective contribution to the hoped-for progress and for this reason I would like to extend a sincere thank you to the organisers, and to all those who have gathered here today.

Thank you.