

**The Revised European Social Charter: what use for what impact?
"Advancing the implementation of socio-economic rights by making better use of
the monitoring procedures of the European Social Charter"**

Webinar

organised by the Conference of INGOs' "Action for Social Rights" Committee, in
partnership with the Department of Social Rights of the Council of Europe
14 June 2022 10.00-12.30 CET

Opening Speech by the President of the Conference of INGOs

First of all, I would like to thank the Social Rights Department of the Council of Europe to make this event possible. Most and for all I want to thank our Committee "Action for Social Rights" which has worked so hard to organise this event and to contribute to the efforts of the Council of Europe through the Social Charta System. When we underwent our own reform process as the Conference of INGOs we envisaged that the new type of committees we wanted to create would be dedicated, highly active and a strong partner to the appropriate bodies of the Council of Europe. The Committee "Action for Social Rights" definitely has lived up to these expectations and has proven to be a most valuable contribution to the work here in the house. My special thanks go to Jean-Bernard Marie and my predecessor Anna Rurka for their great leadership in this committee.

Today everything is overshadowed by the Russian aggression in the Ukraine. But we must not forget that these tragic events only are the end of a long process of increased aggression and systematic undermining of the democratic values for which this institution stands. And even while the horrors of the war unfold in the Ukraine, we still see the deep gaps in our own societies, which have grown through the recent decades. We use often an oversimplifying phrase to describe this gap, talking about "City" and "Country". It is far more complex than this. But when we look at the reasons for this division in our societies, they can mostly be summed up under the word "social".

Social in a material sense of distribution of wealth, income, labour, in a more abstract sense of inequality and discrimination, in education and culture. This makes the Social Charta so valuable, after more than 60 years it is as necessary and actual as when it was drafted – maybe even more so. The Social Charta deals with most of these items and offers paths of reconciliation and thereby strengthening our democratic societies and making them more resilient. The European Social Charta compliments the European Convention of Human Rights and in many aspects helps to bring it to life. During the last Fundamental Rights Forum of the EU in Vienna the representatives of the EU stated that "social rights and human rights are two sides of the same coin".

Like any convention this charter is an international legal instrument which needs to be signed and ratified by states, but most importantly, which has to be implemented. The implementation is the key issue here, because otherwise it is only a nice piece of paper. And that is why the European Social Charter has a monitoring mechanism, a reporting system and a body to deal with complaints and a lack of implementation in the contracting parties. It is this implementation in which Civil Society has to play a key role: providing information, making use of the common complaints mechanism, creating publicity for the charter and for its mechanisms.

This system is under revision right now and we know that member states complain about the system being too complex, the reports too much of a burden, the common complaints by NGOs a nuisance. But with our democracies under attack from inside and outside we must have a strong system here. We

need to heal the wounds in our societies and close the gaps. A good social policy is adamant, and the Social Charter is there to guarantee that the needs and demands of people are heard and served. We need to strengthen the mechanisms not to weaken them. Making them more efficient, yes, absolutely, downgrading them, no, absolutely not.

And here is the arena where Civil Society has to play its role. By calling states and governments to fulfil their obligations, to implement the many good intentions laid down in the charter and in their commitment to it. This is the classic watch dog role of NGOs, to monitor, to make public, to go to court – or in this case use the common complaints mechanism and to demand that the findings are respected, the deficits remedied.

The Council of Europe has only a soft power. It can demand change, it cannot impose fines and just deduct them from the subsidies given to member states like the EU can. Therefore, publicity is of the essence, and again this is where Civil Society and NGOs come into the game, as they can make noise and make deficits public. Therefore, the active participation of our NGOs in the Charter System is vital and events like this, which shall help to empower NGOs to do so, are incredibly important. Therefore, our Committee on Social Rights has made it a key priority to organise these webinars and to spread the message.