

International Day for the eradication of poverty 17 October

**Meeting around the slab in memory of the victims of poverty
10 October 2023 at 10:00 a.m.**

Organised by the Council of Europe Conference of INGOs

**Draft speech of Christos GIAKOUMOPOULOS,
Director General of Human Rights and Rule of Law**

Dear Ambassador, dear President of the Council of Europe Conference of INGOs, dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, which will be celebrated in one week and for which this is an advance, honours the millions of people suffering from poverty and their daily courage and recognizes the essential global solidarity and shared responsibility we hold to eradicate poverty and combat all forms of discrimination. It is also, and mostly, a call for action to eradicate poverty, possibly the human rights violation that affects the largest number of persons worldwide at any given moment.

It is not by chance that the umbrella theme of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty of the United Nations for this year is “dignity for all in practice”. Because poverty is not only deprivation of basic needs or material resources, but a violation of human dignity. There can be no human dignity without equality, and there can be no real equality without solidarity, mutual respect between all human beings and the recognition of social and economic human rights. Human dignity is the basis, the very source and the ultimate goal of all human rights, including those enshrined in the European Social Charter. In recent years, the International Human Rights Law has acquired a high level of global legitimacy. A Human Rights approach to poverty looks not just at resources but also at the capabilities, choices, security and power needed for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other fundamental civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. Human rights have no meaning unless they begin with the right to life at a tolerable level of existence.

Unfortunately, and to my greatest regret, poverty is still persisting in Europe. In 2022, more than 95 million people in the EU (22 percent of the population) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. These are people living in households facing at least one of the three risks of poverty and exclusion: income poverty, severe material and social deprivation and/or living in a household with very low work intensity. Young adults were more at risk of poverty or social exclusion than other age groups.

For example, the latest Eurostat figures show that 68 per cent of those aged between 25 and 29 in Ireland were still living at their parents’ home last year, compared with an EU average of 42 per cent. The reason: young people in Ireland, like elsewhere in Europe, cannot gain independence in terms of home ownership.

We are also experiencing high inflation rates, resulting from rising energy prices linked Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, but also because of speculation on energy

markets, and rising food prices, again linked to speculation on agricultural markets. To protect Europeans from the risk of impoverishment linked to the return of inflation, the system of indexing wages to inflation must prevail and become the norm, like it is in Belgium, Luxembourg and Cyprus.

Let me mention a shocking - more than just surprising - poverty-related reality: shoplifting. High prices, especially of food, have led to the emergence of anti-theft devices on steaks in supermarkets in Germany and to an increase in shoplifting: +14.7 per cent in France and +25 per cent in the Netherlands in 2022 according to statistics from the national police. A worrying symptom for Europe? Shoplifting is undoubtedly a symptom, with the impoverishment of Europeans manifesting itself most visibly on the food front.

The French association 'Les Restos du coeur' will have to reduce the number of their beneficiaries this winter due to financial difficulties caused by the increase in operating costs due to inflation, and the increase in the number of people seeking help and in particular food.

Strengthening social rights and building a strong welfare state are essential to addressing the challenges we face today so that tomorrow is better. Investing today in the fight against poverty means investing in our future, investing in our children and in democracy.

Article 30 of the European Social Charter provides that "Everyone has the right to protection against poverty and social exclusion". Only 19 out of our 46 Member States have accepted this provision. However, although those who have not accepted this provision cannot be subject to full scrutiny of their anti-poverty policies, all are bound by this obligation. Human rights are universal, inalienable, indivisible and interconnected or interdependent.

For far too long, those who do not live in poverty have shifted responsibility. People in poverty or at risk of poverty are not responsible for their situation. Nor are they responsible for the solution to this human rights violation.

But while greedy, wealthy and hyper-wealthy influencers of political decisions have a responsibility, the ultimate responsibility lies with decision makers. Poverty is the result of a policy choice and ending poverty is also a policy choice. Ending poverty is the only legitimate policy choice and solutions are within the reach. Failure to put them in place does not only amount to neglecting the duty of policy makers. It is also an act of cruelty, of extreme cruelty. Transferring responsibility for poverty to the victims is, in addition, a sign of cowardice and a betrayal towards the people for whom they have a duty of care.

The ultimate paradox of ending poverty is that, and I mentioned this before, investing in people and combating poverty is win-win, it is not an actual cost, but a most productive investment, a driver of growth.

I therefore call upon all Council of Europe Member States to further realise their commitments in practice, in line with what they have recently confirmed in the reform process of the Charter's system. These commitments are all the more important given the hard times we face, and which dramatically affect persons in situations of poverty. I call upon Member States that have not yet done so to ratify the revised European Social Charter and accept Article 30 of the Charter, a cornerstone, the respect of which guarantees the fundamental rights laid down in the European Social Charter.