

Rights and Rurality: from Recognition to Action

27 March 2026

Council of Europe Office in Brussels, Belgium

A practical workshop for National Human Rights Institutions and Equality Bodies, follow-up to the 15th Meeting of the COE-FRA-ENNHRI-EQUINET Collaborative Platform on Social and Economic Rights¹ (Edinburgh, 3 October 2025)

CONCEPT NOTE

Background and Rationale

The 2025 Platform meeting “*Rights and Rurality: challenges and opportunities for the full realisation of socio-economic rights for rural communities in Europe*” highlighted a persistent and systemic gap between the **formal universality of social rights** and their **uneven territorial enjoyment**. As underlined in the meeting report, rurality continues to function as a **structural axis of inequality**, shaping access to healthcare, housing, education, transport, energy and digital connectivity across Europe.

Participants agreed that rural exclusion is **not merely a policy shortcoming**, but may amount to a **human rights violation**, engaging binding obligations under instruments such as the European Social Charter, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and relevant UN standards. Yet, despite a robust normative framework, **implementation gaps remain significant**, fuelled by centralisation, austerity, privatisation, one-size-fits-all policymaking and the limited participation of rural communities in decision-making processes.

The conference further identified “**ruralism**” as an under-recognised form of discrimination, compounded by weak monitoring, limited data disaggregation, digital exclusion and uneven climate and transition policies. At the same time, participants emphasised that rural areas are **not spaces of deficit alone**, but also of innovation, resilience, cultural identity and community-driven solutions.

Against this backdrop, the COE-FRA-ENNHRI-EQUINET Collaborative Platform on Social and Economic Rights proposes a **1-day follow-up workshop** aimed at moving **from recognition to action**. The meeting will focus on **operationalising a human-rights-based rural lens**, strengthening institutional practices and fostering peer learning among actors already committed to advancing social rights in rural contexts.

Objectives

The workshop aims to:

1. **Deepen practical understanding** of rural disadvantage as a human rights issue embedded in existing legal obligations.
2. **Strengthen institutional tools and methods** used by NHRIs, Equality Bodies and CSOs to monitor, document and address rural socio-economic rights violations.

¹ Report of the 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 (Edinburgh, 3 October 2025)

3. **Exchange concrete practices** on outreach, participation and trust-building with rural communities.
4. **Explore innovative monitoring and accountability mechanisms**, including shadow reporting, confidential complaints, strategic litigation and country visits.
5. **Advance a shared “rural lens”** for data collection, policy analysis and advocacy at national and European levels.
6. **Foster sustained collaboration** among institutions and civil society engaged in rural social rights work.

Target Participants

- National Human Rights Institutions
 - Equality Bodies
 - Civil Society Organisations (including grassroots and rural-based organisations)
- Participation will be limited to organisations **actively interested in or already working on social and economic rights in rural areas**, to ensure a practice-oriented and in-depth exchange.

Methodology

The workshop will be **interactive and practitioner-focused**, combining:

- Short expert inputs
- Case-based discussions
- Peer-learning
- Collective reflection on next steps

Emphasis will be placed on **accessible language**, mutual learning and grounding discussions in participants' real-world experiences.

Expected Outcomes

- Shared understanding of key **operational challenges and solutions** in rural rights work
- A set of **practical approaches and tools** adaptable to different national contexts
- Stronger **networks and collaboration pathways** among participants
- Initial elements for a **common action framework or checklist** for applying a rural human rights lens

Preparation

- All participants are expected to have carefully read and reflected on the report from the 2025 Platform meeting “Rights and Rurality: challenges and opportunities for the full realisation of socio-economic rights for rural communities in Europe.
- Participants should reflect beforehand the questions and topics proposed in the agenda and concept note.
- To ensure the most effective use of time, participants are kindly asked to prepare notes of case-studies and/or examples of work currently underway on the subject of rurality and socio-economic rights or challenges that the organisation currently face that they wish to interrogate with the group.

PROGRAMME

09:15 – 09:30 | Opening and Setting the Scene

- Welcome by the COE
- Objectives of the follow-up workshop
- Key takeaways from *Rights and Rurality* meeting in Edinburgh

Tanya MONTANARI, Coordinator of the COE-FRA-ENNHRI-EQUINET Platform on Social and Economic Rights, Council of Europe

Luis Felipe YANES, Policy Officer, Scottish Human Rights Commission

09:30 – 10:45 | Session 1 – Rurality as a Structural Human Rights Issue: From Invisibility to Recognition

Facilitator and Speaker: *Luis Felipe YANES, Policy Officer, Scottish Human Rights Commission*

Focus:

- Rural disadvantage as structural inequality and relationship with poverty
 - “Ruralism” and territorial impact on socio-economic rights
 - Implications for mandates of NHRIs and Equality Bodies
 - Potential legal routes for rurality as a ground of discrimination
 - Advocacy for long-term legal reforms
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10:45 – 11:15 – Coffee break

11:15 – 12:30 | Session 2 – Using Existing Legal Frameworks More Effectively: Closing implementation gaps

Facilitator: *Milla VIDINA, Policy Officer, EQUINET*

Focus:

- Leveraging the European Social Charter and the EU Charter in rural contexts
- Creative use of monitoring, education, reporting and litigation
- Distinction between forms of rurality and inaccessible communities
- Addressing limited political will and uneven territorial implementation
- Scrutinising and challenging ‘rural lenses’ such as impact assessments

Speakers:

- *Luis Felipe YANES, Policy Officer, Scottish Human Rights Commission*
 - *Lorenza MOLA, Project coordinator, Professor of International Law, University of Turin*
The SustAge project: Design and governance for integrating the grey and green transitions in rural areas through homecare services and renewable energy communities
 - *Michael MARCONDES SMITH, Representative of the Socio-economic Inequalities and Poverty Discrimination working group (SEIPD), University of Antwerp, Belgium*
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12:30 – 13:45 – Lunch break

13:45 – 15:00 | Session 3 – Monitoring, Data and Accountability Through a Rural Lens: From data gaps to lived realities

Facilitator: *Sophie HALE, Human Rights Officer (Capacity Building), ENNHRI*

Focus:

- Applying a consistent rural lens in data collection and analysis
- Creating long-term sustainable monitoring approaches and data collection for rurality
- Integrating local and community-based knowledge into monitoring
- Reporting to regional and international monitoring bodies, complaints handling, field visits

Speakers:

- *Goele VERCAMMEN, Rural Policy Officer, Flanders Rural Pact, Flemish Land Agency & Stephanie VAN OPSTAL, Rural Policy Officer, Flanders Rural Pact, Flemish Land Agency*
- *Zhanna HAKOBYAN, Director of Centre for Research, Expertise, and Education, Human Rights Defender's Office of Armenia*

15:00 – 15:15 – Coffee break

15:15 – 16:30 | Session 4 – Reaching Rural Communities and Ensuring Meaningful Participation: Examples from the field

Facilitator: *Tanya MONTANARI, Platform Coordinator, Department of Social Rights, Council of Europe*

Focus:

- How to overcome procedural, geographic and digital barriers
- Building trust through outreach, local presence and accessible language
- How to ensure accountability in research for rural communities
- Participation beyond consultation: co-design and co-monitoring (e.g. cooperation with local authorities and civil society)

Speakers:

- *Lenka VESTENICKA, Human Rights Officer, Slovak National Centre for Human Rights*
- *Dragana MARINKOVIĆ, Advisor, Protector of Citizens Office of Serbia*
- *Veerle STROOBANTS, Combat Poverty Service, Belgium*

16:30 – 17:00

Concluding Session - Next steps for collective action

- Key lessons learned
- Identifying priorities for future cooperation among NHRIs and Equality Bodies, CSOs
- Reflections on sustaining peer learning and joint initiatives

Luis Felipe YANES, Policy Officer, Scottish Human Rights Commission

Tanya MONTANARI, Coordinator of the COE-FRA-ENNHRI-EQUINET Platform on Social and Economic Rights, Council of Europe