

Rights and Rurality: from Recognition to Action

27 March 2026, Council of Europe Office in Brussels, Belgium

Meeting Report

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)

Objectives of the Workshop

The workshop aimed 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.
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.

Action Points Identified at the Meeting

- Encourage improved coordination across governance levels and ensure that responsibilities are matched with adequate resources.

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 \(Edinburgh, 3 October 2025\)](#)

- Use transport as a strategic entry point to improve access to multiple rights.
- Strengthen collaboration with NGOs and local actors to bridge the gap between law and practice.
- Expand outreach to rural communities through field visits and trust-building approaches to better capture lived experiences.
- Integrate a rural lens into monitoring and pre-legislative scrutiny.
- Advance strategic litigation on rural ESCR, including by invoking complementary frameworks such as anti-discrimination laws where possible.
- Promote the integration of human rights-based approaches at the local level, including by supporting or training mediators or other local actors.

Session 1 – Rurality as a Structural Human Rights Issue: From Invisibility to Recognition

The **Scottish NHRI** opened the session by asking whether impacts on rural communities are a form of deliberate government action or omission. Participants noted that these impacts are usually not deliberate but reflect limited understanding of rural realities within central governments, weak coordination across governance levels, and insufficient resources. Responsibilities are often delegated to local authorities without matching resources, and rural areas mainly receive political attention during election periods.

Decision-making was described as driven by efficiency considerations, raising the question whether resources are being placed insufficiently under such premises. The **Scottish NHRI** noted that funding is often available but not used effectively, citing an example from Edinburgh where spending on homelessness prevention was reduced while funding for festivals and fireworks increased. Participants also highlighted “one-size-fits-all” policymaking that fails to address structural inequalities and results in inflexible, unlocalised solutions.

Rural poverty was described as being less visible than in urban areas, and was often linked to mobility poverty. Cuts in public transport were noted to affect the enjoyment of other rights, while services such as transport and healthcare are increasingly being treated as individual responsibilities, with third sector

organisations filling the gaps left by the state. Improving transport was identified as a practical entry point to increase access to multiple rights.

Participants further observed that current economic models favour centralisation. One proposed approach was to frame investment in rural areas as economically beneficial and to create incentives that highlight the value of rural communities. However, caution was raised that tourist-driven investments have made it harder for local populations to remain in certain areas, often without local input. This highlighted the need for bottom-up approaches and locally grounded decision-making.

Proposed solutions included raising awareness, increasing pressure on governments, and developing tools to support this work, such as a potential ENNHRI and/or Equinet statement.

Session 2 – Using Existing Legal Frameworks More Effectively: Closing implementation gaps

Lorenza Mola, Professor of International Law, University of Turin, presented The [SustAge Project](#), which addresses two policy trends in the sectors of health and energy: homecare services and renewable energy communities. Using a human rights-based approach based on the European Social Charter (ESC), the project explores how the homecare services provision can be shaped to pursue green transition and social inclusion. It focuses on two European countries with similar demographics trends but different local governance solutions. The project also examines the potential role of renewable energy communities in reducing energy impact and supporting the social impact of active ageing-related homecare services in specific rural areas. It aims to identify a methodology of programming the provision of services with entities managing renewable energy communities, organise funding and propose regulatory improvements of renewable energy communities. The researchers are mapping territories to identify overlaps or mismatches between services, such as libraries and pharmacies, and renewable energy communities. They have mapped legal indicators that are relevant under ESC articles 11, 23, 30 and 31. Results from the first stage of the methodology are expected to be presented in June 2026.

See attached PowerPoint.

Michael Marcondes Smith, (SEIPD), University of Antwerp, Belgium, presented the work of the Socio-Economic Inequalities and Poverty Discrimination working group, which focuses on examining poverty and discrimination through a legal and litigation perspective. The group has identified discrimination as a way of triggering more urgent consideration of the protection of ESR and is exploring whether rurality could be recognised as a ground for discrimination. The lack of a comprehensive perspective of the prohibition of discrimination carries significant consequences for the visibility of such communities which remain widely invisible due to reasons that ought to be seen as arbitrary and remediable. Any employment of non-discrimination must capture the particularities of the issue it seeks to address. In the rural context, for instance, policy making that is ignorant as to the particular reality and needs of such communities may itself be discriminatory. This means that compliance with non-discrimination and the imperative of not excluding communities without justification may require an approach sensitive to their reality, an element that likely may only be achieved with their inclusion in decision-making processes, with proper identification of their needs, in particular compliance with a notion of human rights ‘from below’, or an approach of ‘localising human rights’, as proposed by De Feyter. Such standards, in particular the requirement of taking differentiated or positive measures to ensure the enjoyment of rights by disadvantaged communities has been developed in the international legal context, in particular in the inter-American system of human rights (see Inter-American Court of Human Rights advisory opinions). He also noted that anti-discrimination claims can be stronger than ESR claims, as they limit states’ ability to justify inaction.

In the discussion, participants questioned whether poverty should be treated as a discrimination ground, noting that it reflects a structural issue rather than a personal characteristic. They also discussed the roles of NHRIs and Equality Bodies, including strategic litigation targeting systemic issues and using other human rights obligations, such as anti-discrimination laws, in these processes, and applying a rural lens in monitoring and pre-legislative scrutiny.

It was noted the European Committee of Social Rights (ESCR) does not explicitly monitor rural communities specifically, though it refers to them in case law. Collective action to encourage monitoring on rural ESR was suggested.

See attached presentation.

Session 3 – Monitoring, Data and Accountability Through a Rural Lens: From data gaps to lived realities

Goele Vercammen & Stephanie Van Opstal, Flanders Rural Pact, Flemish Land Agency, presented their work on a Flemish Rural Pact, inspired by the EU Long Term Vision for Rural Areas. They developed a rural report based on official statistics, dividing municipalities by population density into rural, urbanized and large cities, and comparing forty indicators.

During the discussion, participants emphasized collaboration between rural and urban areas rather than competition. The challenge of defining rurality was raised, particularly for potential legal recognition.

See attached PowerPoint.

The Armenian NHRI presented their work on rurality, including awareness raising and monitoring. The NHRI noted that there is a lack of cooperation between ministries regarding data collection and the NHRI is now working on a program to centralise data. The **Slovak NHRI** noted that they created weekly platform meetings in Slovakia with NGOs, ministries, and agencies to improve information sharing on policies, though this required significant resources.

The **Greek NHRI** presented two practices in Greece that promote ESR in rural communities. The first focuses on women's cooperatives preserving local traditions, facing challenges such as limited administrative experience, low capital, and adapting to market needs. The second focuses on Roma women's associations supporting children's education, improving living conditions and empowering women. Supporting such initiatives is seen as a way of strengthening both local communities and human rights.

Suggested forms of support from NHRIs include field visits to collect data, raise awareness, improve reporting, support draft letters to competent authorities, making policy recommendations, and potentially coordinated ENNHRI action, such as producing country reports.

See attached PowerPoint.

The **Scottish NHRI** emphasised the value of qualitative, human-centred data, noting that quantitative data can hide lived realities. The importance of trust-

building with local communities and reporting positive progress to encourage civil servants to continue implementing with good practices was also emphasised.

Participants shared tools and resources for rural data collection, including [PAAR-Net](#) resources, as well as training from Equinet and ENNHRI on how to get good data by creating a trustworthy environment.

Session 4 – Reaching Rural Communities and Ensuring Meaningful Participation: Examples from the field

The **Serbian NHRI** presented practices addressing ESR in rural areas in Serbia, highlighting the lack of infrastructure as a key challenge. These practices included visits to a remote village where residents had to travel long distance to reach schools, which was exacerbated by the lack of adequate roads. The NHRI held meetings with the local authority executives and offered to act as a liaison with the highest government departments to address the situation. A 2023 report on healthcare services for older women living in the countryside identified vulnerabilities due to a lack of services. This led to a project funded by the Council of Europe to strengthen the capacity of institutions responsible for monitoring and protecting older women's rights.

The **Slovak NHRI** emphasised the importance of collaborating with NGOs to bridge the gap between legal frameworks and local realities. For example, they highlighted the crucial input of NGOs in relation to the continued effect of local administration on transgender people following the repeal of a sterilisation law affecting this group of people. The NHRI also published a report on environmental human right defenders (HRD), comparing experiences of HRDs in cities and rural areas. The report found out that HRDs in rural areas were more exposed to verbal and physical attacks. A network of municipalities was also established to flag good and bad practices, recommend improvements and provide training on human rights-based approaches in social housing. The NHRI built its network of stakeholders with the help of a grant from the Council of Europe. Once the network was established, the NHRI provided human rights training to the local organisations.

The **Belgian ENNHRI member – Combat Poverty Service** explained that they collected data on homeless people in Belgium by organising a real-life counting

of homeless people in different settings, including streets and shelters, in cooperation with municipalities. In collaboration with Belgian universities, a methodology for counting people not visible on the streets, was developed and served as a good example of collaboration with academia.

Participants noted that HRDs often view social rights as welfare rather than human rights, highlighting the need to adapt outreach approaches. Suggested solutions included demanding policymakers to increase local officers and regional resources and to conduct more outreach and field visits to collect data and register complaints.

Concluding Session – Next steps for collective action

The **Scottish NHRI** revisited the opening question of whether the impact of policymakers' decisions on rural communities constitutes deliberate government action or omission. They noted that, while many actions, while many actions can be taken without ill intend, they are still deliberate and have a significant impact on ESR in rural communities.

- Participants emphasised the importance of accounting for local specificities and adapting human rights-based approaches to diverse territorial contexts.
- The discussion highlighted opportunities to better integrate rural issues into reporting to the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR). Suggested actions included engaging with the ECSR in writing on the relevance of addressing rurality in responses, reviewing State reports to identify gaps, and consulting peer institutions such as the Irish Human Rights Commission and the Georgian Public Defender.
- It was suggested that the tools referenced during the meeting be consolidated and shared with relevant members of ENNHRI and Equinet to support broader uptake and implementation.
- Participants emphasized the need to strengthen the integration of a human rights perspective at the local authority level. This could be achieved through dedicated mechanisms - whether institutional groups or individual mediators – to raise awareness and ensure that rural concerns are reflected in municipal decision-making.

- NHRIs and Equality Bodies were identified as key actors in supporting capacity-building, including training mediators in human rights-based approaches. The **Scottish NHRI** offered to share its experience in this area.