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Social rights: Bridging the gap from policy to people
High-Level Conference on Social Rights

Institutional statement by Michael O'Flaherty
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

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Madam President, Secretary General, Excellencies, good morning.

In the course of my work, it is my distinct privilege to be welcomed into homes and community centres across the continent. In that context, I am able to witness the extent of unmet social needs, the extent to which social rights are unimplemented. For instance, I have been welcomed into homes that, through no fault of the families who live there, are not fit for human habitation. I have met people, especially women, who face deplorable discrimination in accessing hospital care. I have heard from parents who struggle everyday with the necessary choice between feeding and clothing their children.

Two common dimensions can be found across all the areas of deprivation.

The first is the profound impact of the intersectionality of disadvantage. Things are so much worse for you if you are Roma or a migrant, or indeed in some places if you are a member of the LGBTI communities.

Second, in Europe we face a grave problem of the unmet social needs and rights of children. In the EU alone, according to Eurostat in 2024. 19.5 million children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. That is practically 25% of all the children in those 27 of our member states.

This matters greatly, since poverty impedes almost every element of child development and makes poverty intergenerational. That is why I have made the combat of child poverty one of my top priorities in my mandate as Commissioner.

Today, drawing from my country work, I invite states to consider three pledges.

The first is to get ever more serious about addressing social needs and gaps as issues of human rights. In the Council of Europe context, that means committing to the revised European Social Charter, to signing it, to ratifying it; to accept the monitoring of its provisions; a commitment to the Collective Complaints Procedure; allowing national NGOs to submit complaints.

Second, all of our governments invest in complying with the Council of Europe standards and procedures, but also with the equivalent United Nations ones, including under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. And 27 of our member states also engage closely with the EU Pillar of Social Rights and the Child Guarantee, as well of course as with the Charter of Fundamental Rights. This is all very good, but we should not overlook that all of these are about, in essence, the same human rights. In that spirit, I encourage states in their social rights action plans to join the dots across the systems. Our work will be all the more impactful for that.

And third, and briefly, go local. In my work, I see the essential role of local and regional governance, for instance regarding the housing of Roma. In many places, the central-local partnership can and should be strengthened.

In conclusion, I wish us all well in attaining the lofty but achievable goals of the revised Social Charter, of a Europe of equality, of fairness and of social justice.

Thank you.