SPECIAL PROCEDURES
UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
COMMISSAIRE AUX DROITS DE L'HOMME
COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Social Rights: An Essential Component of the Fight Against Poverty

Joint Statement of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights on the occasion of the Council of Europe High-Level Conference on Social Rights

Chișinău, Republic of Moldova, 18 March 2026 - *As representatives of the Council of Europe Member States gather for the High-Level Conference on Social Rights, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O'Flaherty, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, issue an urgent call for action.*

Europe is losing the fight against poverty. In the European Union - one of the most affluent regions of the world - child poverty remains at 25% and is much higher in some parts of the continent. This trend is not merely a statistic; it is a flashing light pointing to a systemic failure.

The fight against poverty can only be won if it is firmly anchored in human rights. The European Social Charter is not just a collection of aspirations: it defines entitlements for individuals. These are enforceable rights that people should be enabled to claim before independent bodies, thus delivering accountability.

Poverty is more than a lack of income or decent work. It is a form of disempowerment fueled by institutional and social maltreatment, social stigma and daily humiliation.

Children are particularly affected. Being born into a low-income household is not just about overcrowded housing, poor nutrition or low-quality education, it is about the mental weight of shame, bullying and diminished confidence.

When a child is forced to drop out of school or faces systemic barriers to success, poverty is perpetuated across generations. Being born into poverty can amount to a life sentence for a crime one has not committed.

Human rights should guide efforts to combat poverty. Rights are empowering. They change the relationship between service providers and clients, connecting duty-bearers with rights-holders.

This is not only essential for human dignity but also has very practical implications. Between 2021-2023, the contribution of social protection to poverty reduction decreased across Europe. A primary cause is the non-take-up of social rights: the gap between what beneficiaries are entitled to in theory and what they have access to in practice.

Bridging this gap requires:

- removing the shame and stigmatisation associated with claiming support;
- providing individuals with clearly defined legal entitlements and access to independent claims mechanisms, including courts;
- moving from “public charity” for beneficiaries to a relationship between duty-bearers and rights-holders.

We call for the adoption of national anti-poverty strategies informed by Article 30 of the European Social Charter, which protects against poverty and social exclusion.

These strategies should be designed with the participation of people living in poverty, as recommended in the 2012 UN Guiding Principles on extreme poverty and human rights.

Participation should move beyond tokenism toward co-construction, with an enriched solution toolbox. Such an approach identifies blind spots, empowers the agency of those with lived experience, and breaks path dependency and bureaucratic routines.

Social protection systems are an investment, not a burden. According to 2022 OECD estimates, childhood socio-economic disadvantage costs an average of 3.4% of GDP annually through lost employment, lost earnings, reduced health outcomes and the associated costs of reduced government revenue and increased benefit spending. Not making this a priority for Europe would be both legally unjustifiable and economically irresponsible.

The current threats to democratic life are largely the result of the sentiment, within certain groups of the population, that they are being left behind and are not benefiting from general progress. The fight against poverty is therefore, ultimately, a fight for democracy. We welcome the recognition that social rights are central to the New Democratic Pact for Europe and urge Council of Europe Member States to move from mere recognition to robust, rights-based implementation.

For more information and media requests, please contact:

For the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights: Gaëlle Bausson (Gaelle.BAUSSON@coe.int)

For the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights: Bahram Ghazi (bahram.ghazi@ohchr.org)