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Putting human rights into practice at the local and regional level

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All levels of governance are responsible for the implementation of human rights. Shared human rights duties between the authorities at national, regional and local level necessitate close cooperation and coordination. I have promoted systematic work for human rights through national action plans which have become common place in Europe. Human rights action plans cannot be effective without the active participation of local and regional authorities. They have a key role in delivering services related to education, housing, health and social care, water supply and public order which directly affect the enjoyment of human rights by individuals. As a region, Scotland is already implementing its own national action plan for human rights. In Austria, a national action plan is under preparation.

Many municipalities and regions in Europe have expressed their determination to become exemplary in the realisation of human rights. This is the case here in the city of Graz and in the region of Styria. Human rights cities and regions can become focal points for encouraging good and innovative practices. Last year's Congress report on best practices for implementing human rights is very useful in connecting the work of local and regional authorities with European and international human rights standards. The recent Congress Resolution on guaranteeing LGBT people's human rights is exemplary in identifying the measures local and regional authorities should take to promote equality and respect for diversity.

The situation of Roma illustrates the need for coordinated approaches between different levels and across policy sectors. Most member states have national Roma strategies, and municipalities and regions have an essential role in putting them into practice. Inclusive education and decent housing for Roma are two of the first hurdles. In December, I visited an innovative Roma settlement in Strasbourg which is a joint government, local authority and NGO initiative aimed at assisting Roma in their transition to social inclusion. The authorities were providing free electricity, waste collection, washing machines, toilets and showers. Social workers assisted the residents to develop life plans and find work. All children were able to attend school. Strasbourg is already a member of the European Alliance for Roma Inclusion and I encourage more municipalities and regions to join this network.

In addition to Roma, the ability of other minorities to enjoy human rights can be facilitated by the actions of local and regional authorities. In Georgia last year, I met with regional and local authorities and representatives of Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities in the regions of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe Javakheti. Education in state and minority languages, access to services and employment, religious freedoms and the preservation of cultural heritage were among the major issues discussed. I encouraged the authorities to reach out to the members of minority groups and to undertake more systematic efforts to promote interaction and reduce mutual mistrust.

The economic crisis and austerity measures have affected the capacity of local and regional authorities to assume their responsibilities for providing public services. Homelessness is on the rise and there have been cuts to health care and services to victims of violence, for example. Local and regional budgets should be subject to human rights and equality impact assessment so that austerity measures do not have disproportionate effects on vulnerable and disadvantaged groups of people.

Homelessness will not end by moving people living on the streets away or by criminalising begging or sleeping on the rough. During my visit to Norway in January I highlighted the discriminatory effects of municipal begging bans on Roma and the need to provide emergency shelter to homeless people. It is better to tackle the root causes of problems than simply their outward manifestations.

Children and people with disabilities are among the groups adversely affected by austerity. Child poverty is a major concern. During my visit to the Netherlands last year I learned that some municipalities had adopted a “children’s package” of measures to address poverty but that the practice was not uniform across the country. In Andalusia, Spain, austerity measures had hindered the access of people with disabilities to community services and the regional government had launched an emergency plan against social exclusion to address this problem among other crisis-related issues.

The economic crisis has made it more difficult for municipalities and regions to gain sufficient funding from the state to fulfil their duties. While in Northern Ireland last November, I raised concerns about the unavailability of government funding to the regional police ombudsman to carry out effective investigations into past injustices highlighted by the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights. I am pleased to note that government funding has subsequently been de-blocked in Northern Ireland. The judgments of the Court have to be implemented during the crisis period as well.

Local and regional authorities have a central role to play in the promotion of gender equality. This was one of the themes I raised during my visit to Armenia in October. In the town of Vanadzor I met with the Mayor, regional governor, a judge and civil society representatives to discuss progress towards gender equality in the Lori region. Several local and regional bodies shared the duties for improving the status of women in society, responding to violence against women and preventing prenatal sex-selection. Their cooperation and coordination is necessary for the implementation of national policies on gender equality.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) can require local responses in emergency situations. In Ukraine I visited facilities for IDPs in Kyiv and in the eastern regions of the country. Local and regional authorities, volunteers and business leaders have been making considerable efforts and investments to meet the needs of IDPs. However, many localities are now overburdened. The national authorities need to step in to provide support, overall coordination and a uniform legal framework.

We have to improve awareness of the role of local and regional governance in implementing human rights. Local and regional authorities also need knowledge about human rights and the best means of making them a reality. In the Netherlands, I observed that the decentralisation of human rights responsibilities such as child protection measures should not only be accompanied by the transferral of sufficient human and financial resources but also by adequate training efforts in human rights.

Networks of local authorities nationally and at the European level play an important part in pooling expertise on human rights. The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights has made available a web-based toolkit “Joining up fundamental rights” for sharing knowledge about the implementation of human rights at different levels of governance. Many NGOs are useful partners for improving knowledge of human rights and carrying out training.

Local and regional authorities have a unique opportunity to coordinate the broad range of services provided to their residents in a rights-based and person-centred way. In fact, they can ensure that the residents’ human rights are not only respected but also fulfilled. This means that human rights are brought home in people’s everyday lives. During my country visits I will continue to urge governments to work together with local and regional authorities in making human rights a reality.