

4TH WORLD FORUM ON HUMAN RIGHTS,

"IN A WORLD IN CRISIS, WHAT ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS?"

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and pleasure to be here today at the opening of the 4th World Forum on Human Rights. The Forum has by now been established as a key focal point in human rights development through a great effort by the organisers. There seem to be an increasing amount of issues to be discussed and not least this year with the economic crisis taken firmly root in Europe.

Mahatma Ghandi once said, in this world, “There is enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed”. This, ladies and gentlemen, becomes particularly pertinent in times of crisis.

It is widely recognised that the rights of certain groups, particularly those already in a vulnerable position, are at risk from the crisis, including children, women, young adults, immigrants, ethnic minorities, and in particular the Roma.

As Director of the European Union’s Fundamental Rights Agency, I will focus on some of the EU developments in my short speech. I will first share some facts with you, moving on to look at ways of ensuring respect for human rights in a “*world* in crisis”.

A) The European Union is one of the most affluent economies in the world and respect for human rights is a core value in all of the EU Member States, protected by law.

Nevertheless, the economic crisis may already have had an impact on key fundamental rights.

- A large rise in unemployment has been recorded across Europe. Immigrants are being severely affected by the increase in unemployment levels. In Belgium¹, for example, in the first four months of 2009, there was a 13,9% increase in the unemployment of country nationals and citizens of EU-countries, compared to a 21,6% increase for those of non-EU origin. In this situation we run a severe risk of a dramatic increase in the part of the labour market where we find extreme exploitation or modern day slavery. Employers will be tempted due to the poor earnings and the most vulnerable part of the labour force will be attracted in order to survive. But slave conditions is a key human rights violation that needs to be addressed with much more rigour.
- In addition, almost 80 million EU citizens – that is roughly 16% of the population - live below the **poverty** threshold and the extreme poverty is on the rise. How do we ensure access to education, access to health and access to justice are key challenges in this periode?
- Past experience has shown that economic crises can also lead to **increased racism and xenophobia**. This may be due to the false perception that migrants take jobs or scarce welfare benefits away from country nationals; extremist groups may seize on these fears. A recent poll² found that 79 per cent of Italians, 78 per cent of Britons, 71 per cent of Spaniards, 67 per cent of Germans would back proposals to ask jobless immigrants to leave. We have also seen an increase in deadly attacks on Roma in a number of EU Member States.
- The economic crisis also **impacts upon key institutions** which have been established to protect and promote human rights, such as national human rights institutions, equality bodies, data protection authorities and ombuds institutions. This puts the accessibility and effectiveness of these institutions at risk. Some of these institutions are also suffering from serious cuts in their budgets or may even face their closure. The savings gained from such cuts are often minimal, but the cost of doing so can be dear at precisely the time when the vulnerable and the voiceless need more protection, not less. The same applies for **civil society organisations** that are also facing cutbacks not only in funding, but also in donations and sponsorship programmes.

¹ Flemish public employment agency

² United Kingdom : FT/Harris

B) So, Let's take a look forward: What can be done to safeguard fundamental rights in a time of crisis?

I'm sure that this question will be debated throughout this conference and I look forward to discussing with you interesting, innovative, but at the same time realistic and effective proposals.

Let me just mention a few points here:

1) Laws protecting fundamental rights must be in place and they need to be known.

Legislation protecting fundamental rights in the EU is strong, and has in fact got even stronger since we last met here in Nantes. With the Lisbon treaty we have got a stronger protection in particular with the Charter of Fundamental Rights now being legally binding.

But the best laws are passed in vain if people do not know about them or how to invoke them. Therefore, we must make sure that these rights on paper become known rights.

Evidence shows that many people do not know about their rights. There are in fact extremely low levels of rights-awareness among groups that are more liable to discrimination, such as immigrants, ethnic minorities or LGBT persons, to name just three examples. The Fundamental Rights Agency recently found in a survey of immigrant and ethnic minority groups that only a quarter of respondents were aware that legislation exists, to prohibit discrimination on the grounds of race and ethnicity in relation to housing, employment and goods and services. This, coupled with these individuals' lack of trust in the police and lack of knowledge about other institutions where discrimination can be reported, leads to the result that 82% of those who had been a victim of discrimination in the past 12 months did not report the incident, neither to the police nor to an equality body or any other competent authority. A similar picture prevails in the area of homophobia. This leads to a situation where perpetrators get away with impunity and victims remain invisible.

In addition, this means that policy-makers do not get the full picture of how bad things really are, because when they look at official "complaints" statistics, they only see the tip of the iceberg.

What needs to be done? Every person must have access to effective redress mechanisms that are sufficiently independent, sufficiently resourced and have the appropriate

mandates to really be effective. And more effort must be dedicated to telling people, including those who are most vulnerable or marginalised, what their rights are and who to turn to if their rights are violated.

2) And my last point: Ensuring fundamental rights are protected is not just a project at national or even at EU level, but one that must involve everyone.

It is important, particularly during a period of crisis that action is coordinated better between the national governments, the local authorities and specialised agencies – in effect working together to respond to the crisis, sharing resources and strategies.

In schools, hospitals, and police stations across the European Union, fundamental rights are respected – or violated- on a daily basis. Rights are respected when children with disabilities are given the resources they need to enjoy their right to education, for example. Rights are violated when people in reality cannot access hospitals or necessary medicine due to lack of resources or police officers stop members of ethnic minority communities simply because of the colour of their skin. Rights awareness needs to be raised when labour market inspectors or local populations turn the blind eye to extreme exploitation of people at the local industry, farms or as domestic workers.

Local-level actors - like teachers, nurses and police officers - have a huge impact on upholding human rights. They are in the end the real human rights defenders but many of them need to fully realise this responsibility and that should be part of our agenda.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to end with a quote by the so called “mother” of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Eleanor Roosevelt - a great human rights defender. She said: “Human rights exist to the degree that they are respected by people in relations with each other, and by governments in relations with their citizens.” This was said after a major economic crisis and after the two World Wars. Now, today, and, in the same spirit, let us all work together to ensure the real existence of human rights for all.

Thank you very much for your attention.