

Platform on Social and economic rights meeting

Speech of J.Jansons, the Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia

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Dear colleagues from Council of Europe, Fundamental rights agency, Equinet, ENNHRI and European Countries,

I am delighted that Platform on social and economic rights meeting is being held in Riga. And I am even more delighted that the topic of the meeting is poverty.

Poverty is a social phenomenon which exists in every country, however the level of poverty differs in each country. Why is it? What is being done differently?

United Nations has considered the reduction of poverty as one of the main targets in Millennium goals and also in SDGs¹. Also Article 30 of Revised European Social charter sets the obligation for States Parties to take measures to decrease poverty.

Thus the reduction of poverty equals increase of welfare.

However understanding of welfare is very individual. Especially if referring to welfare as a philosophical notion. The welfare threshold is individual and mainly depends on the value system and life quality of each person. In the context of human rights, welfare is a socially economic term.

¹ Sustainable development goals.

There are many international human rights documents which refer to welfare as a value, standard, guarantee that the States Parties have to ensure to their inhabitants. These documents indicate the necessity to increase the welfare level continuously.

Another aspect is the minimum standard. The minimum standard of the social rights refers to a certain standard of living that can be reconciled to the minimum standard of welfare, that is:

- each person has to have a standard of living that includes food, clothing, housing, medical treatment and social services necessary to maintain the person's and his/her family health;
- each employed person has to be provided salary that ensures a life compatible with human dignity for the person and his/her family;
- social security and execution of rights necessary to maintain self-respect and free development;
- rights for a continuous improvement of living conditions.

The minimum standard of welfare is mainly directed towards the person to ensure that his/her living standard would be compatible with human dignity, as well as to provide an opportunity to everybody, in line with the principle of equality, to live an adequate, suitable and fulfilling life, and to ensure free development and independence of the person.

If we analyze poverty from practical point of view, United Nations has pointed out that global poverty rate has been halved since 2000.² It shows a positive tendency.

² Sustainable development knowledge platform. Pieejams:
<<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg1>>

However almost every single day I, as the Ombudsman, receive applications from seniors, persons with disabilities, families with children with questions: “How can I survive with such low income? How can I support my family?”

In cases like this people do not inform me about lack of money for presents for friends or inability to go for a week-long trip to abroad. They talk about insufficient incomes to provide for food, clothing, housing, medical treatment and social services. These are people who work, who want to provide for themselves; who do not want to live on social benefits; however most salaries do not ensure a life compatible with human dignity.

In case of seniors in Latvia – it is surviving, rather than enjoyment of old age and decent life.

In case of persons with disabilities - recently Latvia received recommendations from UN CRPD committee with the request to ensure an adequate standard of living for persons with disabilities and their families, including the guarantee that social protection and poverty reduction programs take into account the additional costs related to disability.³

³ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Concluding Observations in relation to the initial report of Latvia. Pieejams:
<http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRPD%2fC%2fLVA%2fCO%2f1&Lang=en>

There are several preconditions for the development of welfare in Latvia:

- Latvia is an independent and democratic state;
- Latvia is located on the crossroads between West and East, on the Baltic Sea shore which is a favorable precondition for economic development;
- Latvia is a participant in the international organizations (EU, CoE, NATO, UN, OECD, etc.) directed towards welfare, life in peace and safety;
- the principle of socially responsible country has been included in the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia.

Thus it is appreciable that United Nations can inform about improvement in decreasing poverty, however I believe that theory and practice still conflict, even in countries which have preconditions to increase the welfare.

Therefore why do we still have to talk about poverty? Have the international society done enough to decrease poverty? Have responsible institutions done enough to reduce the poverty in national level? What instruments have been used to reduce poverty? Which instruments are efficient and which are not? What can we do more?

I hope to find answers to some of these questions today.

I wish everybody fruitful discussions with valuable lessons learned to be taken to your home countries and institutions.

Thank you.