



**Speech by Sir Alan Meale at the Conference on the occasion
of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty
“Building Europe through Human Rights: Acting Together
against Extreme Poverty”
in Strasbourg on 17 October 2012**

Mr President, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I have the pleasure today of addressing you as a representative of the Parliamentary Assembly and in particular its Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development. My Committee follows closely the situation in the Council of Europe member States on the challenges of social cohesion and the fight against poverty.

We sincerely welcome the initiative of the Conference of INGOs to mark the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty by organizing this meeting and give full support to the joint declaration on action against extreme poverty in Europe. The President of the Parliamentary Assembly has asked me to convey to you personally his warmest greetings to this assembly of stakeholders who unlike some others thankfully are determined to act and mobilize forces for building a more fair and just Europe.

As we all know, with the onset of liberalization and globalization from the mid-1990s, European society has been exposed to multiple strong pressures, notably those concerning its social model(s) and welfare systems. Indeed, most countries have experienced widening social inequalities and welfare gaps as a result. Unfortunately, this negative trend has further accelerated - due to the present financial and economic crisis - even in the most egalitarian countries.

We, in the Parliamentary Assembly, see this rise in poverty and social exclusion as a threat to the full enjoyment of fundamental human rights by the increasingly large parts of our populations. It is also a danger to the social cohesion of our societies. We believe

that everyone in society has the right to protection against poverty and social exclusion: a failure to protect the population from poverty and social exclusion penalizes human development and its full access to all human rights and economic growth.

This is why the most disadvantaged, the most vulnerable members of our society - the disabled, the poor, the young, the elderly, ill persons, the unemployed - need our special attention and support. We must therefore ensure that the existing solidarity mechanisms reach far enough into the deepest pockets of poverty across all Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen, for many Europeans the present crisis translated into the loss of employment and income, with prospects for improvement remaining dim and uncertain. A particularly worrying phenomenon of *long-term* unemployment has exposed entire families to unprecedented hardship. There is now a real risk that such hardship will leave life-long scars on the youngest of our generation - children and young people - and will accentuate the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

At the same time, the continuing financial and economic crisis across Europe has led many countries to apply severe austerity programmes that have in turn massively affected social transfers and policies. I say this because at the very least we must to ensure that any cuts in social expenditure spare the most vulnerable layers of the population and also that there is adequate targeting of social support (through compensatory mechanisms) to alleviate *extreme* poverty.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I believe that social cohesion is “the very cement of our society”, as the OECD Secretary General stressed while addressing the Parliamentary Assembly a fortnight ago. The fact that social cohesion keeps eroding, has gravely escalated social and political tensions in Europe and beyond over the past few years. As the patience of the population has limits, the plight of the neediest compels decision makers to take strong political action in order to defend socio-economic rights and social cohesion. We must therefore make the voice of the poor heard and develop new forms of governance and participation so as to empower people and communities affected to improve their situation.

In this context, we should hail the adoption of the Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly at the proposal from the

Human Rights Council. Importantly, a number of Council of Europe member States¹ gave their support to these principles at the moment of its adoption. We now have to ensure that information about the Guiding Principles reaches relevant authorities in ALL member States with a view to triggering action, especially as regards ending extreme poverty. I note in particular in it a proposal for “affirmative action in poverty-sensitive areas such as employment, housing, food, social security, water and sanitation, health, education, culture and participation in public life”, as well as effective equality between women and men.

This push for affirmative action reminds us of the responsibilities that many of our countries undertook by adhering to the revised European Social Charter which is the most advanced human rights protection instrument in the field of socio-economic rights, including protection against poverty.

The Parliamentary Assembly which today I represent has, on a number of occasions, highlighted the role of parliaments in consolidating social rights in Europe and will continue advocating strong parliamentary oversight of the implementation of national and international social commitments. This is a complex ongoing process but I can assure you that our Assembly will do its utmost so that concrete steps are taken by our member States towards strengthening social rights and social cohesion in general and curbing extreme poverty in particular.

In short, ladies and gentlemen, as representatives of our respective areas of society, we must work together in partnership in order to change things. As that great statesman Gandhi stated more than 50 years ago “when and if necessary we must learn to live more simply so that others may simply live”. As representatives of our respective countries and the people within them, it is our duty to do our best to help more the less well off and in need of our help, whilst on our inevitable journey to build a better society. I wish you well in your endeavours - thank you.

¹ Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, France, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Norway, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey.