

Living in dignity in the 21st century

Poverty and inequality
in societies of human rights:
→ the paradox of democracies

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Foreword

It is no easy task to write the foreword of such a complex work in a context marked by profound social changes. First of all, however, I must thank all those who have contributed their ideas, drawn up strategies and suggested alternatives, agreeing to become involved in this group effort. Above all, I must pay tribute to all those – and they are legion – who each day make great efforts to preserve human dignity and social justice. It is their commitment which first prompted us to produce this work.

What makes it particularly difficult to introduce this guide is the reality of the current social context. On the one hand, a growing number of people are affected by poverty. This wide-spread impoverishment of the population is evident even in the wealthiest countries of Europe, where increasingly large sections of the population have to cope with a growing lack of security unprecedented since the creation of the welfare state. On the other, the reversibility of social rights seems to have become the sole political choice. How then can one introduce a work which speaks of social justice for living together in dignity without appearing utopian, almost ridiculous or unaware of the urgent need – constantly hammered home by the media – to reduce public expenditure – especially expenditure allocated to the protection from poverty?

This guide prompts us to ask what exactly it means to live in dignity in 21st-century Europe. It focuses on the principles which underpin the Council of Europe's human rights approach: *universality* as the inevitable objective of living in dignity, *indivisibility* as a means of organising political approaches, and *integrity* – in the sense of the equal application of rights – as the result. Without this framework, the democratic exercise, or rather the gradual democratisation of societies (that is, progress towards achieving well-being for all), becomes impossible. In Europe's increasingly polarised societies stigmatisation takes the place of participation, criminalisation that of mediation, repression that of consultation and dialogue, and despair that of the prospect of a promising tomorrow.

Dreaming of a future of social justice has thus become taboo. Even thinking about the future has become simply impossible. These limits to our aspirations for society bring with them dire consequences for confidence in the future and our ability to move towards well-being for all. How then can we galvanise all the positive energy necessary to engage in a societal project for a society that has little confidence or vision?

Although imperfect and certainly incomplete, this guide does not merely analyse the current context, in which a re-evaluation of the very foundations of the welfare state appears unavoidable. It also explores other alternatives and prospects, two key aspects of governance which seem to have disappeared from politics. This guide examines concepts such as well-being for all, shared social responsibilities, common goods, tax progressivity and public finance, an end to waste, non-stigmatisation, basic income, etc. It is essential to take these factors into account if we are to regain the ability to conceive of a common future, free of violence and social fragmentation.

This guide argues that other political choices can be made. Choices which differ from those that lead to the

impoverishment and increasing insecurity of a large number of people and which promote the concentration of wealth and influence in the hands of a powerful minority. It also makes it clear that human beings – especially when faced with a situation of vulnerability – must not be viewed solely in terms of social costs. What prospect is there for a society that stigmatises its members because they cost the community dear, obliging them to lower their aspirations and forego their rights, at a time when resources are squandered elsewhere?

The realisation that such a state of affairs threatens the very idea of living together in harmony entails a redefinition of the objectives of political action, based on clear principles. Among other things, such action must be:

- *progressive*, that is, have as its objective the reduction of inequalities in all aspects of life in society;
- *non-stigmatising* by ensuring that human dignity and integrity are not undermined by the imposition of degrading and reductive conditions for entitlement to assistance which compromise the potential of the people in question;
- able to activate the potential to develop, recognise, share and preserve *common goods*;
- conducive to reasserting public awareness of the *universality of human dignity*.

The authors of this guide want to believe that such a transformation is still possible in a Europe so rich in values.

This foreword would not be complete without a few words of appreciation for the work accomplished by the contributors to the project. Alessandra Sciorba has, with the skill and patience of the Italian artisan that she is, drawn together the ideas put forward by all those listed at the beginning and at the end of the book (direct contributors or working group participants). They showed a remarkable ability to work together and reach a consensus on complex issues. Nicolas Wild produced the illustrations following the heated and sometimes difficult discussions. In-house colleagues, temporary members of staff, such as Anne-Iris Romens and David Rinaldi, have worked hard to ensure that this work was complete and followed a logical sequence. Several others also deserve mention: the copy-editors, the translators, the proofreaders, those who monitored the publication process, etc. In addition, I must pay tribute to the five cities which tested practical ways of combating poverty and growing insecurity together with their citizens. Charters of shared social responsibilities have been or will be signed in Mulhouse (France), Covilha (Portugal), Salaspils (Latvia), Timișoara (Romania) and Charleroi (Belgium). These cities have shown that alternatives are possible.

A sincere thank you to all of them.

It only remains for me to hope that readers of this guide will find it of interest. We hope that this work will prompt a societal debate in order to rekindle the political will to construct the paths to a better future, paths which confirm the value of human dignity in the 21st century.

Gilda Farrell
*Head of the Council of Europe Social Cohesion,
Research and Early Warning Division*

A long, shared pathway towards re-establishing priorities

Alessandra Sciarba

In 2010, the Council of Europe Social Cohesion, Research and Early Warning Division and the Directorate General of Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission launched the project entitled “Human rights of people experiencing poverty”.

The main aim of this project was to show how poverty affected all human rights – of which indivisibility is one of the essential characteristics. Accordingly, it is not only social rights that are violated, but also civil and political rights. The initial intention was to show that there is a one-to-one relationship between human rights and poverty: poverty is a form of violation of fundamental rights (and hence the overriding requirement to ensure that institutions and all social stakeholders shoulder their responsibility), but it is also the cause and effect of this violation.

In the course of this project, it seemed to us imperative to make the point that if rights are to be effective, they have to be universal: exercise of those rights must be available in practice to everyone, without discrimination, whether based on national or ethnic origin, social class or legal status. This means that we must bury the idea whereby the application of rights is a “zero-sum game”, in which the guarantee of rights for some presupposes a violation of those rights for others.

In analysing the relationship between human rights and poverty, the participants in the project sought to reassert, in addition to the indivisibility and universality of rights, the principle of their substantive integrity – or equality in their application. The same right, defined in the same words, cannot be exercised in a fundamentally different way depending on whether it concerns the wealthy and powerful or, in contrast, those in a vulnerable situation. There must be no “poor rights for poor people”, but quite simply rights for all.

These thoughts led to the first round of deliberations aimed at providing practical and operational responses to be addressed to the public authorities and civil society bodies responsible for implementing anti-poverty policies.

Along the way, the project evolved. It was augmented by considerations on the relationship between human rights and the ability to have one’s voice heard – in contemporary democracies, people experiencing poverty find it hard to speak out, or indeed are silenced – and on questions relating to the distribution and democratic management of resources, such as the recognition and defence of common goods or the introduction of a basic income.

Three working groups were set up to address these issues, meeting regularly over a two-year period from November 2010 to November 2012. The first group focused on the relationship between human rights and poverty, the second on the challenges which present-day poverty poses for democracy, and the third on identifying and evaluating new strategies to combat poverty.

This work is therefore the outcome of meetings, exchanges of experiences and theoretical discussions between more than 50 experts from academic, associative and trade union circles, and from individuals who, for various reasons, can be regarded as direct witnesses of contemporary poverty. This

explains why one of the features of this guide is its great diversity of opinions – a diversity which is evident in each of its pages and which in the subsequent editing process, we have been unable and indeed unwilling to completely eliminate.

All those who took part in the project provided new complex elements in order to broaden its scope, avoiding any schematic or black-and-white simplification of the real situation.

The first requirement was not to limit our analysis to extreme poverty, but rather to also take into account the impoverishment and growing insecurity of the living conditions of millions of European citizens, some of whom have hitherto never been faced with material difficulties.

Looking at the many causes and effects of old and new forms of poverty in Europe, the working groups made the point that it was essential to re-establish a relational approach to these problems, capable of taking into account the inequalities and examples of social and economic polarisation, addressing poverty from a systemic and political viewpoint, not as the side-effect of an unchangeable reality.

This led to a questioning of certain publicly stated attitudes focusing on the depletion of resources, referring to public debt as the result of a collective error, to be redeemed by everyone having to make sacrifices, with austerity as the only practical way forward and no conceivable alternative. Rather, the crisis we are experiencing, and the rise in poverty which is its inevitable consequence, was seen by the groups as the result of mistaken choices which need to be corrected and which stemmed from an exercise of power which for far too long has failed to include social justice and full respect for human dignity among its priorities.

Subsequently, the analysis of the challenges which societies based on human rights have to address was extended to encompass the intolerable processes of privatisation and waste of the resources which are essential to a dignified life, and the injustices which public institutions run the risk of exacerbating by moving further away from their prime duty of preserving the peace and well-being of all citizens.

Part I of this guide begins with an analysis of the inequalities in wealth distribution and of their effects in terms of insecurity and rising poverty (Chapter 1); it then looks at the negative consequences of all forms of categorisation, leading to exclusion, ghettoisation and social stratification (Chapter 2); lastly, it lays the foundations for new anti-poverty strategies, exploring the issue of the various forms of social interdependence, offering a different interpretation of the concepts of development, efficiency and security (Chapter 3).

Following on from this overview of the problems and reference concepts, Part II takes a detailed look at current trends in Europe. It makes a critical analysis of the way in which poverty is generally defined and measured (Chapter 1); it highlights the contradictions between the promotion of human rights (Chapter 2), democracy (Chapter 3), and the reality of the contemporary situation in which rising inequalities put paid to any prospect of genuine social cohesion; it explores the “irrationality” of the current management of material and non-material resources (Chapter 4); and lastly, it shows the errors of the taxation and redistribution policies pursued in most European countries in terms of their lack of progressivity in order to ensure social justice (Chapter 5).

All this analysis was carried out with one constant question in mind: what is the answer to the dramatic situation of poverty and impoverishment in Europe, where hope and confidence appear to have been exhausted, where supposedly inviolable rights are increasingly being called into question and where societies are fragmented by manifestations of intolerance and xenophobia, further adding to the isolation of the weakest?

There is no simple solution. But it is possible to redefine the goal we must strive for if human dignity is to be upheld and protected, in all contexts and in all circumstances.

Fully aware that the positive, constructive part of any approach is often the most difficult, the experts taking part in the project sought to lay the foundations of a new strategy to combat poverty and inequalities and to come up with concrete proposals for the measures to be taken.

Part III of this guide therefore begins with a new definition of poverty (Chapter 1), taking into account:

- the idea of the interdependence between social categories, dismissing all forms of criminalisation and stigmatisation of the most disadvantaged;