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Session III

Policies for social cohesion and for wellbeing for all – a vision for the future

Honourable Chair, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me express my sincere thanks to the Council of Europe for raising the issue of social cohesion to a new level on our agenda by organising this first Ministerial conference. The decisions made by the Heads of the member states at the Warsaw Summit in 2005 laid the foundation for this conference. Bearing in mind our discussions yesterday, I find it important that we improve the living conditions of all Europeans and in particular of those who face the greatest risk of being excluded from society, both economically and socially.

In order to strengthen social cohesion – especially today in the midst of the economic crisis – we need a comprehensive and effective social protection system. This is the way to maintain the sustainability of our societies, and confidence among our citizens.

Comprehensive social protection covering the entire population – the universal approach - has contributed to the relatively low incidence of poverty and social exclusion in Finland. New challenges, such as demographic change and the current economic crisis, require constant development of the system. In Finland the government has started an important reform to modernize the social protection system. The aim of the reform is to make accepting job offers always profitable, to reduce poverty and to ensure an adequate basic income in all life situations. These efforts, which are based on broad participation by all relevant stakeholders, have proved successful when developing our social policy during previous decades. The key actors in Finnish society, labour unions included, have agreed upon the overall social policy lines for develop-



ment. This kind of consensus building and cooperation has been necessary for the reform of our social protection systems.

Today, it would be a mistake to dismantle existing social and health services because of the economic crisis. I am convinced that social and health services play a vital role in increasing social cohesion and alleviating the impacts of economic recession. It is a matter of political will to provide universal access to services.

Madam Chairperson,

The Finnish welfare society has been built up over many decades. Taking into account our own experiences I wish to emphasize the following points:

- Comprehensive policy implementation ensures that social cohesion goes hand in hand with employment, education and finance policies.
- There is a need to uphold social protection and high-quality services despite the economic crisis.
- Social protection must be regarded as a productive investment for the future.
- The best way out of poverty is decent work.
- More attention should be paid to prevention, and to the promotion of health and welfare.

The Council of Europe, as the only Pan-European organisation that enables close co-operation with and between member states, can give real added value to regional and national policies. Through co-operation and through learning from the best practices of member states we can strengthen social cohesion in Europe. This Conference and its final declaration are important steps in this direction. We also need concrete actions in order to implement social cohesion strategies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A comprehensive policy that highlights justice is the best way to promote inclusion and solidarity. Broad-based responsibility and integrated policies are needed in many



policy areas, such as education, housing, social protection, and social and health services covering all spheres of life. There is a need in Europe to strengthen policy responses in order to improve the social cohesion of all Europeans.

Finally, I would wholeheartedly like to congratulate the Russian Government, firstly for hosting this important Conference and secondly for the intention to ratify the European Social Charter.

Thank you.

