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For the Council of Europe, social cohesion is the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation, to manage differences and divisions and to ensure the welfare of all.

Social cohesion is not a legal concept, which can be defended in courts. It is a political concept which highlights the strong relationship between the core values of the Council of Europe: human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Social cohesion is an essential condition for democratic security and sustainable development because divided and unequal societies are not only unjust, but also unstable in the long term.

That is why social rights, social security, public health and other social issues were included in the mandate of the Council of Europe almost from the beginning. But it was only a decade ago that the Council of Europe focussed on social cohesion as such with the development of our Social Cohesion Strategy in 2000. The Strategy is now regularly up-dated against the background of social developments and changing priorities.

In 2005, the Council of Europe Heads of State and Government created a High Level Task Force and commissioned a report under the heading "Towards an active, fair and socially cohesive Europe". The report, delivered in 2007, identifies four priority areas for concentrated action by public authorities at all levels, and for civil society and other stakeholders.

These proposals are the basis of your Conference, the first ever Conference to bring together Ministers responsible for Social Cohesion in Council of Europe member states.

First, you will look into the **necessary commitment for governments to invest in social rights**. I am particularly pleased that the Russian Federation is about to ratify the Revised European Social Charter, a Council of Europe instrument which not only sets out social and economic rights and freedoms, but through a system of country reports makes sure that Governments continue to respect their commitment.

The European Social Charter - with the European Committee for Social Rights, which supervises compliance with the obligations of the Charter – is accompanied by other instruments. These include the European Code for Social Security, which defines minimum standards for social protection. With the global economic crisis, the question of social protection gathers new relevance and new importance in Europe as much as anywhere else.

The Council of Europe is not about rhetoric. It is about policy and action. This is why the Council of Europe Development Bank actively supports member states in raising the funds which are necessary to invest in projects which reduce disparities and exclusion and make societies more socially cohesive.

Second, the report also concluded that **social cohesion is not the exclusive domain of public authorities** and the Council of Europe Development Bank. The High Level Task Force emphasised that it is crucial to share responsibilities.

Governments at the national, regional and local levels need to incorporate social cohesion into economic decision-making processes. At the same time they should encourage and empower citizens to act responsibly, not only with regard to their civic rights and duties, but also in their employment, consumption and lifestyle. There is also room for the social partners and NGOs, the private sector and the media.

Indeed, everyone is concerned because society concerns us all. Individuals as well as institutions need to be aware of the social changes which affect human, family, labour and local community relations in Europe.

Following the agenda set by the 2007 report, you will also need to explore **how we can help those who are at risk of poverty and exclusion. By help, I mean how we can enable them to represent themselves** and their needs in appropriate and constructive ways. Within the Council of Europe, this is the responsibility of the INGO Liaison Group, which exists to make sure that we hear the voices of those people who would otherwise be speechless.

The list of those who are at risk is long. I should only like to draw attention to one group of people, which exists within all other potentially marginalised or excluded groups, namely people with disabilities. Independently of whatever other group they belong to, their human rights and their dignity need to be respected, and public authorities need to take measures to guarantee equal opportunities, non-discrimination and full citizenship to these people who are so easily left out.

To promote a meaningful dialogue between public authorities and other partners, the High Level Task Force suggests that a forthcoming meeting of the Council of Europe Forum for the Future of Democracy should be devoted to a major topic - social cohesion – and look into the interdependence of democracy and social rights. This is an excellent idea which I fully support. Democracy is a process which only functions if everyone can participate. If citizens feel, rightly or wrongly, that they are excluded and alienated from democratic decision-making, then this is harmful to social cohesion and harmful to the functioning of democracy itself.

Finally, you will discuss the need **to build a secure future for all**. This is perhaps the biggest challenge which sounds almost like a provocation. Markets crumble, what looked safe can no longer be guaranteed, and people in Europe are beginning to understand that what they had come to believe since the end of the Second World War, namely that each generation would be a little bit better off than the previous one, is not necessarily true anymore.

It is true that Governments can take action – they are investing billions in both the financial and the industrial sectors in order to stabilise the economy and avoid unimaginable consequences for the majority of the population - and this is vitally important, but it is not enough.

I repeat: making the economy work is not enough. Governments must also make society work.

Social cohesion is a transversal concept, which requires and creates complementary actions. The wide range of policies and activities developed and implemented by the Council of Europe proves this point. There is no part of our organisation which does not have a role to play. Some of our colleagues work on legal solutions to the problems of debt. Others work on education for the children of migrants, on young people in the inner cities or on the development of indicators for social well-being, to mention only a few of our fields of action.

It is important that the work undertaken by the Council of Europe reflects the reality and the needs of our member states. The proposed Action Plan addresses precisely this issue and would translate the recommendations of the High Level Task Force into “bite-size” steps to be implemented by member states according to their needs and priorities.

The economic reality around us makes it imperative for us to act decisively and to act now. Of course, action to protect and promote social cohesion has a cost, but the cost of inaction is incomparably higher. It is a cost which our societies cannot afford.