

## Economic and Social Rights and the role of the churches

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### Introduction

Thank you for offering me the possibility to give a short introduction into the theme on behalf of the CPCE.

During the last months, the whole discussion on economic and social rights has become even more relevant, also in a European context where the EU-crisis represents a serious threat towards the safeguarding of economic and social rights of many people in Europe. People are losing their jobs and homes, many people cannot afford or do not get the medical treatment they need, children and youth do not have the chance to participate in higher education due to the lack of prioritizing education systems in many countries. In many countries in Europe today, people are suffering. Poverty is a contextual term, but we can clearly see that the poverty rates in Europe are increasing, and the gap between the richest and the poorest is widened. For the time being, we do not see an end of the crisis in Europe. I want to make this the starting point of my reflections on social and economic rights today.

In this severe situation it becomes even more important to highlight the understanding of economic and social rights in a theological and ecumenical way, and to point to some areas of common responsibility for our churches. During this crisis we experience in Europe for the time being, the churches have a specific role to engage themselves, both for the sake of its church members and for the sake of all people and all our societies in Europe. The churches have also despite their confessional identity and background, a *common* responsibility to see where they can stand together in their efforts. Thus, our churches are challenged and called to engage for individuals, communal structures and on a societal and political level. Therefore, the theme we are going to discuss during this session, the question of social and economic rights, is of utmost importance.

In this very short input, I will elaborate on a few aspects concerning the understanding of economic and social rights related to the role of our churches. Firstly, I will give some general comments, secondly, I will relate to the official statements from the Russian Orthodox Church (The Russian Orthodox Church's basic teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights), the response from the CPCE on this statement, and a statement by the CPCE presidium on the economic crisis in Europe, and thirdly I want to conclude by adding some theological comments pointing forward to the possibility for a common engagement of the European churches for economic and social rights.

## **Background: Economic and social rights**

Economic, social and cultural rights are socio-economic human rights, such as the right to education, right to housing, right to adequate standard of living and the right to health.

Economic, social and cultural rights are recognized and protected in international and regional human rights instruments. Member states have a legal obligation to respect, protect and fulfill these rights and are expected to take action towards their fulfillment.

While all human rights are said to be "equal, indivisible, interrelated, and interdependent", the monitoring, enforcement and implementation framework for economic, social and cultural rights seems to be less advanced than that for civil and political rights. International enforcement mechanisms are strongest for civil and political rights, and their violation is considered more serious than that of economic, social and cultural rights. Still we can see that these rights, and these areas of life, are intertwined. Secure health systems and education systems are necessary to safeguard the possibility of political participation of all citizens in the democratic structures of their societies. The possibility to work and have an income is necessary to sustain the basic demands of life.

Historically, we can see that the Christian Church from the time of the Early Church has been concerned about the wellbeing of its members concerning their life, food and everything which is needed to survive. The book of Acts gives a broad picture of this engagement of the Church from the Apostles times. Today, the Churches have continued to engage for people's lives through their diakonia. Diakonia today is not only a reaction towards suffering, but also a proactive engagement of the churches to avoid suffering. Thus, one should underline the close relationship between the Church's diakonia and the human rights concerning the field of social and economic rights.

## **The ROC paper and the CPCE paper on these issues**

In the statement *The Russian Orthodox Church's basic teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights*, the chapter on socio-economic rights underlines that "a person's earthly life is impossible without having its material needs satisfied." (IV.8) Furthermore, the document underlines that the concern for the right use of material wealth is an important concern for the church. From a protestant point of view, there is an agreement with the Russian-Orthodox opinion where it states that "a society has as its important responsibility to take care of those who are unable to secure their material needs. Access to education and vital medical care should not depend on the social or economic status of a person."(Op.cit., IV.8)

The Statement from the CPCE on *Human Rights and Morality*, which is a reply to the orthodox statement also underlines that "according to the Protestant understanding freedom is never without ties, but orientated on responsibility and love."(4) "Personal rights to freedom, rights to social participation and the rights to development, peace and the protection of the environment thus supplement one another, albeit in a relationship of tension." (Ibid.)

Thus, both documents have a common basic positive approach to social and economic rights when these rights contribute to the caring for those who are threatened and contribute to the living and outcome of people. On a local and national and international level, this common

conviction has shaped the churches' lives. The churches' social or diaconal work, focusing both on proactive work and reactive work for all people, especially those who are vulnerable and marginalized, such as sick people, elderly people, unemployed people, etc., show that the churches want to be present in their societies and for the people in their countries. Thus, the diaconal engagement of our churches can be seen as an expression of the basic conviction to protect the material and social needs of the people. In this area, the churches representing different traditions can and should cooperate closely with each other, with the political authorities in their countries and Europe, in order to make an impact on the life conditions of the European people. The churches should try to make an impact on the political and decision making structures within their societies.

### **Common theological ground and common engagement in the European societies**

The classical theological justification for human rights is based on the idea of human beings as images of God. God created humanity in God's own image, and therefore all human beings equally inherit a special dignity that cannot and must not be violated by any other person or state. Our traditions would basically agree on this point.

Secondly, it is important to underline that a basic approval of social and economic rights goes hand in hand with a profound Christian conviction that we are challenged to exercise a changed, responsible lifestyle. A statement from the CPCE presidium which was released on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2012, called *Meeting the crisis*, underlines this by saying:

*It is, however, already leading even more people to slide into poverty and unemployment. It is all the more important to be reminded that Europe substantially involves the European social model, uniting solidarity and subsidiarity. This connexion should be respected in all coming reform measures: the strong can carry more burdens than the weak – this holds good within societies, but also between the nations of Europe.(3)*

*And further:*

*Behind the crisis of debts and budgets, preceded as it was by a financial and banking crisis, a massive injustice comes to light. Gains are privatized but losses and risks socialized.(4)*

One could also say that the basic command "You shall not steal" can be interpreted and transformed in order to underline the demand for social and economic rights as expressed in the Human Rights declaration. In economic matters, respect for human dignity requires the practice of the virtue of temperance, so as to moderate attachment to material values; the practice of the virtue of justice, to preserve our neighbor's rights; and the practice of solidarity, in accordance with the golden rule.

Thus, the Christian tradition both supports the idea that every human being should have the chance to sustain itself and therefore have access to what is needed for life; school, food, medical care, work, etc. At the same time the Christian tradition also underlines that material wealth must not turn to greed, and that we have to be stewards of the material goods we have for the sake of our communities and societies.

## Conclusion

Concluding, one might say that the churches have a double role:

Firstly, to defend human and social rights because of the basic conviction that every human life is valuable and worth to be protected and supported. The churches can do so by encouraging their members, supporting their members, and lift up their voice for the marginalized and oppressed in our societies and by supporting them proactively in their struggle for a better life. Secondly, the churches can raise an active and clear voice towards the societies and political authorities concerning sustainable growth and for just social systems.