



**Opening Address by David Joyce BL  
Acting Chair  
Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Designate**

***A Human Rights Approach to Tackling Poverty and Social Inequality  
An All Island Perspective***

***Newry, Friday, 16 May 2014***

I am also delighted to be in Newry and to welcome you to this conference. We really are glad to see such a wide representation of organisations here today from the community and voluntary sectors and statutory sectors. I would also like to welcome representatives of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Oireachtas and our colleagues from the Scottish Human Rights Commission and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (UK).

I am speaking as acting chair of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (designate). Our mission is to strengthen efforts to promote and protect human rights and equality in Ireland. The legislation that will set out the Commission's functions is currently being debated by the Oireachtas. In the autumn we will begin a consultation on the development of IHREC's first strategic plan. Today's deliberations will inform that process.

A key function that will be carried forward is our work with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission through the Joint Committee. Established as a result of Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, working together, both Commissions have forged an all island perspective on human rights issues. We greatly value our co-operation and are committed to enhancing joint

activity, as this conference illustrates. We also value our work with our colleagues in the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions.

People and communities across the island of Ireland are facing increasing levels of deprivation exacerbated by the economic crisis and austerity policies. Some never escaped even in the so called 'good times'. The purpose of this Conference is to articulate that all human rights must be protected without exception. This event is opportunity to listen, and to share information and experience on an all island basis. We can discuss how a human rights approach can support the development of policies, services and resource allocation that can lead to better outcomes for people and communities experiencing poverty and social inequality. It is also a timely opportunity to become better equipped to review policy and practice against human rights standards and as the records of both Ireland and the UK on protecting economic, social and cultural rights will soon come under the scrutiny of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Both Commissions will provide their own assessments.

At the start of this conference, it is worth reflecting on the experience of the crisis and how stronger economic and social rights might have offered a buffer or shock absorber in the management of fiscal adjustment. A human rights approach would not have avoided fiscal adjustment but it would have enabled a framework for greater proportionality, fairness and protection of people living in poverty and social inequality.

Indeed the role of national and international elites in determining responses to the financial crisis has made manifest the relationship between economic and social inequalities and political or power inequalities. It is also the case, from Greece to Ireland, that over this crisis, institutions established to promote and protect human rights have had budgets cut and the human rights and equality infrastructure has been eroded and diminished. The scaling back of funding to community initiatives that support greater participation of people living in poverty exacerbates the political and power imbalances.

Unemployment, emigration, deprivation and homelessness are not only perilous at the level of the individual, family and community but also damage democracy. A new report just published by the Equality Authority and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) shows that levels of basic deprivation have increased very significantly between 2007 and 2011. Lone parents, children, cohabiting couples with children, people with disabilities and migrants have the highest levels of deprivation. The rise in the number of people being unable to afford some basic need is borne out by the huge increase in demand for support from organisations such as the Saint Vincent De Paul. This is why debt, housing and food poverty are major issues being addressed at our conference today.

A human rights framework offers a form of empowerment for people living in poverty and for those who seek a just and egalitarian society. An essential aspect of a human rights approach is effective and meaningful participation. This is not only ensuring people at risk of poverty and discrimination are adequately represented in all decision-making processes that affect them but are also empowered and supported to express their views.

Stronger enforcement of economic and social rights in domestic legislation is essential and has been called for by our Commissions, United Nations Committees and more recently by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Magdalena Sepulveda Carmona. In her **report** on Ireland, human rights standards shaped her analysis of the levels of poverty and the groups most affected.

A human rights approach is not limited to individual claims for vindication before the Courts which is usually an option of last resort. Justiciable rights do not ignore resource limitations; it provides a mechanism to manage the State's distribution of scarce resources in an equitable way. The approach offers a framework of good governance, strong democracy and better policy processes that can realise more sustainable outcomes that can lead to the reduction of poverty. Human rights principles can guide State institutions towards real equality, capable of making the economy work for everyone in society and our common good.

Having in mind the work in Northern Ireland on a Bill of Rights and our combined work in relation to a Charter of Rights for the island, the decision of the Constitutional Convention to overwhelmingly support the incorporation of economic, social and cultural rights in the Irish Constitution is hugely significant. It will take a combined effort to see this through to a successful outcome.

To conclude, we have a great mix of speakers and participants here. Today is not only an opportunity to share and compare approaches and experience, it is also a challenge for us to identify how we can work more effectively at an all island level to apply human rights standards to tackle poverty and social inequality and achieve real and meaningful results.

Thank you!