



Law Society of Ireland

Madam High Commissioner
Members of the Judiciary,
Members of the Profession,
Distinguished Guests,

Welcome

I am delighted to welcome you all here today to open the seventh Annual Human Rights Conference. Over the past seven years, the Irish Human Rights Commission and the Law Society of Ireland have embraced a number of human rights issues and last years' conference drew record numbers of legal practitioners, academics and students to the Society to learn more about the potential application of the European Convention of Human Rights in Irish law.

This year's conference takes on a much broader topic, that of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the accountability mechanisms that are in force to ensure the protection of these rights. The main objectives of the conference are to provide up-to-date information on the current legal framework relating to economic, social and cultural rights in Ireland and to provide a more detailed analysis of the enforcement mechanisms currently available both nationally and internationally. The conference also aims to provide all of us here with the unique opportunity to discuss the possibilities for the development and use of economic, social and cultural rights in our legal practices and in our daily lives.

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Current Economic Climate

Economic, social and cultural rights, as elucidated in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and in other international instruments, are crucial to the development and maintenance of a just and democratic society. This is even more true during difficult economic times where there is a real danger that the

rights of citizens and in particular, the most vulnerable citizens in society, will be eroded by the increasing financial pressures on the State. The Law Society is committed to ensuring current practices are kept under critical review and this Conference will assist in highlighting the threats facing economic, social and cultural rights in the current economic climate and the importance of maintaining and developing existing protections to the fullest extent.

Economic, social and cultural rights in Ireland

In the Irish context, the Law Society, through conferences and through educational initiatives, such as our new Certificate in Human Rights Law, encourages members of the legal profession to take on the challenge of protecting and enforcing economic, social and cultural rights. The Society regrets that no steps have been taken to incorporate or reflect the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (the main document protecting such rights at an international level) into domestic legislation. This failure limits the potential for the development and protection of such rights in Ireland. Despite this absence, however, much has been achieved in recent years in relation to housing law, mental health law and social welfare law through the work of legal professionals who have found alternative avenues for legal redress. It is hoped that this Conference will inspire others to continue this work and will provide information as to how such rights can be enforced in Ireland and on the international stage.

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Internationally

Internationally, the Law Society continues to manage and promote a programme aimed at developing the principle of the Rule of Law outside of Ireland. The objective of the Rule of Law Project is to develop and enhance the Rule of Law in the developing world so that economic, social and cultural rights, democracy, good governance and justice may be available to all people. The project is run and monitored by members of the Law Society and the Bar Council working together in a spirit of cooperation to further the principle of the Rule of Law globally by undertaking educational initiatives and assisting in the development of infrastructural improvements in legal systems. At present there are on-going projects in Ethiopia, South Africa, Kosovo and Bosnia reflecting the commitment, enthusiasm and

dedication of legal professionals in Ireland to the protection of economic, social and cultural rights worldwide.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to thank all of you for coming here today to participate in this important Conference. I am sure that you will benefit greatly from the wealth of experience of the speakers and from the opportunity to consult with colleagues on these important issues. I would like to thank all the Chairs and Speakers who have taken time out of their busy schedules to be here today. I would like to thank the Irish Human Rights Commission for continuing to jointly sponsor this Conference with the Law Society. I am delighted to be joined in opening this conference by the President of the Irish Human Rights Commission, Dr. Maurice Manning. Let me now hand over to the President to add his welcoming comments.