

Message of Support for Right to Work: Right to Welfare Group, N. Ireland

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Under international human rights law, States have an obligation to immediately meet minimum essential levels of economic, social and cultural rights (Art. 2 ICESCR) such as the rights to food, health, housing, education and social security. The enjoyment of these rights by all individuals is not conditional on the performance of certain actions or the meeting of requirements. Rather, these are inherent rights that are essential to the realisation of human dignity.

In the current climate of government cuts to welfare and increased unemployment, it is increasingly important to assess the compliance of the State's actions to protect and fulfil rights, not least in terms of how they meet basic needs but also in terms of the accountability and transparency of State-sponsored schemes. As I have observed in a 2011 report to the UN General Assembly (A/66/265), when States criminalise poverty through laws, regulations and practices that punish, segregate and control people living in poverty, their dignity and autonomy are undermined and specific human rights are violated such as the right to work, the right to social security and the right to privacy. This is often the case, for example, when States impose conditions or excessive restrictions on eligibility for basic welfare payments. Increased vigilance and monitoring of State actions is therefore sorely needed.

The important work being done by the Right to Work; Right to Welfare Group in Belfast, Northern Ireland to hold the government accountable through the grassroots development and use of human rights indicators and benchmarks is crucial and should be praised as a promising practice to be followed. The United Nations Guiding Principles on extreme poverty and human rights (A/HRC/21/39), adopted by consensus at the Human Rights Council in 2012, provide specific guidance for States on how to ensure that public policies uphold the rights of people living in poverty, based on human rights law and fundamental principles such as autonomy, participation, equality and non-discrimination, and accountability. The Guiding Principles are very much in line with the work of the Group and can be a useful tool for monitoring and advocacy work.

Your work can be an inspiration to others in the world struggling with inadequate State responses to unemployment and poverty. As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, I will continue to follow your work with interest and I look forward to contributing further support in the future.