Protecting human rights is an obligation, not a choice
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Today we celebrate Human Rights Day. Sixty years have already passed since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly. Looking back I think that in the European Union, despite ups and downs, we can be proud of many important advances that have made our countries a better place to live.

We celebrate today this important anniversary in a world no longer divided by an iron curtain, but deeply troubled by a global financial crisis that constitutes a challenge for human rights and raises important questions.

What does this crisis mean for human rights? Implementing human rights, ensuring social justice, supporting the vulnerable in our society – all of this costs money. Are we prepared to “afford” human rights in these times of crisis? How will the transfer of massive funds to banks and financial institutions affect employment, education, health, the protection of the needy and vulnerable? Is there a risk that we might be entering into a “human rights recession”? 

While it is too soon to predict exactly how society, and in particular the most vulnerable, will be affected, the International Labour Organisation estimated that the financial crisis could increase world unemployment by up to 20 million people. I see a great risk that many of these unemployed – in particular migrants - might move to the black labour market, where even in Europe slave-like working conditions can be found.

As the economy risks shrinking and countries tighten their belts, there is a growing risk that essential programmes for education, health care, or social assistance will fall victim to budget cuts - at a time when they are most needed. This can be fertile ground for the development of a “blame culture” and here history teaches us a bitter lesson: The most vulnerable in society – such as minorities, immigrants, refugees or asylum seekers – have often served as scapegoats in such moments. We risk seeing an upswing in xenophobic, anti-Semitic and other extremist ideologies, and also increasing exclusion, if not outright discrimination, of the persons with disabilities or the elderly, or also of women who often are in more precarious employment situations.

In Europe, we have tragically experienced in the past how economic downturn can lead to increasing exclusion, discrimination and persecution of vulnerable groups. It was in the spirit of “never again!” that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights happened in 1948, after Black Friday, the Great Depression, and the Second World War and the Holocaust. Through these economic and humanitarian tragedies the world was ready for such a great leap forward in the protection and promotion of political, economic and social human rights. In his famous “Four Freedoms” speech, Franklin D. Roosevelt underlined what he saw as the core freedoms that every human being should enjoy: Freedom of speech and expression, Freedom of religion, Freedom from want (“economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy
peacetime life for its inhabitants”), and Freedom from fear (“world-wide reduction of armaments … that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor”). These four freedoms have found their place in the Universal Declaration.

The rights in the Declaration, that every human being is granted, deal - next to political and civil rights - with some of the most crucial issues in relation to the current crisis: the right to a job and acceptable working conditions, the right to social security, the right to health and education, and the right to protection and care in situations of crisis.

Although social and economic rights have become an integral part of international human rights law, many governments still hesitate to implement them fully. But what is the cost of not implementing these rights? As it is evident in many parts of the world today, the cost is deprivation, social and economic exclusion and marginalization; all dangerous pathways to social and political alienation, discrimination, radicalisation, or conflict.

Governments have a duty to ensure the well being of their populations, which includes guaranteeing their human rights. This means that government policy must operate within a human rights framework in its efforts to ensure that the economy functions efficiently. Furthermore, in a globalised and interdependent world, governments can only achieve this through fostering multi-lateral cooperation and solidarity, as well as awareness of corporate social responsibility by businesses. Businesses themselves increasingly realize that in the long run they gain from the establishment of higher human rights standards, equal opportunities and social justice.

The financial crisis is addressed internationally in good cooperation between countries. I wish we would apply the same international spirit to develop programmes which finally put into practice the human rights standards that we agreed 60 years ago.

Many people argue that human rights are a “luxury” that we can ill afford in times of economic crisis. History shows that improved protection of human rights goes hand in hand with prosperity and wealth. Is wealth a pre-condition for “affording” human rights protection - or is good human rights protection and a firm rule of law simply a sound and sustainable basis for societies to prosper? I am convinced that the latter is the case: a proper legal framework that ensures that people can realize their full potential irrespective of their background, gender or age is a solid foundation for economic growth and prosperity; and this is why we need to establish a true human rights protection for all human beings.

Are we today better prepared than in the 1930s to deal with the human rights implications of economic crisis? While there may be some similarities, I firmly believe that we are indeed in a much better situation today. One of the main achievements in human rights in the last 60 years has been the establishment of national, regional and international mechanisms to protect human rights. It is said that silence nourishes oppression. Today there are many to speak out, should it become necessary: Today we have strong civil society organisations, and there are powerful
national and regional human rights institutions, such as the Council of Europe and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

Times of crisis have often been a motor for change to a higher level of human rights protection. In this sense the current financial crisis could help us take a leap forward in human rights protection by pulling down the artificial barrier between civil and political rights on the one hand, and economic and social rights on the other. Ultimately, human rights are about the dignity of each person. It is this dignity that must be preserved – especially in times of crisis. This is an obligation, not a choice.