

## **Oral statement to the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights**

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Social security is one of the key rights for the protection of human dignity. Historically, the UK system has been of limited success in protecting people of working age from poverty. Right now it is increasingly clear that it is failing even to provide universal protection against extreme poverty and destitution. Destitution is designed into the system in the level of benefits paid to young people, the deductions that can be made due to debts or overpayments and above all in the conditionality and sanctions regime. Destitution also occurs as an unintended consequence of things like delayed payments and poor take-up due to complexity, stigma and sometimes incorrect decisions. Charitable and discretionary assistance can help, but they are not a substitute for proper social security. They are not available as of right, can be even more stigmatised than mainstream benefits and are usually not adequate to meet people's needs. Scotland is leading the way in promising to build a social security system based on dignity. We need the UK as a whole to do the same – this means thinking again about benefit levels, how people interact with the system and stigma.

*Ulster University ranked number 4 in the UK for research in Law and number 1 for research impact in Law in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework. Research specialisms include poverty and social security, access to justice, human rights and legal issues affecting post-conflict societies. Recent studies of relevance to the Special Rapporteur include Social security systems based on dignity and respect (funder: Equality and Human Rights Commission), Destitution and paths to justice (Legal Education Foundation/Joseph Rowntree Foundation), Litigants in person in Northern Ireland (Nuffield Foundation) and Brexit and Northern Ireland (Economic and Social Research Council). We are currently commencing a participatory research project on claimant experiences of universal credit in Northern Ireland, in partnership with the University of York (funder: Joseph Rowntree Foundation). Ulster Law students address unmet legal need in the areas of employment, social security and housing through the award-winning LLM Access to Justice.*