

# Joining forces for social justice and sustainability

*How to make the Sustainable Development Goals  
and the European Pillar of Social Rights work  
together*

# Eurodiaconia

Eurodiaconia is a **dynamic**, Europe wide **community** of organisations founded in the **Christian faith** and working in the tradition of Diaconia, who are committed to a Europe of **solidarity**, **equality** and **justice**. As the **leading network of Diaconia in Europe**, we connect organisations, institutions and churches providing **social and health services and education** on a Christian value base in over 30 European countries.



We bring members together to **share practices**, **impact social policy** and **reflect on Diaconia in Europe today**.

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## Five steps to link the SDGs and EPSR

On 26 April 2017, the European Commission launched its proposal for a European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), which was then jointly proclaimed by all three EU Institutions on 17 November the same year. The EPSR is a framework of 20 principles building upon existing European social rights, however, it is not creating any legally enforceable rights on its own. For this the EPSR needs to be followed by concrete policy measures.

One year earlier, the European Commission has also committed itself to implement the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 (Agenda 2030) and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are the follow-up to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, in contrast to the MDGs, the SDGs are applicable to all countries world-wide, including the EU Member States, and encompass a wide range of social goals next or in connection with the environmental ones.

Eurodiaconia is a network of 45 organizations in 32 European countries providing social services and working for social justice. Founded in the Christian tradition we work to ensure that our societies provide opportunities for all people to live in dignity and realize their full potential. With the research paper “Towards a Social, Sustainable, and Equitable Europe: Integrating and Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Sustainable Development

Goals”<sup>1</sup>, Eurodiaconia seeks to assess how the EPSR and SDGs can complement each other and make a real difference for people’s lives through their effective implementation.

In our view it is wrong to assume that there is a division of fields of application between the EPSR and the SDGs along the lines of internal vs external and development policies or social vs environmental policies. On the contrary, the SDGs aspire to be a global agenda applicable also to the EU’s internal policies. In addition, it is linking environmental and social concerns to achieve truly sustainable policies. When having a closer look at both frameworks it becomes obvious that their objectives are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. By bringing both frameworks together the EPSR would gain the sustainability element, while ensuring that the social aspects of the SDGs, applicable to the EU’s internal policies, are not overlooked. Therefore, when considered together, those two elements have the potential to form a coherent and comprehensive post 2020 strategy for the EU.

The present paper presents Eurodiaconia’s key recommendations for the SDGs and EPSR. It suggests five steps to integrate the EPSR and SDGs frameworks and their monitoring mechanisms in order to facilitate their effective implementation throughout the EU.

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<sup>1</sup> Eurodiaconia, 2018, [\*Towards a Social, Sustainable, and Equitable Europe: Integrating and Implementing\*](#)

[\*the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals.\*](#)

## 1. Integrate the EPSR and SDGs into one overarching EU policy framework

**As the Europe 2020 Strategy is coming to an end, the EPSR and SDGs could feed into an overarching single framework or strategy guiding the EU's work for the period after 2020.**

There is important common ground as well as complementarity of the objectives of the EPSR and the SDGs. Indeed, several goals of the SDGs coincide at least partially with the principles of the EPSR and it therefore seems to suggest itself that both policy frameworks should be dealt with together and in a well-coordinated manner. These two initiatives provide an opportunity to bridge the thinking and policy action on environmental and economic sustainability and well-functioning social welfare systems, which are effectively protecting people from poverty and social exclusion.

While the EPSR is defining rights, the SDGs are formulated as targets. These approaches are not contradictory, but can build on and complement each other. Several targets and indicators could therefore be used to measure also the implementation of the EPSR, which will be addressed more in depth in recommendation 2.

Such an overarching single framework or strategy would need to take advantage of the complementarity between the EPSR and the SDGs, while including them in their entirety and applying them horizontally to all EU policies. In addition, such a strategy would also benefit from being accompanied by a concrete Roadmap or Action Plan, articulating the measures needed for its implementation and setting out in detail how EU institutions, Member States and civil society can support the implementation of the social rights and principles contained in the EPSR and the SDGs.

## 2. Merge existing monitoring systems and create a single set of indicators

**For a strong and coherent EU policy, this overarching framework or strategy, would need to be monitored by a single monitoring system based on a single set of indicators.**

Both frameworks, the EPSR and the SDGs, are accompanied by different sets of indicators which are aiming at monitoring implementation. These sets of indicators are adding up to other already existing monitoring tools and indicators, such as the Social Protection Performance Monitor (SPPM) and Employment Performance Monitor (EPM).

The SDGs are accompanied by an internationally agreed set of indicators to monitor their achievement. However, the EU has also developed its own set of 100 indicators to monitor the SDGs, based on already available data. The EPSR, has also been published together with the Social Scoreboard, aiming at monitoring its implementation in Member States. Surprisingly, the Social Scoreboard uses much less indicators which don't cover all 20 principles, even though other and more precise indicators already exist and are used at EU level, as mentioned above.

All these different, already existing sets of indicators are overlapping to a significant extent and risk to create more confusion than clarity. A strong and coherent EU policy needs a single monitoring system based on a single set of indicators. This single set of indicators needs to be comprehensive in order to effectively monitor all the different aspects of the EPSR and SDGs, including the external dimension of certain internal EU policies in the case of the SDGs. Gaps in the social indicators need to be filled through the development of new and relevant indicators, which can also be disaggregated as necessary.

In addition to such a joint set of indicators, there is a need to develop tangible benchmarks which would allow to cover aspects such as adequacy of minimum income systems, minimum wages, unemployment benefits, pensions and other social protection benefits. This could be presented as a Joint Assessment Framework, as it has been done for monitoring Europe 2020.

### 3. Ensure implementation through the European Semester

**The EPSR and SDGs should be put at the heart of the European Semester process, to ensure that the social dimension of the EU and in particular social rights are at the core of the European integration process.**

The European Semester is a crucial policy tool regarding structural and policy change at Member State level. There has recently been a welcome evolution of the European Semester from an exclusive focus on macro-economic and fiscal policy towards taking into account the effects of reforms on social cohesion, as well as the importance of social infrastructure and social policy. Following the proclamation of the EPSR, the 2018 Annual Growth Survey (AGS) and Joint Employment Report (JER) have both included a broader analysis and assessment of social and employment policies. This positive trend will need to be continued throughout the European Semester Process, including the Country Reports, National Reform Programmes (NRPs) and Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) to make steps towards effectively implementing the EPSR.

In order to place the social dimension of the EU and in particular social rights at the core of the European integration process, the implementation of the above-mentioned overarching policy framework or strategy, needs to be monitored and promoted through the European Semester process. The assessment of the previously mentioned joined set of indicators needs to feed into analysis such as the Annual Growth Survey (AGS), Joint Employment Report (JER) as well as the Country Reports. This would allow to ensure that all the goals and principles are steadily pursued and their implementation at national level is monitored.

### 4. Support implementation through European Funds within the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)

**The next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) needs to be in line with the policy framework bringing together the SDGs and EPSR and EU Funds will need to be mobilised in line with the principle and goals of the EPSR and SDGs in order to support their effective implementation.**

If social aspects are placed at the heart of European integration process, this needs to be reflected and supported by the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Only through the availability of sufficient financial means social convergence and equality can be effectively promoted. In particular EU Funds play a crucial role in supporting Member States, regional and local actors to implement the EPSR and SDGs. Therefore, they will need to be mobilised in line with the principle and goals of the EPSR and SDGs.

Bringing the MFF and EU Funds in line with the SDGs and EPSR, will allow to effectively implement those principles and goals throughout the European Union. This also means that the thematic objectives that act as investment priorities, foreseen in the regulations of the different EU Funds, should be more strongly oriented towards delivering upon the principles of the EPSR and goals of the SDGs. A particular focus needs to be put on supporting social investments through EU funds, such as the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI). EFSI in particular could be used more proactively to support social investments, including from the public and non-profit sector, especially in countries that lack the necessary resources to invest.

## 5. Allow for fiscal flexibility to facilitate investment in social infrastructure

**The introduction of a ‘Silver Rule’ for public social investment is necessary to support Member States to commit to investments, which will help them reach the goals of the SDGs and guarantee the rights of the EPSR.**

An EU budget and MFF, which is closely linked to the EPSR and SDGs and supports their achievement is crucial, but insufficient if Member States are not doing necessary investments as well. While it is known that countries with high social investment are more resilient to shocks and can perform better in crisis situations, those countries needing it most are sometimes prevented from doing significant social investments. Indeed, the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) of the EU can prevent Member States from making important social investments, when it would mean a breach of the SGP’s deficit rules.

The SGP has a flexibility clause allowing a temporary deviation of the SGP rules in order to make important investments. The application of the clause as regards social investment has, however, been limited so far. Having in mind the importance of social investment for building resilient economies and societies, Eurodiaconia argues in favour of introducing a ‘Silver Rule’ for public social investment in the EU economic governance framework. This could allow and incentivise Member States to commit to higher levels of social investments, especially in areas of public social expenditure which can be considered as having high returns on investment, such as early childhood education and care, primary and secondary education, training and active labour market integration as well as affordable and social housing. Those four areas increase labour productivity and reduce societal inequalities. Short-time savings in these areas carry a high risk of having to face much higher costs on the long-term and pose challenges to social cohesion.

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