



Contribution to the European Commission public consultation

Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights: The way forward

Eurodiaconia is a European network of 52 organisations in 32 countries, founded in the Christian faith and working in the tradition of diaconia. Representing over 30.000 local organisations, our members provide social and healthcare services and promote social justice. They are engaged in all facets of social inclusion, from the integration of people with a migrant background, to work with disadvantaged young people, to elderly care.

Mission

Eurodiaconia is a network of churches and Christian organizations that provide social and health care services and advocate for social justice. Together we work for just and transformative social change across Europe, leaving no-one behind.

Vision

Driven by our Christian faith, our vision is of a Europe where each person is valued for their inherent God-given worth and dignity and where our societies guarantee social justice for all people, including the most vulnerable and marginalized.

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POLICY SNAPSHOT



In this document, Eurodiaconia sets out its proposal for an action plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights, as a part of its response to the European Commission's public consultation.



The introduction of the Eurodiaconia "Social Pillar Tracking Tool" in 2018 aims at collecting information on the state of play of social policies in our members' countries and how our members perceive them. This contribution further builds on this and two membership surveys conducted in 2020.



The action plan needs to be ambitious, innovative, include clear indicators and must be underlined by the highest political will to support an improved social reality of people's lives through appropriate implementation initiatives at EU and member states level. A European Social Summit should be held at least every 2 years.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a huge impact on the social services sector; both directly by the public health situation itself as well as indirectly by the consequences of the pandemic on pre-existing challenges, such as: underfunding, staff shortages, unattractive wages and working conditions. We need to strengthen the role of social service providers and the provision of quality social services as a pre-condition for a successful Pillar implementation. Otherwise, the full implementation of its principles will be impossible.



Eurodiaconia echos the calls for a legally binding EU Framework Directive on Minimum Income. This would be remembered as one of the new European Commission's flagship initiatives that guarantees a right to an adequate income to the most vulnerable, demonstrating to all that the EU delivers on its promises and prioritises protecting people as well as planet. It is a proposal which could reunite the EU around a shared political and moral commitment to end poverty and social exclusion.



About this publication



The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) has been jointly proclaimed by the European Council, European Commission and European Parliament on the 17th November 2017 at the Social Summit in Gothenburg, Sweden. In this document, Eurodiaconia sets out its proposal for an action plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights, as a part of its response to the European Commission's public consultation.¹ It mainly builds on Eurodiaconia's policy position papers and capacity building webinars on the EPSR developed together over the last three years with our members, but also on the feedback we gathered from members in a recently conducted survey specifically for this contribution.

With over 30,000 service centres, approximately 800,000 staff and over a million volunteers around Europe, our members offer front line services to the elderly, families and children, persons experiencing poverty, Roma, migrants and refugees, persons without homes - amongst others. We have a unique view of the specific challenges on the ground and the emerging needs of the social sector. Eurodiaconia seeks to help move the EPSR beyond a framework of mere principles into something more practical, using the possibilities of legislation, policy and tools such as EU funding. The implementation of the EPSR cannot be separated from the unique experience and expertise of civil society actors in addressing poverty and social exclusion. Social service providers are a pre-requisite for a successful Pillar implementation, and we can build on decades of experience in the fight for a more social Europe, which needs to be fostered.

The decisive factor for Eurodiaconia is not that the EPSR (and its upcoming action plan) exists as a text, but that it delivers an improved social reality

¹ European Commission, Have your say on reinforcing Social Europe. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1487>

of people's lives through appropriate implementation initiatives at EU level and in the Member States, thus promoting improved economic and social cohesion in the EU.

As many of the tools to deliver on the ESPR are in the hands of member states, as well as social partners and civil society, Eurodiaconia will continue to be working with our members to determine how we can play our part in making the full implementation of the 20 principles a reality, and what our priorities should be.

Firstly, in this paper we want to highlight the need to strengthen the role of social service providers and the provision of quality social services as a pre-condition for a successful Pillar implementation, if we want to move towards a social, sustainable and equitable Europe. Then we will focus on specific Pillar principles and what we would like to see addressed regarding policy actions or legal initiatives (focussing on the EU level) in the upcoming action plan to ambitiously implement the Social Pillar. The final chapter will focus on the feedback we gathered in two membership surveys in 2020 on what our members see as main priorities, implementation gaps and how the follow-up of the action plan should be organised. Eurodiaconia is committed to continue supporting the implementation process together with all our members in Europe.

Why this publication



Eurodiaconia was already actively involved in the preparatory discussions of the Social Pillar before 2017 and provided recommendations to the European Commission concerning the scope. We warmly welcomed the proposed text and the proclamation by all three EU institutions. Since then, Eurodiaconia has been active in keeping the discussion around the EPSR alive through participation in debates, trainings for its members and a yearly monitoring exercise of the progress made in the “implementation” of the EPSR. Our “Social Pillar Tracking Tool” aims at collecting information on the state of play of social policies in our members’ countries and how our members perceive them.²

We welcome the Commission's view of a strong Social Europe in the face of environmental, digital and demographic change to pursue a just transition to the society of the future.³ Heads of State and government have called for the implementation of the Pillar at EU and Member State level, with due regard for respective competences.⁴ The upcoming action plan for the EPSR implementation needs to be ambitious, innovative and underlined by the highest political support, while respecting the different competences. Eurodiaconia welcomed the appointment of Jose Antonio Vieira da Silva, former Labour Minister in Portugal, as special advisor to Commissioner Schmit to prepare the EPSR action plan, which is to be presented at the Social Summit in May 2021 under the Portuguese Presidency.⁵

² <https://www.eurodiaconia.org/sr/2018/07/eurodiaconia-launches-its-new-social-pillar-tracking-tool/>

³ European Commission, 2020: [Communication and Annex on a Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions](#)

⁴ European Council, 2019: [Council conclusions – New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024](#)

⁵ <https://twitter.com/NicolasSchmitEU/status/1322239589050949638>

This response to the EPSR action plan builds on our: [Webinar on Long-term Care & the European Pillar of Social Rights](#) (September 2018); [Webinar on Access to Essential Services & the Social Pillar](#) (October 2018); [Training on the European Semester and the Social Pillar](#) (November 2018); [Eurodiaconia Social Trends 2018: Report on the state of implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights](#) (December 2018); [Webinar on Active Support to Employment & the Social Pillar](#) (April 2019); [Eurodiaconia Social Trends 2019: Report On the State of Implementation](#) (December 2019); an online meeting with members on [Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights: The Way Forward](#) (September 2020); as well as several other thematic reports. This paper strongly builds on our position paper “[Towards a Social, Sustainable, and Equitable Europe: Integrating and Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals](#)”⁶ (May 2018). The research paper aimed to assess how the EPSR and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can complement each other and make a real difference in people’s lives through their effective implementation. The publication was accompanied by a policy recommendation paper [Joining forces for social justice and sustainability - How to make the Sustainable Development Goals and the European Pillar of Social Rights work together](#) (May 2018), suggesting five steps to integrate the EPSR and SDGs frameworks and their monitoring mechanisms in order to facilitate their effective implementation throughout

⁶ Eurodiaconia, 2018: Towards a Social, Sustainable, and Equitable Europe: Integrating and Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals <https://www.eurodiaconia.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Pub-2018-Towards-a-Social-Sustainable-and-Equitable-Europe.pdf>



the EU. Finally, it also builds on our latest European Semester publication titled “[Promoting shared prosperity in the European Semester: taking stock of the 2020 cycle and launching the 2021 Semester](#)” and the contributions of our partners [Social Platform](#) and [EAPN](#).

In short, Eurodiaconia supports the transformation of the EPSR into a framework of rights and actions and their effective implementation that can make a real difference for people’s living standards and working conditions and their right to a dignified life. Although the proclamation of the Social Pillar in 2017 and the current discussions on the action plan towards its implementation are to be welcomed, this process should have already started with more urgency in 2018. We cannot afford any further delay.

Strengthening Social Europe: This is no time for business as usual

The proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights represented a decisive step towards reinforced upward convergence between Member States by putting fair and well-functioning labour markets and social protection systems at the heart of a more Social Europe. In the beginning of 2020, the European Commission presented its Communication "*A strong social Europe for a just transition*"⁷ that outlined how social policy will help deliver on the challenges and opportunities of today and presented new initiatives towards the EPSR implementation (e.g. a reinforced Youth Guarantee or a proposal for an EU framework on fair minimum wages). Putting social services at the centre of its implementation stage is needed to fulfil such a promise.⁸

The ambition within the Pillar must be underpinned by a coherent policy framework. For this reason, the European Commission should use its full political leverage to support progress on the principles of the Pillar without limiting itself to legislative measures in the policy areas - and principles - where this is possible. Together with funding a lot can be achieved using hard as well as soft law instruments such as the Open Method of Coordination, policy monitoring and evaluation, as well as programmes and practices.

The corona pandemic must not be an occasion to postpone or even abandon the ambitions to further strengthen Social Europe; on the contrary, it must lead to these plans being pursued even more vigorously. Equivalent social objectives in the EU are also important because public

⁷ European Commission, 2020: [Communication "A strong social Europe for a just transition"](#)

⁸ Social Services Europe, 2018: [Towards the Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights – the Role of Social Services](#)

acceptance of European integration is dwindling if the impression continues to prevail that EU policies do not serve people's well-being and quality of life. **We call on the European Union to include a chapter on the further deepening of Social Europe in the discussions on the Conference on the Future of the EU and possible Treaty changes.**

The translation of the principles of the EPSR into robust, directly applicable laws, regulations or other measures is not exclusively the task of the European Union, but must be carried out at other legislative levels too, and this must be done where a regulatory competence is correspondingly located. **The European Commission should promote this concern, for example by issuing guidelines specifically for regional and local legislators and by publishing "best practice examples" to illustrate how and where individual principles of the EPSR have already been successfully implemented.**

The impact of COVID-19 must lead to a paradigm shift

The COVID-19 crisis continues to have a massive impact on the social services sector; both directly by the public health situation itself as well as indirectly by the consequences of the pandemic on pre-existing challenges, such as: underfunding, staff shortages, unattractive wages and working conditions, and the need to adapt to evolving expectations by people who use the services.⁹ If the action plan for the EPSR fails to find answers to these pre-existing challenges, then the full implementation of its principles will be impossible. The economic and social impact of the crisis has to lead to higher demand for social services, than prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The coronavirus crisis offers a must-seize opportunity for a paradigm shift

⁹ European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020: [Surveillance of COVID-19 at long-term care facilities in the EU/EEA](#)

to move towards an economy of wellbeing that puts people first and values (« clapping » is not enough) the relevance of the social sector (social/health services) for a functioning society and economy.

Social services workers have to work under immense pressure, at the same time social service providers are facing a threat regarding their financial sustainability to ensure continuity of the sector.¹⁰ Eurodiaconia has been actively advocating for measures to quickly address the gaps created by COVID-19 through the proposed Recovery Plan and the revised Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).¹¹

Further, on 25 June 2020, Eurodiaconia and the entire social services sector came together at European level to call the European Union to strengthen recognition, urgency and resilience in social services during the COVID-19 pandemic and the recovery.¹² The online summit was also the opportunity for the sector to engage with the Vice President of the European Parliament Dimitrios Papadimoulis, the Vice President of the European Commission Dubravka Šuica, Member of European Parliament Dragoș Pîslaru and Professor Frank Vandenbroucke.

We can only recall here what was highlighted in the joint position paper that was presented during the online summit: *“We urge the European institutions to maximise the potential of the Recovery Plan for Europe to strengthen resilience and recovery through guaranteed budget allocations to quality and affordable social service provision in the existing proposals. For instance, a min. 5% of the Recovery and Resilience Facility should be allocated to reforms in social service provision, including both Long-Term and Short-Term/Crisis Care. REACT-EU’s European Social Fund dimension should earmark 25% to social inclusion measures, as is*

¹⁰ To know more about the impact of COVID-19 on diaconal organisations, please have a look at Eurodiaconia, 2020: [Impact of COVID-19 on Diaconal Services](#)

¹¹ Eurodiaconia, 2020: [Open letter to the Commission, the Parliament and the Council: The Proposed Measures are not Enough](#)

¹² Joint position paper, 2020: [COVID-19 and Social Services: what role for the EU?](#)

*recommended for the main European Social Fund+ proposed and it should in no way replace ESF+ funding, since both funds have different scopes”.*¹³

The European Union’s 1.8 trillion-euro investment plan hopes to kick start this recovery and the move to a more sustainable, fairer Europe. As drivers of inclusive economic growth, social care and support services can hold the key to unlocking the EU’s objectives. But the sector itself needs the resources to recover from COVID-19.

¹³ Joint position paper, 2020: [COVID-19 and Social Services: what role for the EU?](#)

Social services are essential services and a pre-condition for a successful Pillar implementation



The further improvement and continuity of social service provision is essential for a stronger and more resilient Europe; able to empower people even during economic and social shocks by mitigating the fall-out and aiding the recovery.¹⁴ Of course, there is not just one single social services ecosystem in Europe. Yet, all require further strengthening and improvement, given the staff shortages that exist across the European Union, the funding gap in most if not all countries, and the waiting lists or insufficient services that still exist even in the most effective systems. However, the capacity for public authorities to react and invest in a resilient social services ecosystem varies from country to country. Thus, the EU needs to play a stronger role in the development of social services ecosystems; for instance, in funding, policy guidance, monitoring of progress, support to social dialogue and legislation where appropriate. Such EU action is crucial if it is to strengthen social convergence, cohesion and resilience across Europe and to ensure the European Pillar of Social Rights becomes a reality irrespective of where one lives.¹⁵

Social Services provide essential care and support to millions of people in Europe, serving children and young people at risk, older persons, persons with disabilities, people at risk of poverty, homeless persons, migrants or refugees, people suffering from domestic violence, and many others to live healthier, better, and more active lives. Most importantly, they help people to enjoy their human rights. Social services provide essential help to family or other carers, contributing to their employment and work-life balance opportunities. They are extremely important to tackling gender inequalities,

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ Joint position paper, 2020: [COVID-19 and Social Services: what role for the EU?](#)

given the disproportionate share of women in providing family care. Social services are also essential to Europe's social market economy. They help to create meaningful employment for 11 million workers, 5% of the total EU workforce, and with an increase of 24% in the last ten years.¹⁶ The contribution of millions of volunteers across Europe can also not be ignored, especially from the perspective of social cohesion. Social services are services of general interest, primarily provided by public or private not-for-profit organisations often referred to as Social Economy actors. They create local jobs, including for people usually excluded from the labour market and are active across the European Union, in the largest cities, as well as in rural communities. The EU Social Investment Package highlights social services as an investment, rather than as a cost.¹⁷ This remains even more valid today.

Thus, implementing the 20 Pillar principles in a holistic manner, in line with a person-centred approach to service needs, will make the most of the synergies and complementarities that can be established between different types of interventions and principles enshrined in it. To this aim, implementation should be based on the provision of quality services supported by adequate funding and underpinned by innovative design and implementation that maximise the positive transformative power of social interventions.¹⁸

This calls upon enabling legal and financial framework where adequate resources match the needs and ambition within the Pillar, making more relevant than ever the demand for enhanced social investment. This will ensure the right volumes and quality of resources needed to secure sustainable provision of quality services ahead of structural societal challenges such as ageing, digitalisation, the development of “new

¹⁶ Social Employers, 2019: [Social Services Workforce in Europe: State of Play and Challenges](#)

¹⁷ European Commission, 2013: [Social Investment Package](#)

¹⁸ Social Services Europe, 2018: [Towards the Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights - the Role of Social Services](#)

vulnerable groups” because of COVID-19, or evolving family patterns which result in increased care demands that require the recruitment and retention of quality staff that fulfils the sector’s proven potential to create jobs. We should go out of the hierarchical model that always brings first the economy and stability and last social policies; they go hand-to-hand. The 20 principles are of great ambition and at least 10 out of 20 principles cannot be achieved without social services. That means we need to invest in financing those services and improving the policies. Already in 2018 Social Services Europe, in which Eurodiaconia is an active member, developed the position paper *‘The Role of Social Services in the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights’* in 2018, which has not lost any of its relevance today. The paper highlights the importance that *“the effectiveness of the principles described in the Pillar is conditional to the provision of quality services”*.¹⁹

¹⁹ ibid

Quality social services are fundamental to ensure the implementation of at least 10 principles within the EPSR:

- Principle 01 – Social services assist in the achievement of **inclusive education, training and life-long learning** by supporting all people to have access to such opportunities.
- Principle 02 – Social services support **gender equality** by providing care and support to enable parents or family members, often women, the choice to work if they wish to.
- Principle 03 – Social services support **equal opportunities** by helping all people to access employment, social protection, education and access to goods and services.
- Principle 04 – Social services assist in **active support to employment** by providing personalised, continuous and consistent support to help disadvantaged persons onto the labour market.
- Principle 09 – Social services support **work-life balance** by providing care services to those who need it.
- Principle 11 – Social services provide **childcare and support to children** by providing childcare services to those who need it, as well as additional support for disadvantaged children and/or families.
- Principle 17 – Social services support the **inclusion of people with disabilities** by providing services that enable people with disabilities to participate in society and in the labour market.
- Principle 18 – Social services support the provision of **long-term care** by providing quality, community-based long-term care services to people who need it.
- Principle 19 – Social services assist the provision of **housing and assistance for the homeless** by providing support services for homeless people.
- Principle 20 – Social services help to increase **access to essential services** by helping disadvantaged people access such services.

Figure 1: Social services and the European Pillar of Social Rights (Source: Social Services Europe, 2018: Towards the Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights - the Role of Social Services

We call for the role of social services to be sufficiently taken into account in the EPSR action plan. We recommend the European Institutions to strengthen the essential nature of social services; including through a targeted Communication on the contribution of social services to the mission and values of the European Union in the Recovery Plan for Europe, as well as in the outputs resulting from the Communication on a Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions.²⁰

We welcome that individual principles of the EPSR include crucial references to the quality, affordability and adequacy of services and

²⁰ European Commission, 2020: [Recovery plan for Europe](#), (2020) and European Commission, [Communication on a Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions](#)

support structures, which should be available to all. Only quality services that are person-centred and tailor-made to individual needs can provide the support that people require and can effectively reduce inequalities, poverty or social exclusion. They also need to be affordable, so that everyone can enjoy the use of those services without excluding the most vulnerable of our societies. Everyone should be able to access services and support measures, including migrants, Roma and any other group that faces exclusion based on identity or origin. Discrimination in the access to those rights needs to be strongly combatted. **The European Commission should ensure that the quality, affordability and adequacy of services and benefits is addressed in its EPSR action plan, where relevant in legislative and non-legislative proposals.²¹ Furthermore, those qualitative elements should be addressed more prominently in the monitoring of the implementation of the EPSR, including through the social scoreboard, and common reference tools such as the Voluntary European Quality Framework on Social Services (which needs to be reviewed).**

This also calls upon enabling legal and financial framework where adequate resources match the needs and ambition within the Pillar, making more relevant than ever the demand for enhanced social investment.²²

²¹ Joint position paper, 2020: [COVID-19 and Social Services: what role for the EU?](#)

²² Diakonie Deutschland, 2017: [Diaconia Charter for a Social Europe](#)

Socialising the recovery and resilience facility / European Semester

The European Semester is an annual cycle of coordination of all EU member state national economic policies. It allows EU countries to discuss their economic and budgetary plans and monitor progress at specific times throughout the year.

Eurodiaconia has been closely monitoring the European Semester process since its inception in the aftermath of the economic and financial crisis of 2008-9. As a network and together with other civil society organisations, we have consistently called for the European Commission to develop the social dimension of the Semester. In the wake of the financial crisis, the focus on pursuing austerity saw investment in social services and social protection systems fall and, in the decade since, it has still not returned to its pre-crisis levels. COVID-19, through the massive and sudden demand for services and social protection, brutally exposed and deepened the cracks that have developed due to this long-term under-investment. Eurodiaconia has been advocating for years that social divergence is as threatening to stability as economic divergence.²³

The activation of the General Escape Clause of the Stability and Growth Pact, the Spring Package of the 2020 Semester and the 2021 Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy, as well as the guidance for the Recovery and Resilience Facility, all suggest that the tide may be turning on the perception of social investment. However, in order to formalise that development, EU economic governance rules require reform. Strict spending limits which do not allow for public investment in future-oriented projects should be adapted to recognise that these investments have the

²³ See Eurodiaconia, 2018: [Towards a Social, Sustainable, and Equitable Europe: Integrating and Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals](#) or European Union, 2020: [Social Sustainability](#)

potential to build resilience, increase productivity and encourage upward convergence across the EU.

The Semester has, over the years, often been criticised for its contradictory aims: on the one hand, recommending a member state to tackle old-age poverty and, on the other hand, recommending a reduction or reform of pension spending. The need to attend to the current EU fiscal rules can result in important social issues being excluded from reform priorities.

Efforts to use the Semester as a tool to work towards full implementation of the EPSR are hampered by the restriction created by EU economic governance rules. In recent years, both the country reports and the recitals of the country-specific recommendations have become increasingly good at identifying the key social concerns in member states. It is therefore clear that there is an excellent awareness in the European Commission of the issues that need to be tackled, but there is also a problem reconciling these points with the need to control spending. Unfortunately, however, on final analysis of the Semester output, it remains apparent that the macro-economic and fiscal (SEC GEN and DG ECFIN) still trumps social (DG EMPL) when it comes to the final Semester recommendations.

The continual prioritisation of macro-economic stability over social cohesion and stability; blindness to the effects of macro-economic policy pursued through the European Semester; all this has succeeded in weakening care systems and social protection, increasing inequalities and undermining political stability. Unless this emphasis changes, full implementation of the EPSR will remain impossible.

Unfortunately, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, now intertwined with the European Semester, seems to be at risk of inheriting its faults. Although the 2021 Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy highlights that the four principles of the 2020 Semester (macro-economic stability, productivity, environmental sustainability and fairness) remain relevant for the year to come, the general direction of the Recovery and Resilience Facility does not suggest an equal balance between these objectives. Working towards

macro-economic stability, increasing productivity and achieving greater environmental sustainability is very apparent throughout the guidance on the Recovery and Resilience Facility, especially in terms of the flagships that have been identified, but the same cannot be said for the ‘fairness’ quotient. The only flagship which could be overtly classed as falling in this category is “Reskill and upskill”, but this is clearly with the intention of supporting the labour market, not for any ambition of greater social inclusion. The Green Deal, as the EU’s current growth strategy, must expand away from its current sectoral and territorial approach of a just transition and towards full recognition of the benefits of social investment and the encouragement of such spending as a way to ensure the empowerment and autonomy of all people in our societies as well as encouraging economic growth. The green and digital transitions which form such a central element of the Recovery and Resilience Facility must pay urgent attention to those least able to shoulder any extra burden. These ambitions must be pursued in such a way as to narrow the already-too-wide inequalities in society, not make them any wider.

It is crucial that both the European Semester and the Recovery and Resilience Facility do not relegate social priorities but that there is a true balance between all four elements: macro-economic stability, productivity, fairness and environmental sustainability. Without this balance, pressure on member states to work towards full implementation of the EPSR will be reduced. Although it is often referred to as the compass of the Semester, it does not yet appear that the EPSR really is at the heart of the process.

Through the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the European Commission, for the first time, has some control over the spending plans of member states and their work towards implementation of the country-specific recommendations. It is imperative that the Commission ensures that all relevant country-specific recommendations are addressed by national government in their recovery programmes, not just those related to productivity, macro-economic stability and environmental sustainability. The Commission must stand firm on refusing to accept recovery plans that

do not take into account wider social considerations. The voice of DG EMPL must be heard with as much emphasis as DG ECFIN. The assessment made at Council level should also include the Social Protection Committee and Employment Committee, not only the Economic and Financial Committee.

The Semester and now the Recovery and Resilience Facility are currently the most important legislative tools available to encourage, support and pressure member state governments to work to make the principles enshrined in the EPSR into a reality in the EU. However, this in turn means that if they do not properly balance all aspects of the recovery, from encouraging a transition to a green and digital future to the need for increased productivity as well as ensuring that the approaches of governments are fair and inclusive, then the EPSR will remain a nice piece of paper with some warm words on it rather than a compass towards a fairer future for all.

Invest, protect and empower – A vision for the European Union post 2020

As we come to the end of the Europe 2020 strategy, there is a need to ensure that the European Union continues to pursue an overarching political strategy. This must bring together key existing instruments such as the European Green Deal, the European Pillar of Social Rights and economic and financial governance through the European Semester. Such a strategy must go beyond initial recovery from the pandemic and needs to have a longer-term vision of an economy of wellbeing and the sustainability of our environment and social models at its core, in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Eurodiaconia, therefore, calls on

the EU to systematically address the current crisis through ambitious and immediate action and to develop a longer-term post-2020 strategy.²⁴

Eurodiaconia and its Finnish members, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Deaconess Foundation, warmly welcomed the strong commitment to the economy of wellbeing by the Finnish EU Presidency, including the EPSCO Council Conclusions of 24 October 2019.²⁵ Putting the wellbeing of people and the planet at the centre of all policy and decision-making is vitally important in many aspects. First, it is in line with the *raison d'être* and the fundamental values of the European Union. The EU must ensure the wellbeing of its citizens. Secondly, a more coherent approach to linking social policies with economic policies and sustainable development is likely to lead to better competitiveness and economic developments within the EU; a strong focus on social policy is good for the economy and vice versa. And thirdly, the economy of wellbeing is likely to increase legitimacy and the feeling of trust in the EU, thus bringing the EU closer to its citizens.

The European Commission should establish a task force or similar to analyse the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and propose responsive actions using all the legislative, policy and financial tools at the European Union's disposal. The social impact of this pandemic will require ambitious, sustained and coordinated action at European level. Such a task force should include all stakeholders including civil society and social and health care service providers.

In conclusion, we clearly see the need for the European Commission to develop a post 2020 strategy for the European Union that focuses on social investment, protects the most vulnerable and ensures the active empowerment and wellbeing of all people. Such as strategy

²⁴ Eurodiaconia, 2020: [Eurodiaconia Recommendations to the EPSCO Council](#)

²⁵ Eurodiaconia, Deaconess Foundation, The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, 2019: [The constructive role and added value of churches and faith-based organisations in developing the economy of wellbeing](#)

should bring together the objectives and priorities of the proposed European Green Deal, the European Pillar of Social Rights and policies of economic and financial governance to provide an overarching process of improving the wellbeing of people and the sustainability of our environment. This new post 2020 strategy must comprise an integrated EU-level strategy to fight poverty and social exclusion.²⁶

²⁶ European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), 2020: [EAPN contribution to the EC consultation for an action plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights](#)

Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights: The way forward



For Eurodiaconia there are five key areas that prove pivotal for the EPSR and its implementation.

- **1. Coherence:** The implementation of the EPSR needs to be coherent. Its principles need to be mainstreamed throughout the policy fields and a horizontal approach needs to be adopted. We believe that it is central for the action plan to follow in its structure the principles outlined in the Pillar, addressing under each of them the legislative and policy action foreseen to implement the principle in question, including clear time tables at both EU and national levels for their implementation and mechanisms to measure progress made.²⁷
- **2. Contradiction:** The more civil society can recognise contradictions between macroeconomic and social policy initiatives, the better they can address them and the more effective the Pillar can become. It is equally important that the action plan puts people, their rights and needs at the heart, empowers them to contribute to solutions and holds governments to account. This could be facilitated by obligatory guidelines on participation and the involvement of civil society organisations in the European Semester as well as in other EU and national decision-making processes.²⁸

²⁷ See also [Social Platform's](#) (2020) contribution to the EPSR action plan.

²⁸ *ibid*

- **3. Convergence:** Convergence is needed, but this should not be equated with a one-size fits-all approach.
- **4. Change:** It may take time, but the EPSR needs to create systemic and structural change. Otherwise, trust in the European project will dwindle further. To ensure full implementation of the Social Pillar, the action plan must combine legally binding measures for its implementation with strengthened, more coherent and more effective EU soft coordination mechanisms like the European Semester, backed by EU funds.²⁹ A clear goal should be to progress towards an enforceable framework of rights if implementation is to be effective.³⁰
- **5. Commitment:** The EU and all stakeholders need to push the EPSR forward together and explore cross-sectoral alliances. However, real impact will only be possible if the action plan on the Pillar is underscored by the highest political will, too. We encourage the EU to adopt the EPSR Action Plan in the Porto Social Summit in 2021.

In line with our partners from Social Platform,

“we see the need for more ambitious legislative developments to address existing fragmentation and gaps in social rights and to avoid the emergence of new inequalities and discrimination, especially in the framework of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have also seen certain policy initiatives at EU level, such as the communication on more efficient decision-making in social policy³¹ published in April 2019, which aimed at launching a debate on an increased enhanced

²⁹ European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), 2020: [EAPN contribution to the EC consultation for an action plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights](#)

³⁰ See also [Social Platform's](#) (2020) contribution to the EPSR action plan

³¹ European Commission, 2019: [Commission launches debate on more efficient decision-making in EU social policy](#).

use of qualified majority voting in social policy to make decision-making more timely, flexible and efficient where an EU competence already exists. This policy initiative, if implemented, could contribute to strengthening the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights through the adoption of EU-level legislation, such as the horizontal anti-discrimination directive³², blocked in the Council of the European Union for more than ten years.”³³

The debate on an increased enhanced use of qualified majority voting in social policy should be a part of the discussions on the Conference on the Future of Europe and should lead to changes in the EU Treaties.

We expect from the European Commission to present a written summary and analysis of the results of the public consultation on the EPSR action plan. There needs to be transparency on how the European Commission has come to its conclusions on how they justify each of their proposed (in-)actions.

Principle 1: Education, training and life-long learning

“Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.”

Eurodiaconia members are providers of training services and skilling interventions which often target people with lower employability or requiring specific support to reach work and social inclusion e.g. long-term unemployed persons, young people, migrants, Roma, persons with

³² Proposal for a Council Directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, 2008: Available [here](#).

³³ [Social Platform](#)'s (2020) contribution to the EPSR action plan

disabilities, persons with mental health issues or recovering from an addiction.³⁴ In these cases, skills are a bridge towards inclusive jobs, either in mainstream labour markets or supported employment. **We see the urgent need to further improve especially the inclusion of migrants and Roma in education and vocational training.** Thus, the European Commission should also have dedicated funding that focuses on the training and education needs of migrant and refugee women. Research has shown that women migrants, receive less integration and settlement support than men, particularly when it comes to the number of hours of language training and active labour market support measures. But there is evidence to suggest that more attention paid to the needs of migrant and refugee women in introductory activities upon arrival and follow up, as well as a labour market focus early on tends to yield more positive results in terms of socio-economic integration in the long-term.³⁵ Research has also shown that there is often a strong link between a migrant's social network and their ability to secure employment and feel socially integrated.³⁶

Funding at the EU and national level for education and skills training programs targeted towards women, and bridging programs that promote the creation of social bonds and networks between migrant women and the local community are key to support their socioeconomic integration. Mentorship programs, paid internships, and volunteer work can also be a particularly effective entry tool into employment for women who already possess the skills and qualifications but lack the networks and familiarity with the host country's labour market. EU and national funding to assist in the development of these types of programs is key.

Also, in education, many Roma and Traveller children, especially those living in informal settlements and encampments without access, or

³⁴ Eurodiaconia, 2017: [Building up skills for social inclusion](#)

³⁵ Liebig, T. and K. Tronstad, 2018: *Triple Disadvantage? A first overview of the integration of refugee women*, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers, No. 216, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2018.

³⁶ Ibid

adequate access, to the internet or information technology (IT) equipment cannot benefit from online distance-learning measures.³⁷ Eurodiaconia welcomes the Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience presented on 1 July 2020 by the European Commission.³⁸ Unfortunately, it seems that the initiatives on EU level mainly focus on **‘skills’ for the labour market**, whereas **broader objectives beyond skills and employment should also be pursued**. Eurodiaconia and its members advocate for the right to quality, universal, accessible, affordable, and inclusive public education throughout the life-course for all. Our members are very concerned about the sharp increase in digital poverty in the recent months and significant investments are needed to make high-speed broadband internet available to everyone, including disadvantaged groups and people in rural areas and improve the digital skills of all learners, but especially of learners lacking basic digital skills.

Another important issue is to achieve comparability in training and working skills of the professional group of care workers ; the health care assistants (HCAs) across the EU.³⁹ In the long term it would therefore be appropriate if care and work as HCAs attained better social prestige so that more people would be willing to do this job. This presupposes improved working conditions and especially higher wages. Principle 1 (access to quality education) is a prerequisite for the successful implementation of so many EPSR principles.

Furthermore, dedicated funding should be taken to improve the levels of support to disadvantaged young people (NEET). The corona pandemic along with the digital and ecological transformation highlight the important

³⁷ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020: [CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC IN THE EU – IMPACT ON ROMA AND TRAVELLERS](#)

³⁸ European Association for the Education of Adults, 2020: [EAEA welcomes the Skills Agenda – a huge opportunity for Europe](#)

³⁹ Eurodiaconia, 2016: [The education, training and qualifications of nursing and care assistants across Europe](#)

role of continuing vocational education as a key response to structural change in the labour market. We join our partners at Social Platform in their call to *“redefine higher numerical education targets for the “rate of early school leavers” and number of young people neither in employment nor in education and training”* (NEET) compared to those set in the context of the Europe 2020 Strategy, in order to stay politically ambitious and economically and socially sustainable, also set benchmarks for the quality of support for early school leavers.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ [Social Platform](#)'s (2020) contribution to the EPSR action plan

Principle 2: Gender equality

"Equality of treatment and opportunities between women and men must be ensured and fostered in all areas, including regarding participation in the labour market, terms and conditions of employment and career progression.

Women and men have the right to equal pay for work of equal value."

Eurodiaconia welcomes the adoption by the European Commission of a "Strategy for Gender Equality 2020-2025"⁴¹. The previous "strategic commitment", based on a Commission staff working document, has been insufficient and that is why a multi-annual political strategy by the whole European Commission, implemented with commitment by the EU and its Member States, is needed. Eurodiaconia and its members welcome the fact that the strategy focuses not only on the principle of wage transparency but also on good working conditions. "Equal pay for equal work" is an important aspect in reducing the higher risk of poverty for women. But it is also about the fair distribution of care and nursing tasks and domestic work between women and men, about breaking down persistent gender stereotypes and about measures to effectively prevent violence against women. It is also necessary to provide for better working conditions and pay in areas of work often defined as "female work", such as care, education and social work. Public refinancing is often very poor, while it is precisely these fields of work which were the focus of public attention during the Corona crisis as "systemically relevant".

A broad approach to reducing discrimination against women at EU and national level is needed. The experience and suggestions from civil society organisations should be used in the development of the new strategy.

⁴¹ European Commission, 2020: [A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#)

Principle 3: Equal opportunities

"Regardless of gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, everyone has the right to equal treatment and opportunities regarding employment, social protection, education, and access to goods and services available to the public. Equal opportunities of under-represented groups shall be fostered."

Equal opportunities for migrants and Roma need to be recognised as a key issue for social justice across the EU. More needs to be done at all political and societal levels to counter discrimination and to enable everyone to fully participate in society. We must break out of the predominantly employment focus in terms of legal discrimination protection coverage.

Eurodiaconia would welcome a new proposal for a directive by the European Commission to better implement the ban on discrimination (or to finally make progress in the adoption of the Horizontal Treatment Directive).⁴² In addition to the right to achieve gender equality, the EPSR also formulates the right of all persons to equal treatment regarding social protection, education and access to publicly available goods and services. This is in line with the primary law prohibitions of discrimination in the Treaties.

In many EU countries, migrants, particularly those who show visible signs of being a member of another cultural or religious group often report experiencing discrimination and racism either in social interactions with locals, or when it comes to accessing the labour market. Migrants also report that this is even more of a challenge in smaller regions or rural areas than in cities.

⁴²https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/libe/dv/38_eprs_equaltreatment/38_eprs_equaltreatment_en.pdf

Recommendations for EU and national governments:

- In line with the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan, the EC should encourage MS to develop and adopt national action plans against racism and promote better collection of equality data, disaggregated by racial and ethnic origin
- Work with social partners to address the issue of racism and discrimination in hiring practices
- Work with employers to dispel myths and generalised perceptions (e.g. perceptions of cultural incompatibility) about different groups of people (e.g. refugees, Roma) and their suitability for work
- Support initiatives and campaigns that help to raise awareness of migrants and EU mobile Roma rights in all areas of life
- Support campaigns that promote the contributions that migrants, refugees make to our societies and communities.

In terms of the **EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation**, Eurodiaconia would like to highlight the following:

Roma inclusion should be addressed through long term strategies and requires close cooperation among civil society, EU institutions, and across Directorate Generals in the Commission (including but not limited to DG JUST, DG EMPL, and DG EAC) as well as sufficient institutional weight given to Roma Contact Points. We welcome the increased weight given to the EPSR in the new EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation and its emphasis on ensuring that the framework is in line with the principles outlined in the Social Pillar.

As stated by the staff working document accompanying the communication on the EU Roma Strategic Framework, the EPSR “shall support, complement and add value to Members States’ policies to ensure equal

opportunities, access to the labour market, fair working conditions, social protection and inclusion.”⁴³

In order to ensure that Roma benefit from the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities, it is essential that the EU and member states place the fight against Antigypsyism at the center of their efforts. This form of racism and discrimination is strongly incremented in institutions and leads to discrimination against Roma in daily life, for example on the labour and housing market as well as in accessing public services. Recognizing the existence of this specific form of racism is crucial to develop less fragmented approaches to Roma inclusion. We therefore welcome the new Roma strategic framework’s emphasis on putting measures against antigypsyism at the core of its efforts and mainstream such measures in institutional structures, policies and legislations as well as funding instruments. **In line with the framework, the Action Plan on the Social Pillar should encourage governments to make the concept of anti-gypsyism operational by adopting concrete legislation on the issue and by increasing efforts to identify hate-crimes as well as supporting the victims.** At local and national levels, state employees, such as law enforcement officers and teachers, should be educated to identify and prevent anti-gypsyism.

⁴³ [Commission Staff Working Document](#) accompanying the communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council

Principle 4: Active support to employment

“Everyone has the right to timely and tailor-made assistance to improve employment or self-employment prospects. This includes the right to receive support for job search, training and re-qualification. Everyone has the right to transfer social protection and training entitlements during professional transitions.

Young people have the right to continued education, apprenticeship, traineeship or a job offer of good standing within 4 months of becoming unemployed or leaving education.

People unemployed have the right to personalised, continuous and consistent support. The long-term unemployed have the right to an in-depth individual assessment at the latest at 18 months of unemployment.”

On 30 October 2020, the European Council adopted a Recommendation on 'A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee'.⁴⁴ The Youth Guarantee is an EU commitment to ensure that young people will receive a good quality offer of employment, training or further education within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education.⁴⁵ Adopted originally in 2013, the Youth Guarantee has been a key EU scheme for supporting the employment of young people which were particularly hard-hit by the 2008 financial and economic crisis. For many young people who find themselves stuck in cycles of insecure temporary work such as unpaid internships, low-paid or temporary positions, this initiative is failing to provide the much-needed security and support of quality jobs (exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic). This needs to change. Eurodiaconia joins the European Youth Forum and partners in the call for quality standards at European level to be developed to make the reinforced Youth Guarantee a success.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, the Commission's proposal this year for a reinforced Youth Guarantee fell short on this important aspect. While recognising the issue, the Commission only proposes linking the quality of

⁴⁴ European Council, 2020: [Council Recommendation on A Bridge to Jobs - Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee](#)

⁴⁵ European Commission, 2020: [The Youth Guarantee](#)

⁴⁶ European Youth Forum's [“Quality Standards for the Youth Guarantee”](#)

Youth Guarantee offers to existing EU policies such as the “Quality Framework for Traineeships”. However, this will not be enough to tackle the very high rates of precarious work among young people – which is often low-paid and provides little employment or social protection.

Principle 5: Secure and adaptable employment

Regardless of the type and duration of the employment relationship, workers have the right to fair and equal treatment regarding working conditions, access to social protection and training. The transition towards open-ended forms of employment shall be fostered.

In accordance with legislation and collective agreements, the necessary flexibility for employers to adapt swiftly to changes in the economic context shall be ensured.

Innovative forms of work that ensure quality working conditions shall be fostered. Entrepreneurship and self-employment shall be encouraged. Occupational mobility shall be facilitated.

Employment relationships that lead to precarious working conditions shall be prevented, including by prohibiting abuse of atypical contracts. Any probation period should be of reasonable duration.

The actions outlined by the European Commission in its political guidelines to improve the labour conditions for platform workers have the potential to help ensure secure and adaptable employment for this group of workers. While action to improve the labour conditions for platform workers is crucial, we advocate for wider-ranging measures with this objective for all non-standard workers to be included in the Social Pillar action plan. Indeed, they all need a clearer status, better working conditions, social protection and collective bargaining.⁴⁷ We expect that the European Commission will provide for intensive involvement of the social partners, relevant stakeholders and civil society and that answers to the challenges of new

⁴⁷ European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), 2020: [ETUC on Commission's Strong Social Europe communication](#)

forms of work will be developed in partnership. Eurodiaconia welcomed the Council Conclusions from October 9th on “Improving the working and living conditions of seasonal and other mobile workers”⁴⁸ and **calls on the EU to immediately follow up on the proposed actions, such as providing low-threshold, mother-tongue advice and information for workers about these rights.** We encourage the EC to “further step up its efforts to continue working closely with the Member States in the Administrative Commission on the coordination of social security systems to explore the possibility of developing appropriate guidance in relation to seasonal workers.”⁴⁹ Indeed, while any initiatives to increase the quality of atypical forms of work are welcomed, fostering the transition towards open-ended forms of employment must remain the final goal.⁵⁰

Principle 6: Wages

“Workers have the right to fair wages that provide for a decent standard of living.

Adequate minimum wages shall be ensured, in a way that provide for the satisfaction of the needs of the worker and his / her family in the light of national economic and social conditions, whilst safeguarding access to employment and incentives to seek work. In-work poverty shall be prevented.

All wages shall be set in a transparent and predictable way according to national practices and respecting the autonomy of the social partners.”

Eurodiaconia welcomed the launch of the European Commission’s initiative on fair minimum wages in the form of an EU Directive.⁵¹ However, according to ETUC, *“the consultation document is disappointingly light on proposals. Increasing statutory minimum wages to 60% of the median*

⁴⁸ European Council, 2020: Council Conclusions “[Improving the working and living conditions of seasonal and other mobile workers](#)”

⁴⁹ European Commission, 2020: [Communication from the Commission – Guidelines on seasonal workers in the EU in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak](#)

⁵⁰ Social Platform, 2018: Response to EU public consultation. [Access to social protection for people in non-standard forms of employment and self-employed](#)

⁵¹ European Commission, 2020: [Advancing the EU social market economy: adequate minimum wages for workers across Member States](#)

wage, the official poverty wage threshold, is a basic requirement but is not enough. Workers will still struggle to make ends meet. All working people must have the right to join a trade union and bargain collectively with employers for fair pay.”⁵²

Adequate minimum wages are crucial to enabling a decent standard of living and a life in dignity to employees and workers and should determine a wage level below which no employment relationship can be deemed acceptable. Depending on the system, minimum wages also contribute to the social security protection of employees and the financial stability of social security systems. An EU framework for minimum wages could also have consequences for the basic security systems in the member states, if, for example, issues such as the alignment of minimum wages to the poverty threshold play a role. This should be taken into account when considering, for example, the adequacy of wages.

The desire for better minimum wages must also look at some of the barriers in being able to pay them. Many social service providers struggle to offer competitive wages due to the restrictions on funding that tendered services can have. Our members consistently raise this challenge when it comes to the public procurement of social services. Commissioning authorities do not always allow for higher wages in the budgets they offer for running services which then impacts on what the service provider can pay their staff. **Ensuring that above minimum wages is the norm in public service contracts would go some way to ensuring a better standard of living.**

⁵² ETUC, 2020: [ETUC on minimum wages](#)

Principle 9: Work-life balance

"Parents and people with caring responsibilities have the right to suitable leave, flexible working arrangements and access to care services. Women and men shall have equal access to special leaves of absence in order to fulfil their caring responsibilities and be encouraged to use them in a balanced way."

In 2019 the EU's Work-Life Balance Directive⁵³ entered into force, which was warmly welcomed by Eurodiaconia. The Directive introduced legislation which aims to better support a work-life balance for parents and carers, encourages a more equal sharing of parental leave between men and women, and is addressing women's underrepresentation in the labour market. It aims to improve not only work-life balance but also to contribute to an increase in women's employment and families' economic stability. Member states now have two years left to adopt the laws, regulations and administrative provisions necessary to comply with the Directive, which needs to be closely monitored. This Directive specifically aims to help working parents and carers by not obliging them to make a choice between their family lives and their professional careers. The Directive sets minimum standards to create more convergence between EU Member States, by preserving and extending existing rights. In addition, the European Union will support Member States in adopting measures to ensure accessible, affordable and quality formal care services. This is essential if social service providers are to provide the wraparound care services that are essential to achieve better work-life balance and social service provider must be supported to develop and operate the care services needed for the future as the balance between work and life changes.

⁵³ Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on [work-life balance](#) for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU

Principle 11: Childcare and support to children

"Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality. Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities."

On the 19th of August, the European Commission launched a public consultation on the Roadmap for the Child Guarantee – an initiative aimed at providing all children across Europe with access to basic services.⁵⁴

As part of the consultation process, Eurodiaconia and its partners from the EU Alliance for investing in children⁵⁵ welcome the Commission's intention to:

- Launch the Child Guarantee in the form of a Council Recommendation.
- Put in place multi-annual national strategies, covering at least the period until 2030.
- Adopt Child Guarantee National Action Plans.
- Reference EU funding instruments that will support the implementation of the Child Guarantee.
- Broaden the categorisation of children in vulnerable situations tailored to each country's needs.
- Consult civil society for the design of the Child Guarantee.
- Institute a rights-based approach in tackling child poverty.

A significant number of our members work in areas related to children's well-being, including family support centres, after-school programs, child protection and counselling, trauma therapy and family mediation. Our members experience on a day to day basis allows them to see the structural and systemic changes needed to address the risks of child poverty and exclusion. In today's Europe, it is unacceptable that one in four children is at risk of social exclusion and poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic

⁵⁴ European Commission, 2020: [Basic services for children in need - European Child Guarantee](#)

⁵⁵ EU Alliance for investing in children, 2020: [Contribution of the EU Alliance for Investing in Children to the European Commission Public Consultation on the Child Guarantee](#)

and the socioeconomic consequences it has already caused are worryingly expected to escalate this figure exponentially, further affecting health and wellbeing, and the living conditions of millions of children in Europe.

Eurodiaconia, as part of the EU Alliance for investing in children, therefore strongly echoes the alliance's call to the European Commission to take a rights-based integrated approach to tackling child poverty and to incorporate the three Pillars of the Investing in Children Recommendation in its proposal for the European Child Guarantee.⁵⁶ Further, incorporating parents' access to resources (pillar 1) and children's access to decision making (pillar 3) in the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation is of utmost importance. The 2013 Recommendation on Investing in Children had as its main goal the disruption of the poverty cycle, and we ask all the Member States to recall this Recommendation and undertake higher (social) investment aimed at overcoming poverty traps. This will not only reduce poverty levels now but also shows investment in future generations. **The European Commission needs to have better and stronger systems in place to monitor the situation of (child) poverty in the EU, which currently is often far too outdated. However, adoption and strategies must lead to implementation (which clearly has been lacking so far)** and so it is with implementation in mind we make the following additional/general recommendations⁵⁷:

- Support and encourage the development of quality, accessible and affordable social services to support families and children. This should go beyond employment-related childcare services and include family therapies and support, specific services for children who have experienced trauma, children with special needs and early years education.

⁵⁶ EU Alliance for investing in children, 2020: [Contribution of the EU Alliance for Investing in Children to the European Commission Public Consultation on the Child Guarantee](#)

⁵⁷ Eurodiaconia, 2020: [Eurodiaconia feedback on: Basic services for children in need - European Child Guarantee](#)

- Support not for profit social service providers in the transition from institutional to community/family-based care settings.
- Implement policies and other instruments of hard law that encourage the reduction of inequalities among children, for instance, in accordance with SDG 10.
- Support the adoption of a Directive raising minimum standards of living (e.g. Minimum Income) and the availability of adequate housing, reassuring that no child is left behind or on the streets, in accordance with Principle 19 of the EPSR.
- Mainstream the social inclusion of migrant children throughout all EU policies. In addition, targeted measures should be promoted to prevent the exclusion of migrant children, including access to early childhood education and the integration of children into mainstream education regardless of their legal status. Adequate access to health care services and housing should be promoted for particularly vulnerable migrant children.
- Provide support for school enrolment of migrant and refugee children through the coordination of all actors.
- Support initiatives and projects that aim to bolster teachers' and other education professional's capacity to integrate refugee and migrant children in schools.
- Prioritise quality family and community-based care in the EU Member States along with access to holistic integration programs, including access to sport and recreational activities and the provision of psychological support to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on migrant and refugee children.
- Reinforce the adoption of legal instruments that guarantee the protection of incoming migrants and refugees, in accordance with Principle 12 of the EPSR.
- Promote a child-sensitive approach to Roma inclusion on the EU level. Monitor and tackle the multiple discrimination against Roma children, by addressing educational and spatial segregation, and insufficient access to early childhood education and care, primary and secondary education, healthcare, nutrition and decent housing.

- Create synergies between the Child Guarantee and the Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of Roma until 2030 ensuring that the needs of Roma children are prioritised in the EU framework and that their rights are also reflected in the national Roma integration strategies.
- Enhance the collection of data on Roma children and their families, ensuring that EU policies reflect their needs.
- In terms of children with parents from workless households, underemployed parents or parents suffering from in-work poverty: Ensure that equal access to childcare and other social services is not dependent on the employment status of the parents.

Principle 12: Social protection

“Regardless of the type and duration of their employment relationship, workers, and, under comparable conditions, the self-employed, have the right to adequate social protection.”

The COVID-19 crisis reveals once again how income inequality can become a matter of life and death. People in part-time employment (often women), the self-employed, workers in the informal economy and in precarious jobs in general, e.g. migrant workers or platform workers – to name but a few – are particularly affected by the economic and health consequences of COVID-19. The income-poor must be classified as a highly vulnerable group in the crisis. As outlined by the ILO, people in precarious work are often ineligible to unemployment benefits or income support and many of them face the same “work or lose your income” dilemma as informal economy workers.⁵⁸ Such precarity will not only affect the worker but also any family dependents, including children, therefore opening the gates to a greater social crisis.

⁵⁸ ILO, 2020: [The impact of COVID-19 on inequalities in the world of work](#)

The Social Pillar action plan must foresee comprehensive action on reducing poverty and ensuring social protection for all. We call on the European Commission to be bold with regards to its objectives in these fields. **As a member of EAPN, we support their call for a EU rights-based anti-poverty strategy that is based on the integrated active inclusion approach⁵⁹ (“linking” the right to quality employment, services and social protection) to support people into training, quality jobs and participation.** The EU should furthermore adopt an ambitious poverty-reduction target for all Member States in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (50% reduction) and commit to ending extreme poverty (including homelessness) by 2030.⁶⁰ Part of this strategy should be the EU framework directive on universal and non-discriminatory access to adequate social protection for all types of work that Social Platform and its members, incl. Eurodiaconia, have been calling for.⁶¹ **Furthermore, there should be no damaging conditionality in social protection schemes and the practice of sanctions should be stopped. Social Protection should be regarded as a right.** In the meantime, the Council Recommendation on access to social protection must be ambitiously implemented.

⁵⁹ European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), 2017: EAPN Position Paper “[Inclusive Labour Markets – Building pathway approaches to quality employment](#)”.

⁶⁰ Idem. The general EU-level poverty-reduction objective should be combined with an additional target to eradicate extreme poverty, again in line with SDG 1. Robust indicators need to be developed for this area, too, including a concrete measurement of homelessness, covering the widest measure of homelessness covered by the ETHOS framework (see FEANTSA, www.feantsa.org).

⁶¹ Social Platform, 2018: Response to EU public consultation. [Access to social protection for people in non-standard forms of employment and self-employed](#).

Principle 13: Unemployment benefits

"The unemployed have the right to adequate activation support from public employment services to (re)integrate in the labour market and adequate unemployment benefits of reasonable duration, in line with their contributions and national eligibility rules. Such benefits shall not constitute a disincentive for a quick return to employment."

The current economic response from the European Commission recognises that high unemployment will be a result of the current pandemic. However, the economic response cannot limit itself to protecting SMEs alone. It must look at how social protection systems can be enhanced with increases in not only the coverage of such systems but also the level of benefits provided. **While Eurodiaconia welcomed the proposal by the European Commission on the new instrument for Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency called "SURE", it is essential that the work on the proposal for an Unemployment Reinsurance Scheme Mechanism is accelerated and that Member States are given guidance on the level of social benefits that will ensure people are able to retain a dignified life.**

Principle 14: Minimum income

"Everyone lacking sufficient resources has the right to adequate minimum income benefits ensuring a life in dignity at all stages of life, and effective access to enabling goods and services. For those who can work, minimum income benefits should be combined with incentives to (re)integrate into the labour market."

On October 12th, the European Council adopted conclusions on 'Strengthening Minimum Income Protection to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion in the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond'⁶², which were welcomed by Eurodiaconia and its members. We are thankful to the efforts of the German Council Presidency to move this important issue further along and for highlighting the need to invest more in accessibility, adequacy and enabling aspects of minimum income schemes to effectively raise the living and working conditions of millions of people currently experiencing poverty or social exclusion. Eurodiaconia highlights the idea of adequacy of income, without cutting the pre-defined level of subsistence as a punitive conditionality, to guarantee that people will thrive and not just survive.⁶³

However, while Eurodiaconia welcomes the conclusions and the efforts made, we join the strong calls for the implementation of a legally binding EU framework directive.⁶⁴ If we wish to see full implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, then there must be action taken in this regard. Unfortunately, the political conclusions lack the legally binding force to give these principles an enforceable effect. Thus, it is of utmost importance that EU Member States and the European Commission show ambitious leadership within their respective competences and continue to further build on these Council

⁶² Council of the European Union, 2020: ['Strengthening Minimum Income Protection to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion in the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond'](#)

⁶³ Eurodiaconia, 2020: [Policy Paper Update on Adequate Minimum Income – Recommendations for an Active Inclusion Strategy](#)

⁶⁴ See, e.g. [Eurodiaconia](#), [Social Platform](#), [EAPN](#) or [Caritas Europe](#)

conclusions. Merely updating the current policy framework, such as the 1992 Council recommendation on common criteria concerning sufficient resources and social assistance in social protection systems and the 2008 Commission recommendation on active inclusion, is certainly not enough. These soft law instruments have failed to lead to the desired national reforms enabling people a life free of poverty.

Recognising subsidiarity, the EU can set European minimum standards for national minimum income schemes through a legally binding framework without harmonising them.⁶⁵ Regulations that go beyond the minimum standards remain open to Member States.

However, Eurodiaconia together with Social Platform, EAPN, Caritas Europe and many others urges the European Commission and EU Member States to build on the Council conclusions adopted in October 2020 and to move towards a legally binding EU Framework Directive to ensure that all national reforms set minimum standards guaranteeing everyone an adequate minimum income throughout the life cycle, enabling people a life in dignity and ensuring their full participation in society.⁶⁶ That is why Eurodiaconia on November 12th 2020, together with the European Anti-Poverty Network, Caritas Europe, the European Trade Union Confederation and Social Platform and the voice of over 100 others called on the European Commission to respond with courage and propose a legally binding EU framework for Minimum Income.⁶⁷

Recommendations to the EU⁶⁸:

- Introduce a Framework Directive on Adequate Minimum Income. The EU should explore the legal foundation for setting out minimum

⁶⁵ A. Van Lancker, A. Aranguiz, H. Verschuere, 2020: [Expert Study on a Binding EU Framework on Adequate National Minimum Income Schemes](#)

⁶⁶ Social Platform, 2020: Position paper on [AN EU FRAMEWORK DIRECTIVE ON ADEQUATE MINIMUM INCOME](#)

⁶⁷ See Eurodiaconia, 2020: [Joint Statement](#) for a Framework Directive on Minimum Income and the Op-Ed by Shannon Pfohman, 2020: [“Europe needs decisive action towards a minimum income to fight poverty”](#) in The Brussels Times

⁶⁸ Eurodiaconia, 2020: [Policy Paper Update on Adequate Minimum Income – Recommendations for an Active Inclusion Strategy](#)

requirements for national adequate minimum income (AMI) schemes, as well as common standards, whilst respecting the subsidiarity principle.

- Link the development of AMI schemes directly to a new anti-poverty target of a post Europe 2020 strategy and to the European Semester process, specifically with regards to Country-Specific Recommendations.
- Promote AMI schemes as an integral element of an active inclusion policy and a general economic and welfare policy. The introduction of AMI schemes should be connected to the development of quality public services and inclusive labour markets to assist people relying on minimum income to improve their health, housing situation, education and skills, and to facilitate the social inclusion of vulnerable individuals in an integrated manner.

Recommendations to EU Member States:

- Define a national timeframe for introducing AMI schemes.
- Develop AMI schemes based on a mixed method approach and through involvement of a broad range of stakeholders, including people experiencing poverty, to ensure they correspond to real needs and enable equal participation in society.
- Combine AMI schemes with quality services and rehabilitation programmes to ensure they empower individuals and promote access to quality jobs.
- Tackle non-take up of AMI schemes by making the process accessible and transparent, and fighting stigmatisation.
- Monitor price changes of relevant goods and allow space for regular adjustments of monthly rates.
- Prevent rigid conditionality and punitive measures which could jeopardise a person's livelihood.

Principle 17: Inclusion of people with disabilities

"People with disabilities have the right to income support that ensures living in dignity, services that enable them to participate in the labour market and in society, and a work environment adapted to their needs."

Eurodiaconia points out that the inclusion of people with disabilities is an important cross-cutting issue that must be given due consideration in the implementation of the Social Pillar in all 20 principles. We welcome the Commission's announcement in their work programme for 2021 to present a further developed strategy on the rights of persons with disabilities (non-legislative, Q1 2021).⁶⁹ At the same time, the inclusion of people with disabilities in all EU funding programmes must be strengthened through active measures. The adoption of an inclusion strategy for the "Erasmus+" programme from 2021 onwards is an exemplary step by the European Commission in this respect.⁷⁰ **Additionally, ensuring the removal of barriers to work, study and training must be addressed along with ensuring the sustainability of work integrating social enterprises and the provision of adequate minimum income. Support should also be provided to social service providers to develop innovative independent living settings and accompanying use of technologies.**

⁶⁹ European Commission, 2020: [Commission Work Programme 2021](#)

⁷⁰ See Caritas und Diakonie Germany (BAGFW), 2020: „[Empfehlungen zur Verbesserung der Inklusion in Erasmus+ und im Europäischen Solidaritätskorps verschiedener zivilgesellschaftlicher Organisationen](#)“

Principle 18: Long-term care

“Everyone has the right to affordable long-term care services of good quality, in particular home-care and community-based services.”

By 2025 more than 20% of Europeans will be 65 or over, with a particularly rapid increase in the number of over 80s.⁷¹ If we do not want 'old age' to become synonymous with poverty, we must ensure that the elderly enjoy a good quality of life. This requires further investment in social care services, promoting innovation and knowledge transfer throughout the Union. Eurodiaconia welcomed the European Commission's first “Report on the Impact of Demographic Change” which takes a deep look at the drivers of this long-term change and the impact it is having across Europe.⁷²

Over the last years, Eurodiaconia has developed a strong focus on long-term care (LTC) with specific emphasis on integrated and affordable long-term care, in line with its members' work. Led by our member Slezska Diakonie (CZ), partnering with Diaconia Valdese (IT), the University of Trnava (SK) and Eurodiaconia, the “Q-Europe” project developed a tool to support LTC managers to assess and improve their work on rights-based service provision.⁷³

Guaranteeing access to care services is fundamental. From Eurodiaconia's perspective, people in need of care should be able to live in their familiar/family environment for as long as possible. This requires ensuring support in coping with everyday life, medical and nursing care and social participation. The decision on whether to provide services on a home-based or institutional basis should always be based on individual

⁷¹ European Commission, 2015: [Remarkable mobilisation across EU: The challenge of ageing population has received the biggest support in an open, public vote run by the European Commission](#)

⁷² European Commission, 2020: [Report on the impact of demographic change](#)

⁷³ The Q-Europe Handbook: [A practical guide to improving quality in long-term care in Europe Description](#)

circumstances and needs. This also requires framework conditions that enable the people providing care, especially relatives, to carry out their activities. Furthermore, the avoidance or reduction of the need for care is of great importance. **While the overall responsibility for LTC services lies with EU Member States, Eurodiaconia calls for a strategic and coordinated approach to long-term care** to address the rising demand for care provision and common challenges, such as the insufficient working conditions of care workers and the general decline in the numbers of care workers due to the generally low pay, lack of progression, lack of prestige etc.

Many of our members feel that the lack of funding for service provision is adding increasing pressure on them. **Furthermore, the demand for a 20% co-financing rate on Commission funding opportunities is felt to be too high for some smaller organisations to be able to participate.** Many feel that the difficulty of completing applications due to the complexity and the time required is also a deterrence.

There is also a related issue in some member states that, due to the housing crisis (links to principle 19 of the EPSR), some people choose to move to a nursing home because it is a cheaper option than continuing to pay rents or mortgages on their own homes. They do not, however, necessarily require the level of care that a care facility provides, thereby blocking beds which may be needed for other patients.

Challenges that the EPSR action plan should address are the increasing number of for-profit long-term care providers, the challenge of public procurement rules prioritising lowest cost over quality and the difficulties posed by the shortage of staff willing or able to work in the care sector and the need to improve the attractiveness of working in that field. Thus, we seek a significant increase in measures at EU and especially at national level to ensure the availability of quality LTC services, both residential and community-based, to all who need them, while ensuring adequate working conditions and pay for providers of LTC as well as adequate support for informal carers.

Principle 19: Housing and assistance for the homeless

"a. Access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality shall be provided for those in need.

b. Vulnerable people have the right to appropriate assistance and protection against forced eviction.

c. Adequate shelter and services shall be provided to the homeless in order to promote their social inclusion."

Some of Eurodiaconia's members provide quality social services like housing, education and counselling to people experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping in Europe.⁷⁴ Homelessness undermines the human dignity of affected individuals and limits their capacity to develop their potential to fully participate in society, which was also highlighted by FEANTSA and the Fondation Abbé Pierre in the Fifth Overview of Housing Exclusion in Europe 2020.⁷⁵ According to this report, some 700,000 people face homelessness every night in the European Union, representing a 70% increase in ten years. However, during the recent health crisis, this number fell sharply thanks to the emergency measures to provide shelter for the most vulnerable by all member states. We could see that it is possible to end homelessness if we really want to and when we have the means to do so. Nothing less should be the aim of the implementation of principle 19 in the EPSR action plan.

A coordinated EU response to homelessness is necessary to allow the EU to overcome its failure to implement the 2020 objective of reducing the number of persons experiencing poverty and social exclusion by 20 million.

⁷⁴ Eurodiaconia, 2019: [Revision of our policy paper on homelessness and housing exclusion](#)

⁷⁵ FEANTSA & Fondation Abbé Pierre, 2020: [Fifth Overview of Housing Exclusion in Europe 2020](#).

The following recommendations stem from our policy paper on homelessness and housing exclusion.⁷⁶

Recommendations to the EU

- **Develop an integrated approach to homelessness through the modernisation of social protection systems:**

Building on the 2008 Written Declaration on Ending Street Homelessness⁷⁷, the 2014 Joint Resolution on an EU Homelessness Strategy⁷⁸ or the European Parliament's 2018 report on the proposal for a Council decision on guidelines for the employment policies⁷⁹, the EU should develop and implement an integrated approach to homelessness. Eurodiaconia believes that such an approach implies the necessary modernisation of social protection systems across Member States.

It should, a) involve relevant stakeholders such as national and local policy-makers, researchers, service providers and people experiencing homelessness; b) aim to establish a common definition of homelessness, taking the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) into account; c) enable the collection of comparable and reliable statistical data; d) provide a framework for monitoring and evaluating national homelessness strategies, and be linked closely to relevant EU Funding Instruments; e) facilitate mutual learning and transnational exchange on key challenges in the fight against homelessness; f) promote quality services for the homeless.

While the European Pillar of Social Rights should remain the relevant framework for implementing policies aiming at reducing homelessness and housing exclusion through its 19th principle, Eurodiaconia calls for an

⁷⁶ Eurodiaconia, 2019: [Revision of our policy paper on homelessness and housing exclusion](#)

⁷⁷ European Parliament, 2008: [Declaration of the European Parliament on ending street homelessness](#)

⁷⁸ European Parliament, 2014: [European Parliament resolution of 16 January 2014 on an EU homelessness strategy, 2014](#)

⁷⁹ European Parliament, 2018: [Draft European Parliament legislative resolution on the proposal for a Council decision on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States.](#)

extension of principle 12 on social protection beyond the scope of employment and worker's right to comprise the right of the most deprived to access social protection.

- **Promote the eradication of homelessness through social investment in relevant social policies:**

The European Commission released the Social Investment Package (SIP) in February 2013 to guide EU countries in implementing a social investment approach to their social policies⁸⁰. Centred on prevention, a social investment approach aims to develop policies which prepare persons to handle emerging social challenges, rather than merely 'repairing' existing issues that threaten an individual's well-being. Furthermore, a social investment approach is designed to strengthen people's skills and capacities, and to support them in accessing employment and participating in society on an equal basis.

Eurodiaconia believes that relevant social investments approaches are necessary to reduce and prevent homelessness at the same time. Effective homelessness strategies that fall within a social investment approach to housing policy may cover prevention and early intervention, quality homelessness service delivery, rapid re-housing, systematic data collection, monitoring and using shared definitions (ETHOS typology).

Eurodiaconia believes that an efficient social investment approach can be fruitfully translated into practice by empowering vulnerable individuals through the introduction of adequate minimum income schemes, accessible and high-quality services of general interest, and inclusive labour market measures. Homelessness constitutes a multi-dimensional phenomenon that cannot be tackled appropriately through initiatives focused solely on providing physical shelter. Building on the 1992 Council

⁸⁰ European Commission, 2013: Communication from the commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the regions. [Towards Social Investment for Growth and cohesion - including implementing the European Social Fund 2014-2020](#)

Recommendation⁸¹ and the 2008 Active Inclusion Recommendation⁸², an integrated approach to tackling homelessness would significantly strengthen the safety net for those who have lost, or are at risk of losing, their homes.

- **Reduce administrative hurdles to accessing upcoming ESF+ funding:**

Like other NGOs and service providers, Eurodiaconia members generally rely on multiple sources of financing, which can include private donations and (in some countries) church taxes. However, the largest percentage of funding usually comes from public authorities. It is important, therefore, that NGOs and service providers can access EU structural funds to co-finance their activities.

Unfortunately, Eurodiaconia members continue to experience administrative hurdles due to the complexity of rules surrounding ESF(+) funding allocation. Smaller organisations often lack the capacity to apply for ESF(+) funding or to manage grants effectively once they have been allocated, the latter of which can have an adverse effect on project implementation and disrupt organisational structures. Eurodiaconia therefore calls on the EU to continue reducing the administrative burden on (potential) ESF(+) grant beneficiaries by simplifying application and monitoring procedures.

Recommendations to EU Member States

- **Develop national strategies on homelessness:**

⁸¹ [Council Recommendation](#) of 24 June 1992 on common criteria concerning sufficient resources and social assistance in the social protection systems (92/441/EEC)

⁸² [Commission Recommendation](#) of 3 October 2008 on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market (2008/867/EC)

Whilst it is encouraging to see that an increasing number of EU Member States are adopting strategic approaches to homelessness, many of them have not yet implemented a national strategy to address the issue. Eurodiaconia calls upon all Member States to develop national strategies which:

- a) Consider the added value of a Housing First approach, which aims to provide people facing homelessness with stable housing from the start. Housing-led approaches are becoming more widespread in Europe; various countries have already adopted their principles in their national strategies (e.g. Denmark, Finland, France, Scotland). Their potential is strongly tied to the availability of affordable housing and to the continued access of beneficiaries to support by social workers.
- b) Combine emergency support with effective preventive measures. This not only includes affordable housing, but also reinforcing mechanisms to tackle obstacles such as complicated or high rent guarantees, and measures to reduce the number of evictions (especially for families).
- c) Support the work of NGOs and social services providing debt advice, for example by developing an information system for families facing serious rent arrears and over-indebtedness.
- d) Counteract the discrimination towards homeless people and the criminalisation of homelessness, both at the national and the local level.
- e) Involve relevant stakeholders such as local authorities, NGOs and service providers, social workers and particularly people who are themselves facing homelessness in the development and monitoring of strategies and policies. Eurodiaconia members *Hungarian Interchurch Aid* and *Diakonie Düsseldorf* both emphasise the importance of providing space for the active participation of homeless persons in diagnosing policy gaps and coming up with solutions

■ **Develop targeted policies for particularly vulnerable groups**

In line with the increase of homelessness across Europe, Eurodiaconia members report the increasing size of new target groups (also because of

COVID-19). Whilst the homeless used to be predominantly middle-aged, single men, there is a growing proportion of:

- a) young persons (mentioned by members in Denmark, Switzerland, Germany, Czech Republic, France);
- b) migrants (mentioned by members in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, France);
- c) women (mentioned by members in Sweden and France);
- d) persons becoming homeless due to over-indebtedness (mentioned by members in Sweden and Hungary) and
- e) persons with a mental illness (mentioned by members in Sweden and France).

Homelessness results from a unique interplay of causes amongst the different groups, and therefore requires a range of different policy responses, rather than a monolithic approach which presupposes a high extent of homogeneity amongst Europe's homeless.

Eurodiaconia believes that despite the economic, financial and COVID-19 crisis, the European Union and Member States have the means to eradicate extreme poverty (incl. homelessness) and establish a minimum living standard for all by rationalising and prioritising their efforts and financial investment. Eurodiaconia therefore advocates for developing the care for homeless people in order to go beyond the only provision of emergency services, to go toward a strong long term political vision, aiming to eradicate homelessness and improve the life condition of people with inadequate housing conditions on a permanent basis. **Eurodiaconia therefore calls for investing in solidarity for social cohesion: Solidarity mechanisms, such as those implemented by a strong welfare state, are the cement of social cohesion.** As inequalities are growing, social cohesion is cracking. The EU must develop policies to reinforce social cohesion such as urbanism and adopt housing policies aiming to increase social mix, policies strengthening social protection systems and allowing quality, holistic and personalised care services for people in need.

Principle 20: Access to essential services

"Everyone has the right to access essential services of good quality, including water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications. Support for access to such services shall be available for those in need."

A strong social Europe must also ensure a fair transition to the digital age. We live in a society in which digital participation is increasingly becoming the key to social inclusion. One goal in terms of access to essential services must be to ensure the digital participation of the disadvantaged, too. As social and health care service providers, our members use digital access, tools and opportunities for the benefit of those involved and to improve their quality of life. The European Digital Strategy presented by the European Commission on 19 February 2020 mentions important points regarding digital participation.⁸³ Eurodiaconia welcomes, among other things, that technology should be at the service of people. Investing in digital literacy for all Europeans, but also in the necessary technical conditions and access to appropriate equipment for those on low incomes (inc. free access to the internet), is crucial for digital participation, as well as ensuring that artificial intelligence is developed in a way that respects people's rights and earns their trust, also appear to be central. It is equally important to ensure the protection of personal and sensitive data and to strengthen citizens' capacity to act in controlling and protecting their data.

Eurodiaconia and its members expect the EU institutions to provide for intensive involvement of the social partners, relevant stakeholders and civil society in further legislative projects in the framework of the European digital strategy. The topic of digitalisation is very broad and diverse also within the EU, the member states and the local level (e.g. urban vs. rural areas), so the European Commission could provide more nuanced information on the current status quo and provide

⁸³ European Commission, 2020: [The European Digital Strategy](#)

more funding for social service providers to hire/build expertise around digital tools and skills.

Eurodiaconia members feedback on the main priorities, gaps and follow-up action

On the one hand, the following feedback on the main priorities, gaps and follow-up action of the EPSR has been gathered through a membership survey in June 2020, where we received answers from 30 Eurodiaconia members. One question included, for instance, the key priority areas for Eurodiaconia (members perspective) for 2021 (see figure 2). On the other hand, we received additional information from another specific member survey in preparation for the Strategic Dialogue meeting “*Consultation on the Action plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights*” held on 21st October. The European Commission provided guiding questions, which will be used as basis in the following chapter. Given the limited time frame, we received feedback from five members (Diaconia ECCB, Evanjelická diakonia ECAV, Slezská diakonie and Hela Människan). Diaconia Germany kindly contributed by sharing their draft response with us on the public consultation on the EPSR action plan. The answers of Eurodiaconia members on the following questions regarding the main priorities, gaps and follow-up action will be based on a combination of both surveys.

Priority activities the action plan should include

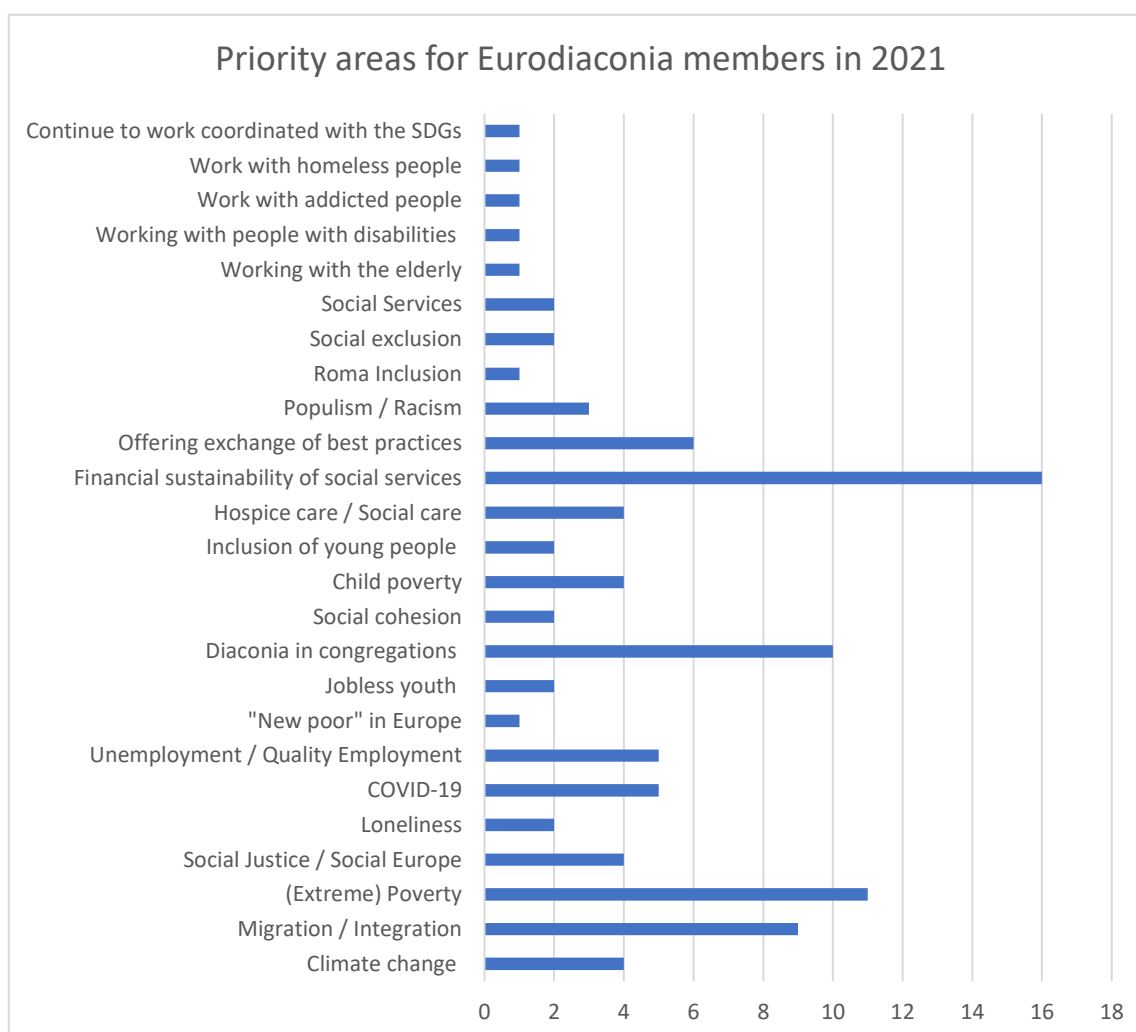


Figure 2: Key priority areas for Eurodiaconia (members perspective) for 2021; Membership survey in 2020 with 30 responses from Eurodiaconia member organisations.

First, as argued in the previous chapter on strengthening Social Europe, a priority is to guarantee the continuity and further improvement of (diaconal) social service provision (incl. support by EU and national funds), which is essential for a stronger and more resilient Europe and which constitutes a pre-requisite for a successful Pillar implementation. Our members fear that without concrete proposals on social services the EPSR will not be successful. Therefore, **it is recommended that the European Commission develops a Communication on Social Services that**

identifies the most pressing issues and identifies how they can be addressed at EU and Member State level as one of the priority actions of the EPSR. Such a communication should address financing of social services, legal frameworks, employment and work force challenges, legal instruments such as public procurement and state aid and how innovation

Eurodiaconia recommends that the European Commission develops a Communication on Social Services that identifies the most pressing issues and identifies how they can be addressed at EU and Member State level as one of the priority actions of the EPSR.

in social services is developed. **This should be accompanied by a review of the 2011 Voluntary Quality Principles for Social Services.** A clearer understanding of social services would re-enforce their essential nature and contribute to a common definition and understanding.

Diaconal organisations can play a key part in the implementation of the Social Pillar on the national, regional and local (urban + rural) level with its wide network of services. Thus, implementing the Social Pillar in a holistic manner, in line with a person-centred approach to service needs, will make the most of the synergies and complementarities that can be established between different types of interventions and principles enshrined in it. To this aim, implementation should be based on the provision of quality (diaconal) services supported by adequate funding and underpinned by innovative design and implementation that maximise the positive transformative power of (diaconal) social interventions.⁸⁴ In this regard, our member **Slezská diakonie** mentions the **need for reforms in psychiatric care towards community based support** as one priority. They also mentioned that additional support to new digital solutions (administration and management) in the social sector should be given and that the expansion of integrative elderly care should be stepped up. Another priority for our Swedish member, **Hela Människan**, is the need to **overcome the failure**

⁸⁴ Social Services Europe, 2018: [Towards the Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights - the Role of Social Services](#)

to guarantee equal rights to healthcare (including digital access) for the most vulnerable in our societies. The promotion of social inclusion, as highlighted by our member **Evanjelická diakonia ECAV** in Slovakia in their survey response, must be the guiding principle for all actions included in the upcoming EPSR Action Plan. They also mention the **active support to increase employment** in general as another priority.

This calls upon enabling legal and financial framework where adequate resources match the needs and ambition within the Pillar, making more relevant than ever the demand for enhanced social investment. Given this, the European Union needs to play a stronger role in the development of social services ecosystems; for instance, in funding, policy guidance, monitoring of progress, support to social dialogue and legislation where appropriate. Such EU action is crucial if it is to strengthen social convergence, cohesion and resilience across Europe and to ensure the European Pillar of Social Rights becomes a reality irrespective of where one lives.

Second, the health, social, and economic shock across Europe as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic will disproportionately affect the poor and marginalised. Our member **Hela Människan** in Sweden mentions that the crisis also brings to light “**new target groups**” (e.g. young and poor, self-employed and poor, increase of people in need of basic material assistance for the first time, ...). **Our members highlight, that the Social Pillar action plan must foresee comprehensive action on reducing poverty and that it must ensure social protection for all. On behalf of our members, we call on the European Commission to be bolt with regards to its objectives in these fields.** As a member of EAPN, we support the call for a EU rights-based anti-poverty strategy that is based on the integrated active inclusion approach⁸⁵ (“linking” the right to quality employment, services and social protection) to support people into training, quality jobs and participation. The EU should furthermore adopt an ambitious poverty-reduction target for all Member States in line with the

⁸⁵ European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), 2017: EAPN Position Paper “[Inclusive Labour Markets – Building pathway approaches to quality employment](#)”.

Sustainable Development Goals (50% reduction) and commit to ending extreme poverty (including homelessness) by 2030.⁸⁶ Eurodiaconia also reiterates that adequate minimum income schemes are indispensable to achieve poverty eradication in Europe as stated in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the European Pillar of Social Rights with principle 14. Thus, as one concrete outcome of the European Commission's public consultation, Eurodiaconia joins the call for the adoption of an legally binding EU Framework Directive on Adequate Minimum Income as a cornerstone of the upcoming action plan to raise the living and working conditions of millions of people currently experiencing poverty or social exclusion. Because access to adequate social protection (incl. MI) or to adequate employment and accessible, affordable quality social services are part of that big package that people need in order to fully participate in society. On the occasion of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty 2020, Eurodiaconia called on the European Union and its Member States to **address homelessness and housing exclusion (a priority also highlighted particular by our members from Sweden and Slezská diakonie) with increased urgency, as it remains one of the most extreme forms of poverty and social exclusion in our societies today.**⁸⁷

Third, the majority of Eurodiaconia members focus on migration in terms of the **social inclusion of migrants and refugees** through access to social and health care services as well as promoting education and employment. They have placed special emphasis on integration services that empower female migrants and highlighted the role of local communities in making integration and inclusion work for both migrants and host societies.

⁸⁶ Idem. The general EU-level poverty-reduction objective should be combined with an additional target to eradicate extreme poverty, again in line with SDG 1. Robust indicators need to be developed for this area, too, including a concrete measurement of homelessness, covering the widest measure of homelessness covered by the ETHOS framework (see FEANTSA, www.feantsa.org).

⁸⁷ Eurodiaconia, 2020: PUBLIC STATEMENT [Eradicate Extreme Poverty for a Sustainable and Fair Europe](#)

Our members reported in the previous months that the pandemic further exacerbated the exclusion and vulnerability of undocumented migrants.⁸⁸ In many EU countries, undocumented migrants do not have access to health care nor health insurance, but were at the same time highly exposed to the virus as a result of being employed as frontline workers in essential jobs, such as cleaning, care work, and the agricultural sector. Due to their informal employment in sectors that have also been badly hit during the pandemic, such as the hospitality and tourism sector, many lost their jobs and livelihoods when these jobs disappeared, and as a result could no longer pay their rents and faced the risk of eviction. Nongovernmental organisations, including our members have stepped in to help through emergency provision. Therefore, this is the time for the EU to promote more inclusive societies and invest in migrant and Roma integration in the labour market and other areas within a holistic approach in the Social Pillar action plan.

This is the time for the EU to promote more inclusive societies and invest in migrant and Roma integration in the labour market and other areas within a holistic approach in the Social Pillar action plan.

Our member the **Diocese of Västerås, Church of Sweden**, sees a much tougher migration politics in Sweden nowadays. This leads to an **increasing number of people (including families with small children) in a limbo situation due to rejected asylum applications** and without the possibility for the authorities to send them back since, for example, Afghanistan, will not receive them. Additionally, the reduced possibilities for family reunification or reduced possibilities to get asylum on humanitarian grounds (e.g. health related issues) contributes to the problem. This in turn leads to an increasing number of migrants without documents who also move across the European borders to try their luck elsewhere. They see the risk of a growing parallel society because of this, with consequences such as growing racism and protectionism. They also

⁸⁸ Eurodiaconia, 2020: [Impact of COVID-19 on Diaconal Services](#)

want to raise awareness of how fear of climate change and loneliness in general (exacerbated by the corona crisis) affects people on a broader scale.

Overall, Eurodiaconia members see the need to work more diligently with the aspects of conviviality, trust and democracy. In societies with less effective welfare systems, parallel societies growing, fear of climate change and the long-term negative effects of the Corona crisis (e.g. more protectionism, a higher level of unemployment, economical crises etc) they see this as crucial. Our members are committed to constantly find (new) answers on how the the church/ diaconal actors can act as a performer, advocacy agent and collaborator in these issues; locally, nationally, and on a European level.

How Eurodiaconia members can help make the Pillar better known and implemented at EU and national level

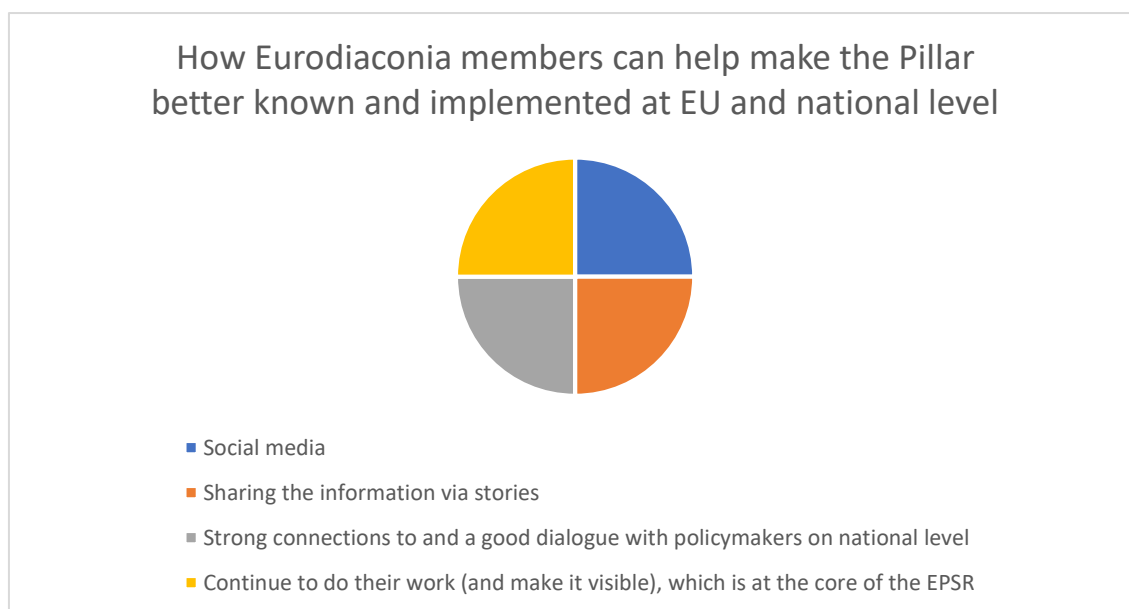


Figure 3: How Eurodiaconia members can help make the Pillar better known and implemented at EU and national level. Answers from member survey.

The feedback we received from our members on how they can help make the Pillar better known and implemented at EU and national level was limited. The main answers were to further promote the EPSR via social media, to share the realities of different people via personalised stories and give voice and a platform for the most vulnerable in our societies. The promotion of the services our members are already doing to support the implementation of the Social Pillar could be even more highlighted by best practice sharing on EU and national level. The partnership principle should be strengthened, too. They also mention the strong connections to and a good dialogue with policy makers on national level as a key aspect, which is not a given in all member states.

Main gaps in the implementation of the Social Pillar

The response we received from our member **Diaconia ECCB** in the Czech Republic regarding the main gaps in the implementation of the Pillar at EU and national level was that there is a special **imbalance in the understanding of the approach to income**. On the one hand there is a discussion on the adoption of unconditional, universal basic income and on the other hand the EU is tolerating employment contracts with zero income guarantee. Thus, we need to find the right balance and from our point of view the proposal for a legally binding EU framework on adequate minimum income schemes are indispensable to achieve poverty eradication in Europe and could be one of the EU flagship initiatives that overcomes this discrepancy.

Our member **Evanjelická diakonia ECAV** from Slovakia identified a huge gap in the **low level of networking between the non-profit sector, church sector and state stakeholders and organisations involved in the process of implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights**. Also, the cultural diversity in different regions in Slovakia and human right literacy in these regions is not connected with critical thinking. The lack of social, sustainable strategies to build resilience and guide economies in their recovery efforts regarding the COVID-19 crisis can cause deeper differences in peoples' lives and harder applications rights in the vulnerable/less developed Slovak regions.

Our member **Hela Människan** mentions the **inequality of access to social protection and social inclusion as the main gap in the implementation of the Pillar at EU and national level**.

How the follow-up of the action plan should be organised

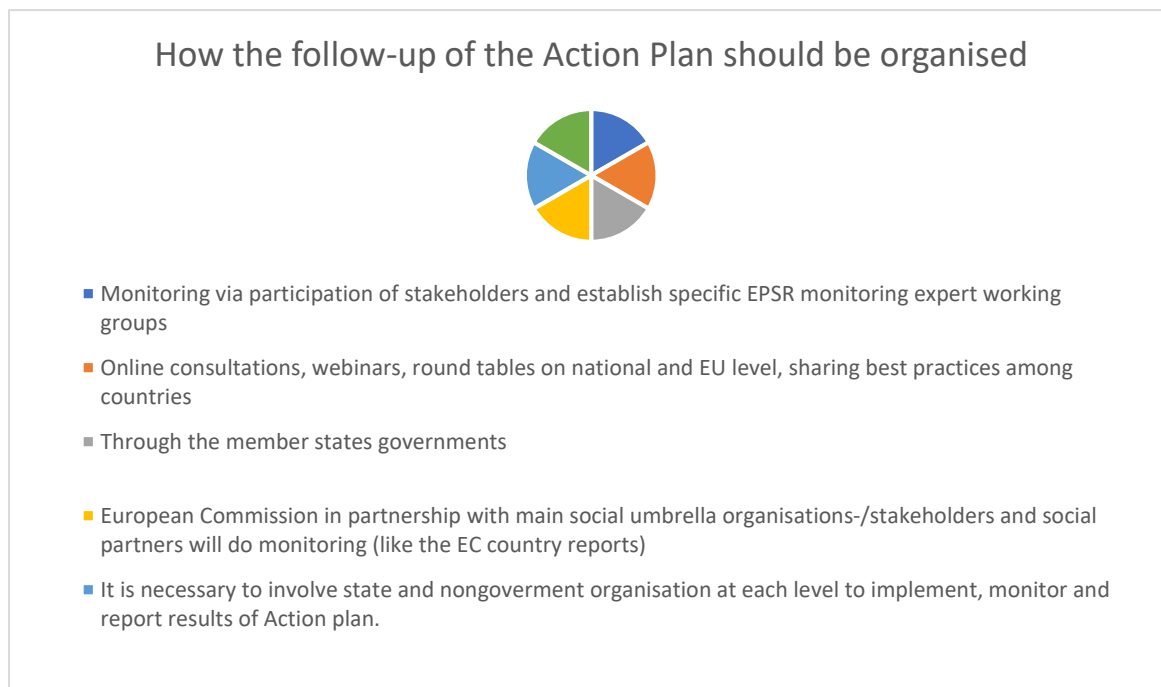


Figure 4: How the follow-up of the Action Plan should be organised. Answers from Eurodiaconia members survey.

The feedback we received from members on how the follow-up of the Action Plan should be organised, in terms of monitoring, reporting and stakeholders' engagement was quite mixed. The direct answers can be found in figure 4. Eurodiaconia and its members stand ready to further discuss how best to monitor the implementation of the EPSR and where we and our members can make our contribution. Two answers we would like to highlight here. **First, the involvement of all EU member states is crucial.** If the EPSR action plan and all its follow up actions will not receive the (full) support of all EU member states, the European Commission, social partners and civil society alone won't be able to enforce the necessary progress. **Second, it is important that the social scoreboard will cover all 20 Pillar principles in its monitoring. Eurodiaconia also warns about the risk of a piecemeal approach for the Action Plan**

(focusing only on some principles or actions). This would not be enough to reach the most vulnerable. For instance, Roma people or refugee women usually face multiple barriers in access to education, employment, etc.

Eurodiaconia's commitment towards implementing the Pillar



Since the launch of a proposal for an EPSR, Eurodiaconia has been committed to informing and engaging its member organisations at national and local levels, identifying the unique opportunity represented by the Pillar to make Europe more social.

Eurodiaconia commits to continue its active engagement towards a successful implementation of the Social Pillar that brings positive change to people's lives. Based on their experience in the provision of social services according to the principles within the Pillar, Eurodiaconia members are in a unique position to work together with European, national and local authorities, as active ambassadors of stronger social rights and higher social standards in the EU.

Not-for-profit social service providers seek to meet people's needs, including basic needs such as food and housing, but they also contribute to the greater goal of developing social cohesion and reinforcing community, creating learning and work opportunities, building social capital, and enabling people to take part in society as respected and responsible citizens. This, in turn, contributes to economic development and strengthens society.

CONCLUSIONS AT A GLANCE

The continual prioritisation of macro-economic stability over social cohesion and stability; blindness to the effects of macro-economic policy pursued through the European Semester; all this has succeeded in weakening care systems and social protection, increasing inequalities and undermining political stability. Unless this emphasis changes, full implementation of the EPSR will remain impossible.

Unfortunately, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, now intertwined with the European Semester, seems to be at risk of inheriting its faults.

To ensure full implementation of the Social Pillar, the action plan must combine legally binding measures for its implementation (e.g. with the introduction of a legally binding EU framework directive on minimum income) with strengthened, more coherent and more effective EU soft coordination mechanisms, backed by EU funds and prioritised social investment.

Our members fear that without concrete proposals on social services the EPSR will not be successful. Therefore, it is recommended that the European Commission develops a Communication on Social Services that identifies the most pressing issues and identifies how they can be addressed at EU and Member State level as one of the priority actions of the EPSR. Such a communication should address financing of social services, legal frameworks, employment and work force challenges, legal instruments such as public procurement and state aid and how innovation in social services is developed. This should be accompanied by a review of the 2011 Voluntary Quality Principles for Social Services. A clearer understanding of social services would re-enforce their essential nature and contribute to a common definition and understanding.

Eurodiaconia, as part of the EU Alliance for investing in children, strongly echoes the alliance's call to the European Commission to take a rights-based integrated approach to tackling child poverty and to incorporate the three Pillars of the Investing in Children Recommendation in its proposal for the European Child Guarantee.

We call on the European Union to include a chapter on the further deepening of Social Europe in the discussions on the Conference on the Future of the EU and possible Treaty changes. The debate on an increased enhanced use of qualified majority voting in social policy should be a part of these discussions.

The European Commission should promote guidelines specifically for regional and local legislators and publish "best practice examples" to illustrate how and where individual principles of the EPSR have (already) been successfully implemented.

Eurodiaconia warns about the risk of a piecemeal approach for the Action Plan (focusing only on some principles or actions). This would not be enough to reach the most vulnerable. For instance, Roma people or refugee women usually face multiple barriers in access to education, employment, etc.

The desire for better minimum wages must also look at some of the barriers in being able to pay them. Many social service providers struggle to offer competitive wages due to the restrictions on funding that tendered services can have. Our members consistently raise this challenge when it comes to the public procurement of social services. Commissioning authorities do not always allow for higher wages in the budgets they offer for running services which then impacts on what the service provider can pay their staff. Ensuring that above minimum wages is the norm in public service contracts would go some way to ensuring a better standard of living.

While the European Pillar of Social Rights should remain the relevant framework for implementing policies aiming at reducing homelessness and housing exclusion through principle 19, Eurodiaconia calls for an extension of principle 12 on social protection beyond the scope of employment and worker's right to comprise the right of the most deprived to access social protection.

Eurodiaconia calls for investing in solidarity for social cohesion: Solidarity mechanisms, such as those implemented by a strong welfare state, are the cement of social cohesion. As inequalities are growing, social cohesion is cracking. The EU must develop policies to reinforce social cohesion such as urbanism and adopt housing policies aiming to increase social mix, policies strengthening social protection systems and allowing quality, holistic and personalized care services for people in need.



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