

For an Inclusive Social Europe

The European Pillar of Social Rights
Action Plan, the Social Scoreboard and
the new "social rulebook" of Europe

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Connecting faith
and social justice
through action

Since the joint proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) was made by the European Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament at the Social Summit in Gothenburg, Sweden on the 17th November 2017, those committed to creating a more social Europe have been eagerly waiting for the Action Plan outlining concrete measures for the implementation of the EPSR to be published.

As a European network of 52 members in 32 countries delivering social services to the most vulnerable and advocating for social justice, we have been long determined to see the rights enshrined in the Pillar turned into reality for all people in Europe. Therefore, Eurodiaconia has participated in the 10-month-long consultation process on the Action Plan, and we submitted our written input based on the experience and needs of our members. We firmly believe that for our Union to be truly social, it must be both inclusive and non-discriminatory – combining concrete, targeted actions with universal rights and support.

Finally, on 4 March this year, the European Commission launched the Action Plan which immediately generated heated discussions among experts, policy makers and all interested parties debating whether the proposed actions will be broad and strong enough to make meaningful changes in the lives of the most deprived, excluded and discriminated against in the EU.

We are very aware of the continuing negative socio-economic situation that too many people in our Member States experience. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 90 million people were at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and every fifth child lived in a family that experiences poverty. Women, persons with disabilities, Roma, migrants and many others have been facing enormous inequalities in all areas of life including when accessing basic services and social services. Young people, almost 18% of whom are currently unemployed, have been struggling to start their careers. An increasing number of people experience some form of homelessness in the EU in the absence of available social housing and strong enough social protection systems. And all these major challenges have been further exacerbated by the socio-economic effects of the present COVID-19 crisis.

The EU is often held up as an example of a socially well-functioning Union, where human rights are respected and where people can fulfil their potentials. But whenever we talk to our members providing services and support to those who experience marginalisation, poverty, social exclusion and a lack of care, and whenever we see the ever-growing demand for their work and services, we realise how much **we need a comprehensive Social Pillar Action Plan which takes both a human rights-based approach and the revitalisation of our economies from a solidarity perspective to ensure that we have an economy that works for people.**

Having taken a closer look at the proposed Action Plan, we can see several promising measures, such as the new Disability Rights Strategy, the Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee, but we also feel that the Plan should go further in addressing all of the rights and principles of the Pillar rather than only focussing on some actions that are already planned.

For the Action Plan to effect real change, it must combine ambitious measures that reduce poverty, social exclusion, inequality and also the reasons for them, such as discrimination or antigypsyism. Otherwise, those who need advancement in their lives the most, and may be the hardest to reach, might be very easily left behind.

We therefore share some specific opinions, proposals and concerns on the following areas of the proposed Action Plan:

On eradicating poverty and fighting for social inclusion

Out of the proposed **3 EU headline targets**, the one on poverty is essential. Poverty is the most blatant form of deprivation of human rights and dignity. Poverty is also Goal 1 "NO POVERTY" among the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), to which the Action Plan wishes to align itself in accordance with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda by the EU and all its Member States.

However, whereas the proposed **EU target on poverty** aims that by 2030 at least 15 million people should be lifted out of poverty and social exclusion, at least 5 million people of whom should be children, **SDG 1 goes much further in all aspects:**

-  First, the signatories to the 2030 Agenda have committed themselves to reducing the proportion of people living in poverty at least by half by 2030. This would imply a goal of at least 45 million people in the EU, and not 15.
-  Second, apart from setting a concrete target, SDG 1 also sets out to have social protection systems providing substantial coverage of people who experience poverty in our countries.
-  Third, by 2030, Member States should ensure that all people who experience poverty have equal rights to economic resources, access to basic services, to property, new technologies and financial services, etc.
-  Fourth, the signatories promised to build the resilience of people who experience poverty and reduce their vulnerability to socio-economic and environmental shocks and disasters.
-  And finally, Member States undertook to create sound, pro-poor and gender-sensitive policies and to invest in poverty eradication actions.

Therefore, there is much more to do to align the proposed target and the Action Plan with Goal 1 of the 2030 Agenda. **Adequate minimum income**, as a start, plays a key role in reducing poverty and fighting inequalities, thus we hope to see a more ambitious proposal on this vital issue from the European Commission than the one for a Council Recommendation to be adopted in 2022, and call on Member States to recognize the need for a common European approach on this.

Moreover, while we welcome the **EU sub-target on child poverty**, we also believe that it is not ambitious enough. Eurodiaconia has jointly stated through the EU Alliance for Investing in Children, that if the EU wants to achieve the child poverty reduction target set by the 2030 Agenda, it should aim to ensure that at least 9 million children will be lifted out of poverty, not 5 million. Therefore, **we call on EU Member States to adopt more ambitious targets that will exceed the EU target**. There should be no compromise when it comes to child poverty, and **not even one single child should experience poverty**.

We find it reassuring that on 24 March, the European Commission adopted its comprehensive EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and put forward its proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee. As we stated in our response to the launch of these documents, we welcome the Strategy's focus on children experiencing homelessness, living with disabilities, children with precarious family situations, from migrant, minority racial or ethnic backgrounds as well as on children living in alternative care. We also appreciate the strategic and comprehensive approach to child poverty and social exclusion, and the aim to establish an integrated, person-centred, and multidimensional approach to the issue and an enabling policy framework.

However, we regret **the lack of a sub-target on homelessness** and a related indicator in the Social Scoreboard. NGOs working with people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity have been advocating for this for a long time, as well as Members of the European Parliament who have adopted two resolutions with a wide majority calling for the adoption of an EU-wide goal of eradicating homelessness by 2030, and for the launch of an EU Framework for National Homelessness Strategies. Yet so far, the European Commission has failed to act on either of the calls, and it is not clear what the proposed Platform on Homelessness will achieve to this end. We hope that the Member States will adopt national goals to eradicate homelessness and will launch National Homelessness Strategies with concrete proactive and reactive measures.

We are convinced that **the EU and all its Member States should set out the eradication of poverty and social exclusion as their first and ultimate goal**. Furthermore, the European Commission should launch an EU Framework for National Homelessness Strategies and monitor National Homelessness Strategies, and have a strong EU Framework Directive on Minimum Income. This would be the only way to effectively live up to our EU treaty commitments. We hope that across the European Union the political will and the ambition of the Member States will be strong, alongside a more ambitious response by the European Commission.

Without this, poverty, social exclusion and material deprivation will remain a reality for at least every fifth person living in the EU for the decades to come.

On reducing discrimination and inequalities in the field of employment and education and ensuring quality

We welcome the **EU headline target on employment**, aiming for at least 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 to be in employment by 2030, and also its three added targets saying that the gender employment gap should be at least halved compared to 2019, that the provision of formal early childhood education and care should be increased, and that the rate of young people neither in employment, nor in education or training (NEETs) aged 15-29 should decrease from 12.6% (2019) to 9%. We also appreciate the **EU headline target on skills**, setting out that at least 60% of all adults should participate in training every year by 2030, and the added targets on acquiring basic digital skills (at least 80% of those aged 16-74), and on further reducing early school leaving.

However, when comparing, for example, the employment headline target and the gender employment gap target to the relevant 8.5 sub-target of SDG 8 "DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH", we can again observe that the Action Plan falls short, as SDG 8 aims at reaching full and productive employment and decent work by 2030 for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value.

At a closer look, our EU target of 78% for employment and 9% for NEETs might seem ambitious enough, however, they might easily leave behind exactly those who are victims of long-term unemployment, and persons who suffer from systemic segregation and intersectional discrimination in the fields of education and employment. We therefore regret that the revised Social Scoreboard attached to the Action Plan which aims at monitoring progress in the Member States does not foresee breakdowns of its indicators on employment and unemployment rate, long-term unemployment rate or youth unemployment rate, underachievement in education, etc. by racial or ethnic origin, and only foresees breakdowns by age, gender, country of birth and disability status "where relevant".

We strongly believe that anti-discrimination indicators should be added to the employment and education targets, that anti-discrimination safeguards should be built into all the items of the Action Plan and focus should be put on active outreach to the most vulnerable people in order to avoid the so-called 'creaming' of those who are most likely to be employed, who most easily get an opportunity to participate in the Youth Guarantee schemes or take part in trainings. This is particularly key as the European Commission starts to explore funding by results in relevant social cohesion programmes.

While the establishment of an EU target for adult training and skilling is also very positive, once again, when compared to SDG 4 "QUALITY EDUCATION", we observe that the Action Plan only covers a small part of it.

For instance, the signatories to the 2030 Agenda have committed to eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples. However, the Action Plan does not contain specific measures to tackle unequal access to education and training for women and vulnerable groups. Here again, we would have liked to see the reality of inequality in accessing training and skills being actioned.

The 2030 Agenda has a specific goal number 10 “REDUCE INEQUALITIES” which is exactly the focus missing from the Action Plan and the Social Scoreboard. **We need a human rights-based approach, a focus on the most vulnerable and deprived people**, or as SDG 10 puts it, we need to “progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population”, “empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status”, “reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies...”, “adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality”, etc.

Without such a focus, **the risk of once again excluding people who are usually left out of the formal labour market and inclusive education – migrants, Roma people and other ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities and those having intersecting disadvantages – remains high**. To this end, it would be key to align the already existing EU strategies and action plans, such as the one on Roma inclusion and the one on third-country nationals, and their attached monitoring with the Pillar Action Plan and the Social Scoreboard.

On the provision of social services

The European Pillar of Social Rights properly declares that everyone has the right to access adequate, enabling, and good-quality social services. In the EPSR Action Plan, the Commission states that investment in social services is essential for addressing intergenerational cycles of disadvantage as well as complementing Minimum Income schemes as an enabling factor. Furthermore, the Action Plan stresses the need to have effective access to essential services of sufficient quality and recognises that such services can be an important source of job creation.

However, despite it being clear that social services are essential for the realisation of many of the core activities of the Action Plan, there are no specific proposals to support social services to be affordable, accessible, available and of high quality with the exception of a proposed initiative on Long Term Care Services in 2022.

Therefore, we, as a network of providers of social services to the most vulnerable, would like to encourage the Commission to put a greater emphasis on social services through the EPSR Action Plan, to include specific actions to support social services in their essential role of enacting the Pillar, and to address the financing, legal framework, employment and workforce challenges of the sector.

This could take the form of an Action Plan or a Communication on Social Services. Also, to ensure that social services are of good quality across the EU, we call on the Member States to abide by the Voluntary European Quality Framework for Social Services and make sure that they cover all the dimensions of quality enshrined by the Framework.

Also, when it comes to the proposed revision of the Social Scoreboard, we feel that social services have been left out, as there is no mechanism in it to report on either the investment in social services as a percentage of GDP or the reported un/met needs for social services. We recognize that there is a hurdle due to the data that Eurostat currently collects and therefore what can be reported in the Scoreboard but we strongly feel that these pieces of information are essential to ensure that a positive ecosystem for all social services is at the heart of the Action Plan. Therefore, we strongly urge the Commission and the Member States to add these two indicators.

Our 7 + 6 policy recommendations for an inclusive and non-discriminatory Europe

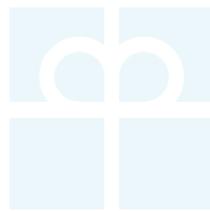
Concerning the **European Pillar Action Plan**, on the basis of the facts mentioned above and of our experience collected on the ground, we encourage the European Commission and the Member States:

-  to aim at lifting all the people out of poverty by 2030;
-  to aim at eradicating child poverty completely as soon as possible;
-  to put forward and adopt a Framework Directive on adequate minimum income schemes;
-  to launch an EU Framework for National Homelessness Strategies, and to prepare and implement National Homelessness Strategies;
-  to underpin all the elements of the Action Plan by strong and consistent anti-discrimination measures, as discrimination is one of the root causes of poverty and exclusion;
-  to add active outreach measures towards all those who are the farthest from the labour market, who struggle with attaining basic skills, and who are generally left behind; and
-  to advance work at an EU level for quality, affordable, accessible and available social services through putting forward a Communication or an Action Plan on Social Services.

Relating to the **Social Scoreboard**, we encourage the European Commission and the Member States:

-  to add an indicator on homelessness;
-  to add racial or ethnic origin to the collection of data in line with the demands of the EU Anti-racism Action Plan and following the principles of equality data collection;
-  to use racial and ethnic origin as bases for the breakdowns to all the social scoreboard indicators;
-  to have breakdowns by age, gender, country of birth and disability status added to all the social scoreboard indicators;
-  to add an indicator measuring the level of investment into social services as percentage of GDP spent or equivalent; and
-  to add an indicator measuring self-reported un/met needs for social service.

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan provides hope for the people in Europe at a time when Social Europe is a top priority for a large majority of EU citizens. We have to deliver the expected results. **Eurodiaconia is committed to supporting the implementation of the Social Pillar principles and the Pillar Action Plan** for the sake of creating a social rulebook ensuring inclusion and equality for all.



For further information, contact us:

Rue Joseph II, 166
1000 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: +32 2 234 38 60
Email: office@eurodiaconia.org

www.eurodiaconia.org