

# SOCIAL EUROPE WILL NOT BE STRENGTHENED WITHOUT BINDING MEASURES! EAPN'S INITIAL REACTION TO THE EUROPEAN PILLAR OF SOCIAL RIGHTS ACTION PLAN

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## Introduction

EAPN welcomes the European Commission's **Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights**,<sup>1</sup> published on 4 March 2021. The Action Plan is the long-awaited follow-up to the promise, proclaimed by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission in 2017, that the unique European Social and Economic Model brings about shared prosperity and opportunities for all.

Nicolas Schmit, Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, explained that the Action Plan is not only about targets and objectives, but also **contains tools, and policy and legal initiatives to achieve the goals by means of the community method, backed up by resources from the Recovery and Resilience Facility and ESF+, and by a monitoring framework**. EAPN fully supports him and the Commission in making effective use of these tools and using the revised Social Scoreboard for monitoring progress on social rights. He stated that 70% of the EU's citizens view the lack of social rights as a serious problem for them and that nearly 9 out of 10 believe that social issues should be a key matter for the EU.

The Action Plan sets three major political targets in the areas of employment, skills, and social protection to be achieved by 2030 which will help to steer national policies and reforms, also in the context of the European Semester, including one headline target on poverty and social exclusion.

## Poverty reduction target

Headline target 3 aims to **reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030, of which at least 5 million should be children**. The Action Plan highlights that in 2019 before the pandemic hit Europe and the world, 91 million people were at risk of poverty or social exclusion and 22.2% of children lived in poor households in the EU27.

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[1] <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=23696&langId=en>

Approximately 700,000 people are estimated to sleep on the streets across Europe on any given night. It concedes that the Europe 2020 social target of a 20 million-people reduction was not met, even though compared to 2008 the number reduced by about 12 million.

EAPN considers it essential that a poverty reduction target is one of the only three headline targets. However, **the aim of reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030 is a significant scaling back of the ambition of the Europe 2020 target** of 20 million, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and expected higher levels of poverty and income inequality in the future. Even with the addition of “at least”, setting a minimum number, this headline target falls short of aiming at a substantial decrease of women, men and children at risk of poverty or social exclusion as set out in the first Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), although the Action Plan claims that the headline targets are consistent with the UN’s SDGs. The Commission calls on the Member States to define their own national targets and emphasises that the effective implementation of the Social Pillar greatly depends on the resolve and action of Member States, with whom the primary responsibility for social policies, employment and skills lies, and EAPN strongly urges governments to increase the ambition on the poverty reduction target.

**EAPN welcomes the focus on the reduction of child poverty, but regrets that no further sub-targets**, e.g. on homelessness are included, even though the Action Plan announces the launch of a European Platform on Combating Homelessness.

**EAPN also welcomes that the new targets are supported by a revision of the Social Scoreboard** to support monitoring and strengthen the social dimension of the European Semester.

## Minimum Income

For EAPN it is crucial that the Action Plan contains an initiative for a **Council Recommendation on minimum income in 2022** to effectively support and complement the policies of Member States. The document rightfully explains that while all Member States have them, minimum income schemes “vary significantly in their adequacy, coverage, take-up and articulation with labour market activation measures and enabling goods and services, including social services. In many cases, the eligibility criteria and the levels of benefits would deserve to be modernised.”

Given this, and the fact that this is no time for business as usual, **EAPN strongly regrets that the Action Plan does not include a Framework Directive on Minimum Income, as a binding EU legislative proposal.**

**EAPN welcomes the steps of:**

1. **Updating the EU framework on Minimum Income** to effectively support and complement the policies of Members States on national minimum income protection;
2. Strengthening the **exchange of good practice and mutual learning**;
3. Periodically preparing **a joint report to analyse and review progress** achieved in the development of minimum income – as mentioned in the Staff Working Document.<sup>2</sup>

However, **as they lack binding effect and enforceability, they are not sufficient to systematically improve the income situation** for millions of persons and families and substantially reduce poverty. A Framework Directive would have been legally feasible and built on existing EU competencies in the social and cohesion policy fields, fully respecting principles of subsidiarity and proportionality and thus protecting national competencies.<sup>3</sup> It would have demonstrated to all that the EU delivers on its promises and prioritises protecting people as well as planet, in its commitment to a social, inclusive and sustainable recovery.

## **Further initiatives regarding the fight against poverty and social exclusion**

EAPN is also glad to see the Action Plan's several initiatives relevant for the fight against poverty and social exclusion, such as an **EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child** and Council Recommendation establishing the **European Child Guarantee**, a **European Platform on Combating Homelessness** and an **Action Plan on the Social Economy**. The Commission is also adopting a new **Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030** this week, and already presented in 2020 several actions deriving from the Pillar, such as the **Gender Equality Strategy**, the **EU Anti-Racism Action Plan**, a **Youth Employment Support package** and a proposal for a **Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages**.

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[2] <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=23704&langId=en>, p.86.

[3] [Expert Study Minimum Income Framework Directive](#)

EAPN is also pleased to see the Commission mention the **Affordable Housing Initiative** and the report on access to essential services, due in 2022, as well as the forward-looking initiative of setting up a **High-Level Expert Group** to study the future of the welfare state.

The Action Plan also mentions communication activities from the Commission to ensure awareness and shared commitment to the Pillar, calling on Member States to organise coordination mechanisms to ensure engagement of all relevant stakeholders at national level in implementing the Pillar, which is very much welcomed. **EAPN sees the need for real processes at national level to ensure the participation of civil society organisations and citizens**, especially of those most vulnerable, such as people at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

## Deeper analysis to follow

Not least in the light of the devastating economic and social consequences we have already seen from the COVID-19 pandemic, EAPN and its members will be further reflecting on three key questions:

1. **Can the Action Plan deliver on these promises and expectations and provide an adequate integrated approach** to addressing the structural causes of poverty when it comes to the much-needed fight against poverty and social exclusion?
2. Can it help guarantee that everybody has **the right and access to an adequate and enabling minimum income**?
3. Can the different key initiatives effectively contribute to an improved **rights-based access to social protection and affordable public services**, including health, care, housing and energy?

EAPN is hopeful for a positive outcome regarding the Action Plan at the Social Summit in May 2021. As Europe is facing an unprecedented crisis, the **Action Plan must play a crucial role in the fight against poverty and social exclusion** in an integrated way to address the structural causes of poverty, effectively guaranteeing the right and access to an adequate and enabling minimum income, to social protection and to affordable public services.