

Workshop A

How can we overcome the barriers that People experiencing Poverty face in accessing essential services (such as energy, housing and food)?

Principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan affirms that “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.”

EAPN understands essential services as services of general interest, of an economic and social nature, which are essential to the lives of the population and where the public authorities must ensure adequate standards for all. Therefore, essential services cover a broad range of activities linked to private providers, such as energy, telecommunications and transport services, but they also include vital services which lie at the heart of EU social protection systems: e.g. education, health, housing and social services.

Access to such services is a fundamental social right and their accessibility and adequacy should not be subject to other conditions. They should be a complement to effective social protection systems and enabling minimum income schemes [1].

[1] From Access to Essential Services Report - EAPN.

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Therefore, EAPN considers the following as main essential services:

Water (Principle 20 of the EPRS Action Plan)
Sanitation (Principle 20 of the EPRS Action Plan)
Energy (Principle 20 of the EPRS Action Plan)
Transport (Principle 20 of the EPRS Action Plan)
Financial Services (Principle 20 of the EPRS Action Plan)
Digital Communications (Principle 20 of the EPRS Action Plan)
Housing
Healthcare
Education and training
Social services
Food

Barriers that people experiencing poverty (PeP) face in accessing essential services:

Increasing restrictions on eligibility and punitive conditionality of social protection schemes do not guarantee a rights-based access to support measures for facilitating universal access to services.

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Health Care

- Poor or no coverage for dental and mental healthcare;
- Shortage of doctors;
- Long waiting lists to get treatment;
- Closure of services at various times during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Social stigma and unequal treatment that people living in poverty; experience;
- Decreased public investment and more reliance on private insurance.

Energy

- Inadequate access to energy due to dependence on unclean fuels.
- Huge increase in energy prices.
- People living in poverty are forced to make risky sacrifices in order to be able to afford energy such as not paying for their medication or other health-related costs in order to pay their energy bills.
- When people cannot afford to pay their energy bills, private companies simply disconnect them.
- The energy transition has not been delivering for people experiencing poverty, as some of the energy efficiency or renewable energy programmes are not accessible or affordable to PeP.

Housing

- The high cost of housing, which is the main driver of homelessness and frequent relocations.
- PeP are spending 70% of their income on housing.
- Deposits on rental accommodation and down payments on mortgages present a major barrier to PeP.
- Abusive evictions by landlords for the purpose of increasing the rent.
- Lack of protection from the state in case of evictions.
- Insufficient provision of social housing and long waiting lists for people who apply.
- Poor conditions in social housing that sometimes lead to long-term health problems.
- Discrimination in the rental market faced by vulnerable groups (racialised communities, single/solo parents, Roma, migrants, etc).
- Insufficient appropriate housing for people with disabilities – people are often forced to live in accommodation that is not fit for their needs.

Food

- Steep increase in prices for food and PeP can no longer afford even basic food products like bread.
- People with disabilities or with health issues have to choose between healthcare and food.
- Children are going hungry to school, despite the fact that access to healthy nutrition is recognised as a key service in the European Child Guarantee.
- Young people are starting to eat more and more fast food because it is cheaper and because they cannot afford healthy and nutritious food. At the same time, they are very worried about the long-term impact that consuming this kind of food has on their health and school performance.
- Having to always rely on food banks does not allow people to have autonomy over their diet.[1]

[1] Food banks cannot be a long-term solution as they are not accessible to everyone (people with disabilities or people with certain health issues).

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- Insufficient coverage of public transport in rural areas or sparsely populated areas.
- Public services traditionally operating in face-to-face settings such as for claiming social benefits, registering for the provision of services, healthcare (medicine prescription, COVID-19 vaccine certificates, scheduling appointments) and banks (online banking) are increasingly moving to the digital space and excluding people in vulnerable situations and/or living in digital poverty.[1]
- Insufficient access to water and sanitation.
- Unequal access to early childhood education and care as well as education/training and lifelong learning(with quality) to PeP.

Questions for thought/discussion:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of emergency measures vs long-term structural changes? For instance, did you receive temporary energy subsidies/vouchers during the energy crisis? What was their impact?
- How do you foresee that the EU and national governments can eliminate the barriers you face in accessing essential services?
- How can we improve the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan in the access to essential services?

Workshop B

How can we overcome the challenges faced by People experiencing Poverty in accessing social protection schemes (including minimum income) and decent wages?

Principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan

06 “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.”

12 “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.”

14 “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.”

EAPN views social protection as more than just the provision of basic needs. Social protection schemes are key instruments for creating socially just societies and therefore must be embedded in social policies that promote social justice, social security, social coherence, democracy and well-being. They “have a preventive and sustainable effect; strengthen the resilience of individuals, families and communities and enhance the[ir] capability to react to risks of life.” [1] Consequently, they are extremely important to people experiencing poverty as they may be their only source of income, they therefore rely on them to survive and have a decent life.

[1] International Federation of Social Workers. (2016, October 3). The Role of Social Work in Social Protection Systems: The Universal Right to Social Protection. Retrieved December 21, 2022, from www.ifsw.org/the-role-of-social-work-in-social-protection-systems-the-universal-right-to-social-protection/?fbclid=IwAR2KBzQUSJw_6mYcOPaFSXua_dwip3DA9-oeXiBqWH0Kb-EzO3A1AH5RfFM

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Adequate social protection for all, throughout the lifecycle, allows individuals, both those who can and cannot work, to live in dignity and is the cornerstone of an inclusive Europe, free of poverty. Additionally, in line with the Active Inclusion Strategy developed by the European Commission in 2008, EAPN finds it vital that vulnerable groups have personalised pathway support to quality employment. Quality employment in an inclusive labour market must include, among other things, adequate wages, social security, lifelong vocational training, available childcare policies and strong collective bargaining across all sectors.

The Council of the EU adopted the Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages on 4 October 2022 and EU Member States have two years to transpose the directive into national law. Nevertheless, EAPN demands, amongst other things, that Member States assess the adequacy of wages using specific baskets of goods and services which must also account for work-related expenditure (e.g. transport, clothing, food, care responsibilities). [1]

Barriers that people experiencing poverty (PeP) face in accessing social protection schemes (including minimum income) and decent wages:

- Wages are set in a discriminatory manner depending on the type of employment contract or relationship, residency status, age, (dis)ability, ethnicity or nationality.
- Adequacy of wages often does not take into account work-related expenditure (e.g. transport, clothing, food, care responsibilities).
- PeP and vulnerable groups have weaker connections to the labour market (e.g. unpaid internships, precarious work, undeclared and informal work).

[1] EAPN. (2021, February 25). EC Proposal for EU Directive on Minimum Wages. Retrieved December 21, 2022, from <https://www.eapn.eu/the-eu-must-adopt-a-directive-on-minimum-wages-eapn-statement/>

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- Vulnerable groups struggle to access social benefits and social protection schemes due to the strict eligibility criteria, conditionality rules and/or inadequate measures to address the high rates of non-take-up.
- Social benefits and wages remain inadequate in the face of inflation and the cost-of-living crisis as they are not regularly updated.
- Social protection schemes do not guarantee a minimum standard of living and a decent life for all, nor enable people to fully participate in society.
- No European minimum income scheme matches the actual needs of beneficiaries.
- Access to social protection schemes is done digitally, yet digital poverty means many do not apply for it.
- In-work poverty. [1]
- No integrated and tailored support for long-term unemployed people.
- Discrimination in accessing and staying in the labour market faced by vulnerable groups.

Questions for thought/discussion:

- How can the EU and national governments make it easier for you to access social protection schemes and decent wages?
- What are your demands regarding access to social protection schemes and decent wages?
- What is the right balance between universal and targeted social policies? For instance, universal provision of child allowances as opposed to child allowances targeted to low-income households?
- How can we improve the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan in this area?

[1] EAPN defines in-work poverty as people experiencing poverty while being employed.

Workshop C

How to achieve an ambitious EU anti-poverty strategy building from national experiences?

The resolution of the Council of Ministers 184/2021 approved the Portuguese National Strategy to Combat Poverty 2021-2030. The Government acknowledged this national strategy as a central element of the objective of eradicating poverty, framed in the strategic challenge of reducing inequalities and included a set of targets to accomplish by 2030, thus contributing to the European poverty reduction targets:

- Reducing the monetary poverty rate for the total population by 10%, which represents a reduction of 660,000 people in poverty;
- Halving monetary poverty in the group of children, which represents a reduction of 170,000 children in poverty;
- Approximating the child material deprivation indicator to the European average, in percentage points;
- Halving the income poverty rate of the working poor, which represents a reduction of 230,000 working people in poverty;
- Reducing the gap in the poverty rate of the different territories to a maximum of 3 percentage points in relation to the national average rate.

The Strategy has 6 main strategic goals:

a. To reduce poverty among children and young people and their families;

b. To promote the full integration of young adults into society and the systemic reduction of their risk of poverty;

c. To boost employment and qualifications as crucial to eradicate poverty;

d. Strengthen social inclusion policies, promote and improve the societal integration and social protection of the most disadvantaged individuals and groups;

e. Guarantee territorial cohesion and local development;

f. Making the fight against poverty a national goal.

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This last strategic goal ends up being the framing goal of the entire Strategy and contains important objectives in its implementation, like the guarantee of participation by people experiencing poverty. The need for multi-sectoral articulation is also fundamental so that this approach can be incorporated into government structures even after 2030.

The need for a European Strategy to Combat Poverty

The Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights was a way to boost the development of the Portuguese National Anti-Poverty Strategy. We have an opportunity to demand a European strategy able to face new challenges, improve people's lives and achieve concrete results in the reduction of poverty. EAPN Europe carried out a reflection exercise in 2019[1] that presented a set of principles and recommendations for a European strategy that can work as a basis for further reflection:

<p><u>A. Achieving poverty eradication and increasing well-being</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A rights-based integrated anti-poverty strategy, beyond employment;• An ambitious EU Poverty Target, with mid-term review;• Effective Poverty Indicators and Social Scoreboard;• Urgent action to guarantee adequate Minimum Income and Social Protection;• Concrete results on other social rights – particularly quality work, education and services including housing and health.	<p><u>B. Political Pre-requisites to achieve results</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• High-level political commitment;• Making well-being the goal – rebalancing the economic/social/environmental objectives.
<p><u>C. Embedding Participation and Transforming EU Coordination Instruments</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A participative, social, and sustainable European Semester;• Making Civil Society equal partners.	<p><u>D. Mobilising EU Funds to Support the Anti-poverty Strategy</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase the effectiveness of EU funds spending on poverty reduction.

[1] EAPN Europe, Delivering Agenda 2030 for people and planet. EAPN proposals for a Post Europe 2020 Strategy, september 2019: <https://www.eapn.eu/delivering-agenda-2030-for-people-and-planet-eapn-proposals-for-a-post-europe-2020-strategy/>

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Questions for thought/discussion:

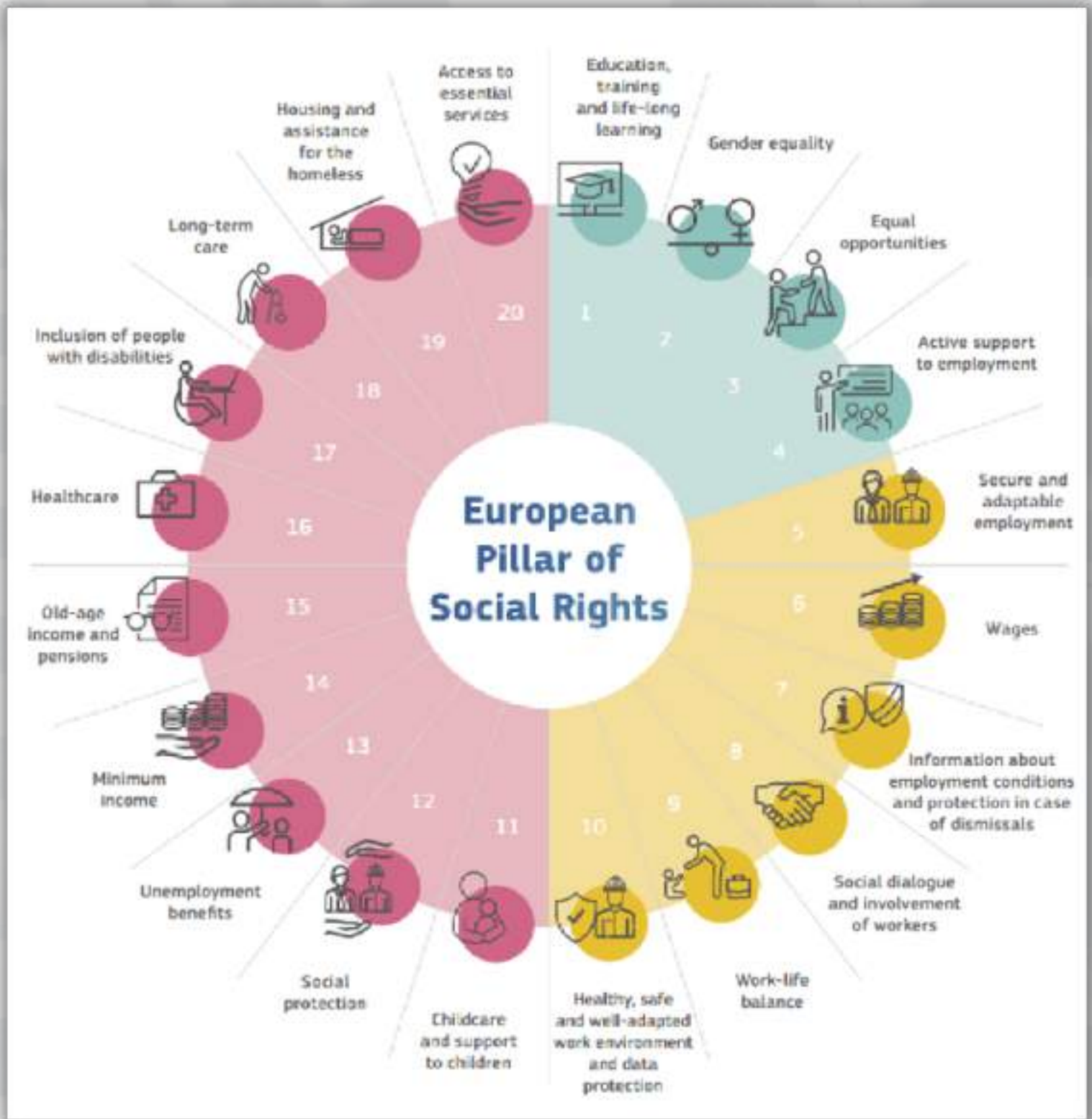
- How can we push for the implementation of other national/local strategies?
- What recommendations can we make for the definition of a European anti-poverty strategy and ensure the fight against poverty is a top priority at the EU level?
- How can we ensure the effective participation of people and civil society organisations in defining and monitoring the national/European strategies?

What is the European Pillar of Social Rights? And its Action Plan?

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) was adopted on the 26th of April 2017 and it was Proclaimed in November 2017 by the EU Council, the European Parliament and the Commission. Whilst the package contains a large number of elements and documents, the key elements of the Pillar are an overall framework and proposals for principles, proposals for mechanisms for implementation, a social scoreboard of indicators and some legislative proposals (see the list of principles below).

The European Commission's Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights, published on 4 March 2021, aims to guide the implementation of the principles. 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".

The Action Plan sets three major political targets in the areas of employment, skills, and social protection to be achieved by 2030, including one headline target on poverty and social exclusion: reduction of the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million, of which at least 5 million should be children.



EAPN reaction in 2021 to the EPSR Action Plan:

- 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 from 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.
- EAPN welcomes the focus on the reduction of child poverty, but regrets that no further sub-targets, e.g. on homelessness, are included.
- It is crucial that the Action Plan contains an initiative for a Council Recommendation on minimum income in 2022, but EAPN strongly regrets that the Action Plan does not include a Framework Directive on Minimum Income, as a binding EU legislative proposal.[1]

[1] For more information, please read Minimum Income Council Recommendation: Not Enough To Fight Poverty – EAPN, 2023.

What we can say now:

- The lack of a comprehensive strategy has made the impact of the EPSR limited. This is why the EPSR Action Plan is not a sufficient roadmap for the elimination of poverty. The EU has to develop an anti-poverty strategy, with a set of tools and measures, including binding legislation, to effectively target barriers faced by people experiencing poverty to have a decent life.
- The energy crisis is not addressed by the Action plan, but by emergency measures. Although energy is listed in Principle 20, the EPSR failed to provide truly structural investments and reforms to make the right to clean and affordable energy accessible.
- In the face of multiple crises, the lack of ambitious and binding commitments has made the Action plan obsolete and does not reflect the current reality. Indeed, the EPSR Action Plan and its implementation fell short before the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the cost of living crisis.
- EAPN regrets to see that countries with the lowest GDP per capita are aiming to contribute the most to the poverty reduction target. There was a strong potential to have a more equitable distribution of the target, with solidarity measures among Member States. Yet this is not reflected in the current national targets. We see time and time again that the EU offers no comprehensive strategy when it comes to social rights: this is always left to the Member States, which in the current case, is leading to an unfair distribution of the EU poverty reduction target.