



EPC Online Policy Dialogue “Strengthening Europe’s safety net: The role of the European Pillar of Social Rights in the recovery”, 29 April 2021, 14.00-16.00

***Strengthening Europe’s safety net:
The role of the European Pillar of Social Rights in the recovery***

Welcome by Herman Van Rompuy

President European Policy Centre (EPC) & President Emeritus of the European Council

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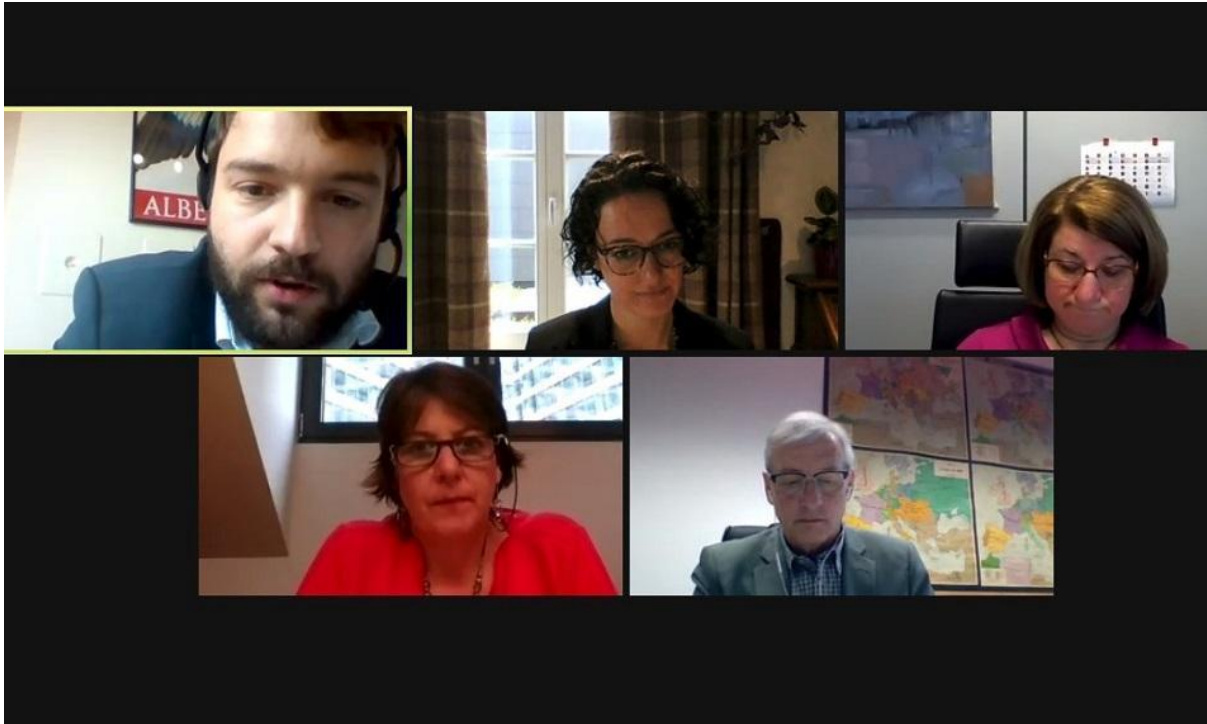
President, Social Services Europe & Secretary General, European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD)

The European Policy Centre, in cooperation with the Coordinated Action on Social Services, is pleased to invite you to this online Policy Dialogue.

The 2020 Eurobarometer saw the fight against poverty and social inequalities ranked as the top priority for European citizens for the first time. A subsequent Eurobarometer, released in March 2021, highlighted that nine out of ten Europeans consider Social Europe important, and that it should offer equal opportunities and access to the labour market, as well as fair working conditions and social protection.

Social services are at the heart of social protection, access to employment, care and wellbeing. They have been at the forefront of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and will have a vital role to play in the recovery. They also play a key role in the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). The recently published EPSR Action Plan calls for acceleration on implementation of the Pillar. The upcoming Social Summit in Porto on 7-8th May is expected to see a renewed pledge to fully implement the rights and principles of the EPSR at the highest political level.

This online policy dialogue will discuss expectations for the Porto Social Summit, the place of the EPSR in guiding the shape of the recovery, and how best to support social services in their efforts towards full implementation of the Pillar.



From right above to left below: Lukas Embacher, Laura Rayner, Andriana Sukova, Heather Roy, Luk Zelderloo

Summary of key points from the interventions and the question and answer session

by Mathias Maucher, Policy & Project Coordinator, Social Services Europe

Please note: They have not been checked for green light with the speakers

1 Points raised in the interventions

1.1 Andriana Sukova, DG EMPL

- The EC and the general public have recognised the work of social service providers and their role in mitigating the COVID-19 crisis. This role also helped convincing the EC about the need to set up a Social Services Helpdesk to inform the key stakeholders about available funding possibilities for investments to support the recovery from COVID-19 pandemic in line with the policy priorities of the EPSR AP.
- The EPSR AP supports a strengthening of the European Social Model and of social upward convergence if there is commitment from EU MS governments and regional and local authorities to help implementing many of the initiatives announced by the EC
- Where is the main role for the EC in the EPSR AP and where can it be inspirational and supportive?
1) The EC has set 3 headline targets on employment, education/training and poverty reduction. Reforms in the EU MS can be backed up by money from the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). Policies, measures or initiatives benefiting vulnerable groups and socially excluded people should be particularly focused upon; 2) The EC will also support resilient social protection systems and effective social services.
- Most relevant initiatives for social services sector included in or in line with the EPSR AP: 1) Action Plan Social Economy; 2) European Framework for Social Services of Excellence for Persons with Disabilities (planned for 2024); 3) European Platform on Combating Homelessness; 4) Council Recommendation on Minimum Income, supporting an active inclusion approach; 5) EC Proposal on Adequate Minimum Wages (28 October 2020): Need to reduce in-work poverty for vulnerable

workers, incl. front-line workers in social services particularly at risk as seen during the pandemic. Salaries in the social services sector are about 21% below EU average of all economic sectors.

- The EC is encouraging the use of EU funding to co-fund costs of construction for social infrastructure, incl. for social housing, day-care facilities for children and elderly.
- The EC will monitor the use of RRF funds as set out in the national Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRP) and also share information and raise awareness of possibilities to combine RRF money with other EU funding instruments, such as ESF+, FEAD (as part of ESF+) and ERDF.

1.2 Heather Roy, Eurodiaconia & Social Services Europe

- In the past the EC and EU MS got stuck in Lisbon Treaty rules on the EU competences in social policy and the social services providers had to face the dynamics of internal market competition. There is therefore a need to set up appropriate rules for public procurement and effective modalities for contracting not-for-profit social service providers as well as to promote good practices for a socially responsible public procurement.
- In the COVID-19 pandemic some of the most understaffed, under-funded and under-recognised economic sectors became crucial, such as social services. The role of social services – as services in the general interest and services working towards the public good – became visible for everybody. The COVID-19 crisis also made obvious that social services are essential for the well-being of people and that they need to be agile, not fragile – whereas in reality in the last 14 months since March 2020 they had to struggle to survive and adapt, as a rule without sufficient public support.
- Social service providers expect an effect of upward social convergence as a main general policy orientation, backed up by the EPSR AP. They would like to see the key role social services play for social cohesion and social inclusion/integration fully recognised – and also financially supported by governments at different levels and by the public authorities.

1.3 Lukas Embacher, EPSU

- In particular in the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic we have seen a lot of cases across Europe where social service workers were not able to protect themselves against the virus and infection due to a lack of protective equipment and non-adapted sick-leave arrangements, with the more precarious workers, often front-line workers, being hit most.
- The strong symbolic recognition of health and social care workers now needs to materialise in a financial recognition and the improvement of working conditions, wage increases and a better coverage by collective agreements for more workers in the sector.
- The predictions are clear: We will soon face even more important staff shortages. We thus need effective recruitment and retention policies and better working and pay conditions.
- There is an urgent need for EU and national policy and legislative frameworks to shift away from a blind economisation, commercialisation and privatisation of the social services sector. Contrary to those trends what we need is a right to care for all. The announced Framework Initiative on Long-term Care should be used to achieve a better funding of the relevant social services and safe and adequate staffing levels.

2. Points raised in the questions and answer section

2.1 Andriana Sukova, DG EMPL

- The EC has no intention to overthrow the division of competences between EU MS and EU on social policy or to question the subsidiarity principle. It will, however, pursue policies leading to EU-level minimum requirements.

- The EC expects that the COVID-19 pandemic will for the future add another layer of cross-country/-border solidarity – not least as everybody has seen the pressure and risks vulnerable groups have been exposed to, in particular homeless people. There is thus a good basis to make the case for the European Platform on Combating Homelessness.
- The EC is reflecting on possibilities how to take account of public spending for social investment when calculating the EU MS's public debt levels in line with the Stability and Growth Pact.
- In the context of follow-up activities to the EPSR AP, there is a need to investigate with Eurostat which comparable data beyond the indicators contained in the updated Social Scoreboard could be collected if a common methodology is followed in all EU MS.
- The EC has built the principles of non-discrimination and rule of law in most EU funding programmes, e.g. by introducing conditionalities, complaint systems and the possibility to refuse the co-funding of projects in case of non-compliance with these two principles.
- The EC has to report annually what has been spent from the RRF on "social", including in the "components" defined by the EC Guidance for the national Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRP).

2.2 Heather Roy, Eurodiaconia & Social Services Europe

- EU MS need to be honest on what they agree and commit to under the EPSR AP and about their own efforts to arrive at EU-level and national targets (as monitored by the Social Scoreboard). This not least is a lesson to be learnt from the Europe 2020 Strategy and those EU-level targets not achieved – in particular the poverty reduction target.
- Resilience is a concept for individuals, but it's also an appropriate approach for the social services sector and the social services providers. One key learning point from the COVID-19 pandemic is that ESF+ and RRF money should improve the "sectoral resilience".
- The EPSR AP (as the EPSR itself) is organised vertically, around the 20 principles. What is missing, in particular for the social services sector, is a complementary horizontal approach. What social service providers need is a supportive ecosystem! This also comprises adequate, accessible and enabling minimum income systems. Local authorities often are tendering social services without sufficient funding attached, i.e. the not-for-profit providers don't have enough money to pay decent wages, to invest in upskilling and further training of their workforce. The EU public procurement rules in place are therefore barriers for a sound development of the social services sector, also in order to recruit sufficient and adequately qualified staff, to reduce the gender pay gap in social services, etc.
- There is a need to have more disaggregated data in and beyond the Social Scoreboard, i.e. including on selected vulnerable groups, such as homeless people, and/or on services, such as on long-term care and their users. Such a data basis would also help to better measure and grasp the intersectionality of disadvantages and/or discriminations. Social services providers are ready to engage in exchanges to arrive there with Eurostat.
- The social services sector needs to be fully involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies in a spirit of "co-production". With such an approach, also the EU public procurement rules could be adapted, and EU funding more appropriately designed.
- Proposal: Let's discuss in 2022 an Action Plan for Social Services as a concrete and sector-specific follow up to the EPSR AP.
- The social services sector also needs to be represented in the High-level Group on Social Protection/Welfare Systems and their resilience announced in the EPSR AP.

2.3 Lukas Embacher, EPSU

- Lukas Embacher broadly supported the main points made by Heather Roy.
- He focused his reactions again on workforce-related issues such as pay, working conditions, recruitment and retention policies to make the sector more attractive.

- He recalled the need for a better coverage of the social services sector by collective agreements for a much bigger part of the workforce, in particular the more vulnerable workers the more precarious forms of work.

3. Conclusions/Take-Home Messages

Luk Zelderloo, EASPD & Social Services Europe

- Social services are part of the services of general interest. They are insofar "essential services", what became even clearer during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- What can we learn from the crisis? 1) Social service sector gave proof of its capacity to adapt, learn, be innovative and resilient; 2) Social services sector had to face very difficult situations for the workforce, but also family carers and volunteers. 14 months into the pandemic, not that much EU money arrived in the sector!
- The needs of the social services sector also need to be understood and taken into account by the EU MS when elaborating their RRP. The same holds for changes needed to the EU agenda, which needs to reflect and include issues such as under-staffing, poor working conditions, under-investment and the measures to effectively address these problems
- Mainstreaming is the wrong approach as is in reality means that the social services sector is "mainstreamed out". What we rather need is ear-marking social policy, social inclusion and social services in the national RRP and the RRF and other EU funding instruments!
- A change in governance is needed – towards cooperation of governments and public authorities with the social services sector and the providers there. This would be the best approach to support people in need of care, education/training, employment, guidance.
- The EPSR AP has to be properly resourced, otherwise the objectives cannot be achieved. The EU and the EU MS will then also fail on the objective of enjoyment of social rights, including access to quality services. This is as important as employment rates and educational outcomes.
- An EU Social Services Helpdesk needs to be launched as soon as possible, this would also help to revisit and adapt the EU-level funding machinery to existing and new needs of the social services sector and social service providers stemming from the COVID-19 crisis.

* *The Coordinated Action on Social Services brings together 13 key European Networks with responsibility for social services. They include the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD), Social Services Europe (SSE), Caritas Europa, European Platform of National Non-Profit Umbrella Organisations (CEDAG), Eurodiaconia, European Ageing Network (EAN), European Network of Social Integration Enterprises (ENSIE), European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR), European Social Network (ESN), European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU), Federation of European Social Employers and Solidar.*

