

The European Pillar of Social Rights



“Reinforcing Social Europe”

**International Network Meeting
3 – 4 March 2020
Stuttgart/Germany**

Dear Madam, dear Sir,

under the banner “The European Pillar of Social Rights - What has changed so far?”, members of European civil society, from trade unions and church related organisations, from nine EU member states met in the “Europa Zentrum Baden-Württemberg” in Stuttgart (Germany) to map out recent developments in diverse Member States, to discuss the commissions communication “*A strong social Europe for just transitions*” and also to prepare their contribution to the debate on the next steps in the process of implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).

As a network of organisations committed to social justice, we took a close look at the development and the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. We already participated at the EPSR consultation with the results of a conference in 2016 and continued this work at our International Meeting in March 2020.

The recent Covid19 pandemic strongly highlights the vital importance of good social protection and welfare systems such as access to healthcare and minimum income.

In addition to the current key “economic recovery” and “ecology” issues, as participants of the International Network Meeting, we emphasise the importance of a strong social dimension as an indispensable base in the triangle of economy, ecology and social inclusion. By requiring that “*people are at the centre and no one is left behind*” we encourage the European Institutions to continue their work beyond the first steps of e.g. the *Posted Workers Directive* or the *Work-life balance Directive*, and also to understand social rights as a fundamental principle of the European society, including the following:

- “*No one is left behind*” has to find application not only to EU citizens but to all persons residing in the EU (whether undocumented, refugees, or simply non-EU citizens,...),
- That these “principles” are transformed into rights based on the rule of law,
- That the involvement of Civil Society as a driver for change and value creator in the field of social inclusion and innovation is acknowledged,
- That more significant indicators for monitoring the social progress such as the UN-SDG indicators are added.

We would like to point out the following aspects of our Stuttgart meeting:

Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is an important way of holding societies together, as additional qualification related to practical experience. It could start with vocational training at the beginning of work life and continue throughout professional life in order to keep up with developments in the workplace. Lifelong learning is much more than “on the job training” but a structured way of strengthening cooperation in companies and in society. In addition, companies for example can offer their workers a certain number of working-hours to engage in a social activity in their city or region. Lifelong learning in this way could be an effective instrument to strengthen solidarity in society and support social skills and commitment inside and outside the workplace.

In addition, informal learning and additional qualifications need to be encouraged and validated. Lifelong learning can offer a “second chance”, for instance, to women who often start professional life by working in lower paid jobs with fewer responsibilities.

As the experience during the pandemic clearly demonstrates, the digital gap needs to be bridged in order to ensure that the most vulnerable persons will receive opportunities to participate fully on lifelong learning. Therefore, both in school as in settings of professional learning technical equipment and digital training has to be at the learners’ disposal.

Labour market politics

It is in the interest of all economic stakeholders to ensure job security, in particular for young people coming into the job market, for persons who are long term unemployed and for other vulnerable groups such as migrants. It should also be in the interest of all economic stakeholders to avoid increasing wage inequality and in-work poverty.

The introduction of legal minimum wages should guarantee a reasonable standard of living, counteract social exclusion and provide ways out of an economic crisis.

Free movement of workers is one of the most important founding principles of the European Union. Mobility needs to be shaped in a fair way (for example the “Job Verification Service” of the Salvation Army in Poland helps to check the reliability of job offers before young people leave their country to Western Europe).

In order to decrease push factors for working emigration it is necessary to make sure that all workers in the European Union receive at least a fair minimum wage allowing a decent living where ever they work. It is not a question of introducing a uniform minimum wage throughout Europe. If workers are not protected by a collective agreement, it should be possible to set minimum wages at an appropriate level, at least 60 percent of the average wages (median), and / or at least 50 percent of the average wage (arithmetic mean), based on full-time workers in the country concerned. Therefore, we strongly welcome the initiative of the European Commission on minimum wages in the EU.

Minimum income

The Covid-19-pandemic emphasises the necessity to amend the European approach of minimum wages by an effective EU anti-poverty action. In order to realise principle 14 of EPSR, we need binding common principles and minimum standards for minimum income schemes to ensure dignity, social participation and empowerment.

Social economy enterprises (SEE)

Social economy enterprises (SEE) strongly support the implementation of equal opportunities, access to the labour market and fair working conditions. We therefore request from the European Commission and the member states to develop easily accessible funding instruments further for SEEs and to create incentives for public authorities and the private sector to support them.

Childcare and support to children

We wish a child guarantee for *all* children regardless of their status (including refugee children) and especially for socially disadvantaged groups and families such as Roma, homeless or children with disabilities.

We strongly agree with the initiatives taken to realise child guarantee with focus on inclusive early childhood education and care and schools, access for health care, healthy nutrition and decent housing.

Child protection legislation still needs to be reinforced, recognising the need to take an integrated approach in tackling child poverty in the EU and broaden the scope of Child Guarantee and the Council Recommendation by:

- 1) Proposing that the multiannual strategies are built around the 3 pillars of the 2013 Investing in Children Recommendation and
- 2) Incorporating parents' access to resources (pillar 1) and children's access to decision making (pillar 2) in the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation.

There are many good practices of diaconia/caritas and churches that strengthen access to education (after school homework support, day care centres for children and family counselling, pre-school for refugee children), housing (prevention of homelessness through counselling programmes for women/single mothers how to maintain a lease) and nutritional guarantee (grants for school meals paid by the regional government according to specific economic criteria).

Affordable and available health care

As mentioned above, effects of mobility on the health care sector deprive many Central and Eastern European countries of professional health care staff. This leads to a precarious lack of medical services in their home countries and a medical system where many services are not available for people with low income.

The fact that some persons have been forced to sell their homes in order to afford health care is just not acceptable.

“*Europe's Beating Cancer plan*” is important but the EU moreover needs to guarantee access to general health care and also mental health care. Mental health problems can be a result of poverty and should be addressed while fighting poverty in the EU (mental issues can lead to poverty, but poverty can also lead to mental issues).

We suggest setting up mobile medical services to provide health care to persons in regions and rural areas who lack access to the most basic as well as more specialised medical services. In this respect, a Scandinavian best practice example is a hospital for persons who have been homeless for a long time due to drug abuse or other issues and who do not fit into the “normal” system.

Long-term care

Demographic changes are ongoing and will create an increased demand for new social services, especially for the elderly. Every person is entitled to long-term care at home as long as possible, and thereafter to institutional help as long as necessary. Both approaches require a well-functioning financial system, developed by national governments.

Challenges related to demography and mobility need to be coordinated at EU level. We therefore call on the EU institutions to facilitate the development of new solutions in this area.

EU Member states need to be prepared for the changing population age structure in terms of providing special training and job opportunities for geriatric specialists and caregivers.

Social housing

Housing is one of the basic needs and an investment in people to be included in social and labour life. We want to underline housing as a right (not as an economical commodity). We further want to encourage the commission to look at social housing best practices for example at experiences with

a certain cap of rent, building solar panels or developing (innovative) worth living quarters (*Quartiersentwicklung*). We call for realising a larger percentage in investment of social housing and ask the commission to encourage governments offering social housing and also to check the possibility of offering incentives through EU finance.

In conclusion

Regarding the question “What has changed so far?”, at the March 2020 conference we of course take due note of legal and administrative initiatives on EU level, but we hardly see any impact on persons who are vulnerable, who are threatened by poverty or who work in precarious working conditions.

Instead we still observe increasing imbalances in living standards across the EU. Engagement should not only be focused on developing action plans, but also on ensuring that support reaches the persons who need it most.

As part of civil society, we offer our help and our knowledge about the real conditions on the ground, what is needed where, and what works. It is necessary to involve representatives of the European civil society, trade unions and church related organisations from EU member states more closely and to improve the framework for promoting the cooperation of public authorities and civil society.

Participants of the International Network Meeting ”*The European Pillar of Social Rights: What has changed so far?*“ held on 03-04 March 2020 at the “*Europa Zentrum Baden-Württemberg*” (Stuttgart/Germany):

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