

International Federation of Social Workers Europe

Contribution to the European Commission Consultation
'Have your say on reinforcing Social Europe'

Position Paper on the European Pillar of Social Rights' Action Plan



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European Pillar of Social Rights Implementation Action Plan

The International Federation of Social Workers Europe (IFSW Europe):

The IFSW Europe is one of the five regional bodies of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). The IFSW is the global body for the social work profession. The IFSW European Region has member organisations from 50 countries including all EU member states.

The social work references: The social work profession has its roots and value base in a commitment to social justice and the upholding of human rights (IFSW, 2018)¹. The dignity of every human being is central to social work, as is a commitment to work for the positive social change that improves the well-being of people in all countries across the European continent.

The social work field of interventions: Social workers work on a daily basis with those who are vulnerable; with those on the margins of society; with those who are in poverty and with those who are oppressed. Social workers engage with the problems that manifest themselves because of the economic, social, health and/or cultural systems that disadvantage these individuals, families and communities.

There are variations in the roles and statutory responsibilities, but generally in Europe, the task of social workers is to identify and protect vulnerable children and adults and provide preventative, care and support services alongside health and other service providers (in public, private and charitable/non-governmental sectors) and to ensure effective co-ordination and joint working.²

The European Pillar of Social Rights and the IFSW Europe Mission:

In 2017, the IFSW Europe welcomed the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) with its call to respect the dignity of people through its support and protection measures. It is consistent with the IFSW Social Protection Policy³ which promotes a transformational and sustainable approach to eradicate poverty, social exclusion and achieve dignity for all. Poverty and social exclusion in all their manifestations remain far too high across Europe in 2020.

A critical element of social work is its advocacy for and promotion of social justice. IFSW Europe views the EPSR as a key vehicle to underpin and help achieve social justice across

¹ <http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/>

² <https://www.ifsw.org/ifsw-europe-poverty-watch-report-2020/>

³ <https://www.ifsw.org/the-role-of-social-work-in-social-protection-systems-the-universal-right-to-social-protection/>

Europe. Social justice frames human rights. From a social work perspective, social justice is about quality of life and self-determination. Quality of life is central to a person's ability to live a dignified life with opportunities to be able 'to do' and 'to be' in terms of such things as health, bodily integrity, education, personal growth, income, housing, etc; where respect is shown and exploitation, inequality and discrimination play no part.

Today, IFSW Europe welcomes the opportunity to respond to the public consultation process on an action plan for the implementation of the EPSR.

The IFSW Europe Position on the implementation of the EPSR:

General:

IFSW Europe calls for the full implementation of the twenty principles of the EPSR at member state and EU levels within specific time lines and legal binding mechanisms as well as 'soft' instruments. The implementation plan should have measurable targets to monitor its progress. The EPSR must have the well-being of all people at the centre of decision-making. The implementation is all the more critical today because of the negative impact of Covid-19 on the lives of so many Europeans.

As members of the European Anti-Poverty Network⁴ and the European Social Platform⁵, IFSW Europe collaborates closely with and supports both organisations on matters pertinent to the EPSR. IFSW supports the view that it will be crucial that the EPSR Action Plan builds on the positive support measures that have been put in place to reinforce adequate income and access to key public and essential services which should include social services and social work. It is imperative that the value of front line work is fully recognised in this time of pandemic. It is also crucial to ensure that those who are poor do not pay with more austerity.

1. The EPSR should be clearly embedded in the new EU frameworks and mechanisms to respond to the pandemic through the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025. In meeting the 'long-standing challenges that affect fairness in society', the *Sustainable Growth Strategy 2021*, for example, must support those hardest hit in this pandemic, including young people, women and vulnerable groups. There must be:

- Equal access to adequate and resilient health care, social care and social services
- Preparedness, resilience and access to social protection systems
- Gender mainstreaming and equality in employment, pay, work life balance and rights

⁴ <https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/EAPN-EAPN-Proposals-on-Action-Plan-to-implement-the-EPSR-4514.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.socialplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Social-Platform-report-on-the-European-Pillar-of-Social-Rights-Action-Plan-with-visuals-final.pdf>

The EPSR has the great potential to help ensure that ‘no one is left behind’ by eradicating the social, economic and cultural deprivation that has given rise to often severe material inequality and social exclusion across European societies. Inequality and exclusion cause problems that weaken these societies, paradoxically, to the long-term detriment of the whole of those societies.

Therefore, it is imperative that resourcing social services and social protection generally should be seen and acted upon for what they are - an investment in society as a whole. Social protection helps to stabilize economic development as it has been demonstrated that for every \$1 spent on social protection yields a \$3 return to the economy (IFSW, 2018).⁶

2. In designing social services and social protection generally, the people who use these services must be at the centre and have their voices heard. Maintaining the dignity and respect for all people must be at the heart of the EPSR implementation action plan.

3. The IFSW Europe calls for a much stronger emphasis on building the social dimensions of the EPSR. There is still too much stress on the economic and those who are employed in paid work (the labour market). Many people who are not in paid employment contribute to society in other important ways, such as the care of children or care of family members who are frail. Some people, because of their personal circumstances, for example, having a severe disability, cannot work in paid employment. The implementation of the EPSR should aim to achieve a right-based, person-centred, integrated strategy to fight poverty and exclusion for all groups through the life course. The implementation should also contribute to the achievement of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals 2030 to eradicate extreme poverty.

4. The EPSR must have adequate investment at both EU and national levels to ensure its proper and meaningful implementation. The European Commission must find ways to guarantee, as far as possible, that national governments will fully realise the EPSR, by, for example, demanding a legislative framework at both EU and member state levels. In this regard, the IFSW Europe recognises the interrelationship between individual difficulties and their structural origins. In order to progress on social rights, there needs to be an explicit commitment to reinforcing welfare states, particularly in guaranteeing adequate social protection for all, quality jobs and universal public services, and supported by adequate funding – especially in the light of the impact of Covid-19. The implementation should therefore be a step away from merely improving people’s troubles towards the transformation of societies in ways that are sustainable.

⁶ <https://www.ifsw.org/social-workers-for-transformational-and-sustainable-social-protection-in-europe-2/>

5. Social protection is a human right (IFSW, 2016: 5);⁷ International Labour Organisation, 2017: XXIX)⁸. IFSW states that ‘social protection systems should have a preventative and sustainable effect...’ and they should be instruments for social transformation, democracy and creating social just societies (IFSW, 2016: 5). In implementing the Pillar, there must be adequate social protection measures for all who require support on the basis of inclusivity.

5a. IFSW advocates for systems that builds solidarity and promotes self-determination. Social protection is also an important target for the attainment of the Sustainable Goals Agenda 2016-2030.

5b. There must be an adequate minimum income for all, determined as appropriate in each country. An EU Framework Directive to guarantee adequate minimum income and the implementation of the European Child Guarantee are essential.

5c. The EPSR’s Principle 20, ‘*Access to essential services*’, should be expanded to contain access to appropriate public social services, including professional social work services. ‘This represents an effective element for and an essential element of cohesion and resilient societies’ (European Social Platform, 2014:5)⁹. The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated clearly the absolute need to have adequate health and social services in all member states.

5d. The EPSR should be a vehicle to ensure rights and promote social justice for people who are marginalised and ‘unseen’ because they are migrants or refugees and/or undocumented, so that they may use their skills and talents to become active contributors to European societies. Europe today relies to a large extent on migration. It must find ways to manage this migration in a manner that is more humane and effective than it has shown to-date.

6. It is crucial that the *Recovery and Resilience Facility* emphasises meaningful social policy priorities alongside economic policies. IFSW Europe member organisations report that the social consequences of Covid-19 crisis have increased pre-existing inequalities, particularly to those most vulnerable across Europe. The Pandemic has exacerbated the strains in health and social care services in many countries caused originally by austerity measures, but also by chronic under-funding.

6a. The EPSR’s core elements of ‘*Social Protection and Inclusion*’ are hugely impacted by Covid-19. The social workers in IFSW Europe’s member organisations work with those who have been hit hardest by the Pandemic and see its daily toll on those individuals, families and communities.

⁷ <https://www.ifsw.org/the-role-of-social-work-in-social-protection-systems-the-universal-right-to-social-protection/>

⁸ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_604882.pdf

⁹ https://www.socialplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/20141216_SocialPlatform_PositionPaper_financing-of-social-services.pdf

Some examples of the Covid-19 impact given by member organisations in an IFSW Europe Poverty Watch survey¹⁰ in collaboration with the EAPN's Poverty Watch Report –

- social workers have seen ageism, human rights and social justice concerns, and ethical dilemmas form a backdrop to, for example, the experiences of illness, death and dying, grief and loss, isolation and safety concerns;

- reductions in formal social service support, such as day care and rehabilitation, during these unprecedented times have had serious negative consequences for already vulnerable people and have added to their stress and mental health difficulties;

- the pandemic has inhibited the protection of children from abuse because monitoring opportunities have been reduced. The closure of schools heightened the risk of such harm and the closure of services in some countries meant that accessing care and protection facilities were more difficult. The closure of schools and services also had negative consequences for children with special needs and their parents;

- refugees and migrants who have been forced to live in congregated settings, such as overcrowded camps, are at increased risk of being infected by Covid-19. Risk is also high for refugees and migrants because they are over-represented in low paid front-line care services and many do not have adequate access to health care;

- homeless people have been hugely affected by the pandemic and the danger of homelessness has also increased because of the loss of employment and consequent inability to pay rents. Mental illness and drug misuse are also reported to have increased amongst this population of people.

- domestic violence has increased in most countries, while in some countries, places of safety became more difficult to access

As mentioned above, Covid-19 has highlighted the fact that maintaining access to essential health care and public social services are crucial factors in protecting people during the pandemic.

Without 'social' recovery and resilience, the entire Covid-19 response fails. The rights to adequate minimum income, access to social protection, particularly health and social services and decent affordable housing are vital elements in creating better societies for all.

7. In implementing the EPSR, IFSW Europe calls for a clear focus in the allocation of resources and for the priority to be on prevention, collective responsibility and respect for diversity. In doing this, the long-term goal should seek the concentration on universal schemes rather than merely targeted approaches that can in themselves be a source of exclusion.

¹⁰ <https://www.ifsw.org/ifsw-europe-poverty-watch-report-2020/>

8. The EPSR must be the vehicle to ensure that the ‘Green New Deal’ and ‘Just Transition’ do not impinge negatively on those who are vulnerable across Europe. Rather, vulnerable people must benefit from the Deal.

9. The EPSR must be an instrument to help ensure that people are lifted out of the poverty, social exclusion and discrimination that drives them to extremist politicians. The rise of populism is a significant negative consequence of ‘people being left behind’ as a result of the austerity measures taken since 2008. IFSW Europe sees this as a serious threat to society, to democracy and to democratic institutions as witnessed in a number of countries across Europe.

10. IFSW Europe calls for meaningful civil dialogue with the EU and member state institutions to engage with and support the work of civil society organisations in the implementation of the EPSR at national and European levels.

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