



# BRIEFING PAPER 98

## Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights

On 4 March 2021, four years after the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in Gothenburg, the European Commission presented its long-awaited Action Plan for the Social Pillar. With this new Action Plan, the European Commission aims to turn principles into actions “for a strong Social Europe that focuses on jobs and skills for the future and paves the way for a fair, inclusive and resilient socio-economic recovery.”

This briefing paper sets out the most important points of the document relating to social and education policies and gives SOLIDAR's assessment of the plan.

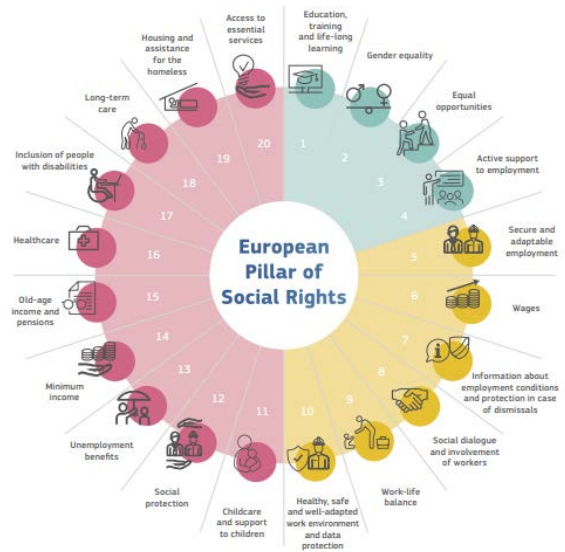




## Introduction

On 4 March 2021, the European Commission presented its Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR, Social Pillar).<sup>1</sup> The Social Pillar was solemnly proclaimed by political leaders four years earlier at the Social Summit in Gothenburg. It sets out 20 principles and rights that are essential for fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems in 21st century Europe. The principles cover equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. Although progress had been made on some of these principles<sup>2</sup>, a real plan for effective implementation was missing until now.

With this new Action Plan, the European Commission aims to turn principles into actions “for a strong Social Europe that focuses on jobs and skills for the future and paves the way for a fair, inclusive and resilient socio-economic recovery.”<sup>3</sup> This has become all the more relevant in light of the Covid-19 crisis. In fact, a recent Special Eurobarometer on social issues has found that 9 out of 10 Europeans now consider that a social Europe is important to them.<sup>4</sup> This briefing paper sets out the most important points of the Action Plan relating to social and education policies and gives SOLIDAR's assessment of the plan.



Source: European Commission (2021).  
Communication: European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=23696&langId=en>

## The Action Plan

The Action Plan focuses on three headline targets that the Commission aims to achieve by 2030 and that should at the same time steer national policies and the Recovery and Resilience Plans, that for this year will be included in the European Semester cycle.<sup>5</sup> Each of these then has one or more sub-targets that contribute to the headline target. The targets are:

1. More and better jobs: At least 78% of people aged 20 to 64 should be in employment.
  - At least halve the gender employment gap compared to 2019.
  - Increase the provision of formal early childhood education and care (ECEC).
  - Decrease the rate of young people who are neither in employment, nor in education or training (NEETs) aged 15-29 from 12.6%(2019) to 9%.



2. Skills and equality: At least 60% of all adults should participate in training every year.

- At least 80% of those aged 16-74 should have basic digital skills.
- Early school leaving should be further reduced and participation in upper secondary education increased.

2. Social protection and inclusion: The number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million.

- Out of the 15 million people to be lifted out of poverty or social exclusion, at least 5 million should be children.

For a detailed overview of how the European Commission intends to achieve these goals, we strongly recommend you to read the relevant parts of the [Action Plan yourself](#). However, below we give a synopsis of the most important points from our perspective. You can also see a timeline of the Commission's key initiatives below. In 2025, halfway to the end-date, the Social Pillar Action Plan will be reviewed.



## More and better jobs

Under this heading, the European Commission has a strong focus on increasing employment, as is reflected in the target of reaching 78% of employment in the population between 20 and 64 years of age. To achieve this, the Commission presents a Recommendation for Effective Active Support to Employment (EASE) that guides Member States on job creation and the digital and green transition in employment in the recovery after Covid-19.<sup>6</sup> This encourages active labour market policies as well as temporary hiring. In terms of the quality of employment, the Commission says it will 'monitor' in-work-poverty and is gathering evidence on the working conditions of the platform workers and the self-employed. Finally, there will be a new strategic framework on Occupational Safety and Health.

## Skills and equality

Under the heading 'skills and equality', the Action Plan puts a strong focus on education with the aim of improving skills of the green and digital transition and to increase employment potential. It includes the [Digital Education Action Plan](#)<sup>7</sup>, an initiative on Individual Learning Accounts, and ESF+ (European Social Fund Plus) with a budget of € 26 Billion. These initiatives relate mainly to formal education, but the plan does not specify which skills are needed for people to face these transitions. Overall, the plans are coherent – with the [European Education Area Communication](#)<sup>8</sup>, the Digital Education Action Plan and the updated [Skills Agenda](#)<sup>9</sup>. However, there is little reference to crucial issues such as the validation of prior learning, the validation of informal and non-formal competences, on how to activate NEETs or combat inequality in access to education.

Source: European Commission (2021). Communication: European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=23696&langId=en>



## Social protection and inclusion

Under this heading, the Action Plan acknowledges the rising inequalities and the fact that these are currently being exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. With the proposal for an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee, the focus is on the early development of children. In terms of combatting poverty, the most concrete proposal is a Council Recommendation on minimum income that is expected in 2022. Finally, the plan mentions the extension of social protection across borders for mobile workers, however it does not make any proposals on how to approach or implement this.

## Civil society involvement

The Action Plan also addresses the involvement of social partners and wider civil society. One of the most concrete points concerning Civil Society Organisations is that “Member States must dedicate an appropriate amount to the capacity building of social partners and civil society organisations”. In practice, this means Member States that have received a country specific recommendation in this area should spend at least 0.25% of their ESF+ resources on strengthening social and civil dialogue. In 2022, the European Commission will furthermore introduce an initiative to support social dialogue at the national and EU level, including an award for innovative social dialogue practices.

## New Social Scoreboard

In Annex 2, the Action Plan proposes a revised version of the Social Scoreboard, which is a collection of indicators that monitors the progress of social rights in the European Semester process. This scoreboard was previously criticised by Civil Society Organisations<sup>10</sup>, including SOLIDAR, for failing to address several important aspects of the Social Pillar.

The new Social Scoreboard includes 17 headline indicators, and 40 secondary indicators that are also related to a number of the SDGs, more specifically: 1. No poverty, 3. Good health-and well-being, 4. Quality education, 5. Gender equality, 8. Decent work and economic growth, and 10. Reduced inequalities. These are more comprehensive than the previous version, however they still fail to relate to all 20 principles of the Social Pillar, including key aspects such as the inclusion of minorities, precariousness of work, income inequality and work-life balance. There continues to be a lack of disaggregated data that would allow for analysis of inequalities between genders, age groups and minorities, and it is not clear from the new proposal whether such disaggregated data will be made available.

## SOLIDAR's assessment

SOLIDAR is glad to see some concrete steps towards the realisation of the rights that are set out in the Social Pillar, the key building block to achieve a social Europe, that if implemented correctly and consistently opens up a path to a different development model. However, we are rather disappointed by the lack of comprehensiveness of the Action Plan and the fact that it leaves several key parts of the Pillar outside of the plan – in essence, it falls short on a number of crucial issues.

Firstly, **SOLIDAR regrets the heavy focus on employment** that we believe not to be sufficiently nuanced. Although in the context of Covid-19 and the effects it has had also on the labour market a strategy for (re)creating jobs is needed, the Action Plan misses the mark by not emphasising the importance of high-quality jobs, with decent wages, working conditions and job security. In fact, the Commission states that temporary, and thus insecure, employment will be part of the recovery. And although SOLIDAR welcomes the proposed directive on minimum wages<sup>11</sup>, it will not be sufficient for ensuring decent wages for all workers.





The preoccupation with employment is also reflected in the approach to education and skills policies, which is solely addressed from a labour market perspective and fails to harness education's key role for the societal wellbeing, as well as its capacity to actively include people in society, to prepare citizens for the transition needed, to safeguard and increase the quality of democracy through active citizenship participation. There is no mention of the increasing importance of non-formal and informal education, ignoring the fact that, especially during the pandemic, learning has become more flexible.

Secondly, by choosing to focus on just three headline indicators, **the European Commission fails to effectively address all 20 principles of the Pillar**. It shows a lack of commitment as there are only few targets set out for the review in 2025. SOLIDAR wonders how exactly these three headline targets, 9 if we count the sub-targets, are going to ensure progress on all 20 principles of the Pillar and how this would fit within a more comprehensive post-Europe 2020 strategy. The targets that are there are also below what one would expect of a plan that promises to leave no one behind, especially when it comes to poverty reduction, or too abstract. The Pillar's principles – much like the SDGs – were developed from a holistic perspective, they all interact with and depend on each other. It is hard to imagine a Social Europe that fails on any of the principles. There is ground to regard this as part of a worrying tendency to cherry pick among agendas and thus miss the opportunity of creating a transformative agenda based on the principles of the Pillar.

Many relevant issues are addressed in the communication of the plan – such as work-life balance, in-work poverty, the skills needed for the green and digital transitions – however, they are not further detailed or accompanied by targets or concrete initiatives, leaving these words rather non-committal. Similarly, although SOLIDAR welcomes the much-needed revision of the Social Scoreboard, the new proposal is not at all sufficient to monitor the progress on all 20 principles.

It still misses indicators on income inequality and the integration of migrants and minorities. It also lacks disaggregated data on, for example, different age groups and gender. The indicators continue to focus on the average of countries while failing to dig deeper and expose the inequalities that lie underneath.

Thirdly, SOLIDAR is glad to see explicit attention for the role of civil society organisations and civil dialogue in the implementation of the European pillar of Social Rights, as we are crucial partners and actors in the creation of a vibrant and healthy democracy. Unfortunately, almost all national governments continue to neglect their duty to actively engage civil society in the European Semester process. Therefore, SOLIDAR calls for these **promises on civil dialogue to be backed up with commitments by all Member States**.

Finally, despite the mentioning of other policy agendas like the SDGs and the Green Deal, there are few true commitments and clear interlinkages made between the European Pillar and how it is intended to be streamlined across policy areas. We are convinced that a Social and Sustainable Europe are two sides of the same coin, that it is impossible to achieve one without the other. **Policy coherence and reciprocity** is therefore of utmost importance to be able to realise the full potential of the Pillar, making it a centrepiece for a just transition towards social justice.

Europe finds itself at a crossroads that will define the future of the Union. Much depends on re-creating the faith of citizens in the European project in the fact that multilateral cooperation, sustainability, democracy and social rights have a central place for the EU. That it is not an elitist project serving the interest of the few. The European Pillar of Social Rights is key to win the hearts of citizens in this respect, to convince them of the relevance and meaningfulness of Europe, and to make sure that the recovery is characterised by a just transition that leaves no one behind. The Action Plan is a step in the right direction, albeit not as big as we would have hoped. There is a continued need for SOLIDAR and our allies to advocate and mobilise for higher ambitions, concrete advances and a reserved seat at the decision-making table for civil society and trade unions, at the member state level as well as at the EU.



## Recommended readings

- **European Commission (2021).** Communication: European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=23696&langId=en>
- **European Commission (2021).** Commission Recommendation on an effective active support to employment following the COVID-19 crisis (EASE): <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=23699&langId=en>
- **Social Platform (2021).** A missed opportunity? Social Platform's initial reaction to the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan: <https://www.socialplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Social-Platform-initial-reaction-to-the-European-Pillar-of-Social-Rights-Action-Plan-1.pdf>

## Endnotes

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9. European Commission (2020). European Skills Agenda: <https://ec.europa.eu/esf/main.jsp?catId=62&langId=en>



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10. See for example: SOLIDAR (2017). European Semester: First critical moment to implement the Pillar of Social Rights: <https://www.solidar.org/en/news/european-semester-first-critical-moment-to-implement-the-pillar-of-social-rights>, Social Platform (2019). Socialising the European Semester – Analysis of the 2019 European Semester process & recommendations for the 2020 cycle: <https://www.socialplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Socialising-the-European-Semester-Social-Platform-analysis-of-the-2019-Semester-process-with-recommendations-for-the-2020-cycle.pdf>, Social Platform (2021).: Open letter on an ambitious and comprehensive Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights: <https://www.socialplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Social-Platform-open-letter-to-the-European-Commission-and-EPSCO-on-the-European-Pillar-of-Social-Rights-Action-Plan-1-1.pdf>

11. SOLIDAR (2020). SOLIDAR Position Paper: EU Initiative on Minimum wages: [https://www.solidar.org/system/downloads/attachments/000/001/143/original/Position\\_Paper\\_Minimum\\_Wage\\_final\\_%281%29.pdf?1592312885](https://www.solidar.org/system/downloads/attachments/000/001/143/original/Position_Paper_Minimum_Wage_final_%281%29.pdf?1592312885)

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SOLIDAR is a European network of membership based Civil Society Organisations who gather several millions of citizens throughout Europe and worldwide. SOLIDAR voices the values of its member organisations to the EU and international institutions across the three main policy sectors; social affairs, lifelong learning and international cooperation.



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