

TOOLKIT ON ENGAGING with EUROPE 2020 and the EUROPEAN SEMESTER

COUNTRY REPORTS,
NATIONAL REFORM PROGRAMMES,
COUNTRY-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS 2017

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Introduction

In 2010, the **Europe 2020 Strategy** broke new ground, by establishing five concrete targets for delivering on smart, social, and sustainable growth (see more information below). This process is implemented annually through a cycle called the **European Semester**, the main instrument for economic coordination between the policies of Member States and for achieving common objectives on Europe 2020.

There is therefore a strong case to be made for **the need to urgently and actively engage with these processes**, to ensure that people and planet are put before profit, and that we are moving towards a social and sustainable Europe. Here are the main reasons why:

1. The Strategy and the implementation cycle are the dominant EU policy process for delivering on the EU's economic, employment and social priorities and could provide a **development framework for the European Union and its Member States**, setting out a vision for the future of Europe and for a sustainable exit from the crisis.

2. **Europe 2020 objectives are direct drivers for EU funding opportunities**, most significantly Structural Funds, which are explicitly linked to the targets, hence it brings clear benefits to national organisations who engage.

3. The Strategy includes **key targets to reduce poverty**, increase employment and tackle educational exclusions, **but progress has been limited, particularly on the poverty target**.

4. **Stakeholders, including civil society, are supposed to be key partners in the delivery at national and EU level**. However, their involvement remains so far very marginal, with limited engagement and minimal impact on the policy proposals, and few new opportunities for engagement and structural dialogue put forward by the European Commission, or by national Governments.

The added value of getting involved with Europe 2020 and the European Semester process is clear: it is the dominant EU strategy, encompassing economic, social and environmental policies, and enforced by Member States and the EU. The challenge is to press for better and more effective governance and engagement processes.

This Toolkit is designed to help EAPN members engage during 2017 with the European Semester delivering on Europe 2020 goals and targets, especially the poverty target, and in particular with Country Reports, the preparation of the National Reform Programmes (NRPs), and Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs). It supports the delivery of EAPN's Europe 2020 Advocacy Strategy, in line with EAPN's Strategic Plan, and it aims at providing you with brief, to-the-point information about the processes and the opportunities for engagement, by clarifying the key elements, timeline, and strategic actors of the processes, as well as giving links and suggesting different ways of involvement. If any of the terms used in this Toolkit are not clear, please refer to the [Glossary](#) on the EAPN website. For any other query, please contact the [EAPN Europe staff team](#).

What is Europe 2020? What is the European Semester?

[Europe 2020](#) is a 10-year strategy, proposed by the European Commission on 3 March 2010, aimed at "smart, sustainable, inclusive growth". It takes over from the Lisbon Strategy (which covered the period 2000–2010).

The Strategy identifies five headline targets:

- To raise the employment rate of the population aged 20–64 to at least 75%.
- To achieve the target of investing 3% of GDP in R&D (research & development).
- To reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20% compared to 1990 levels, increase the share of renewable energy in final energy consumption to 20%, and achieve a 20% increase in energy efficiency.
- To reduce the rate of early school leavers to 10% and increase the share of the population aged 30–34 having completed tertiary education to at least 40%.
- **To reduce the number of Europeans living in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion by at least 20 million.**

However, as the European Commission recognizes¹, progress on these targets has been unequal. We are highlighting below the most important targets for EAPN and our joint work:

Europe 2020 targets for the EU	2010 data	Latest available data	In 2020, based on recent trends
1. Increasing the employment rate of the population aged 20-64 to at least 75 %	68.6 %	70.1% (2015)	Target likely to be met
4a. Reducing school drop-out rates to less than 10 %	13.9 %	10.8% (2016)	Target likely to be met
4b. Increasing the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary education to at least 40 %	33.8 %	39% (2016)	Target likely to be met
5. Lifting at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion	0.5 million increase (compared to the 2008 base year)	1.7 million increase (compared to the 2008 base year)	Target unlikely to be met

¹ Table adapted from **European Commission**, *2017 European Semester: Communication on Country Reports*, 22 February 2017, available [here](#). The document reprises [Eurostat](#) data.

Monitoring progress and ensuring the active involvement of Member States are key elements of the Strategy. This is done through the [European Semester](#), an annual cycle of macro-economic, budgetary and structural coordination.

WHEN?	EUROPE 2020 (thematic surveillance)	STABILITY AND GROWTH PACT & MACROECONOMIC IMBALANCES PROCEDURE (macroeconomic & fiscal surveillance)
November	Autumn Package (EC) <i>(including the Annual Growth Survey)</i>	
February	Country Reports (EC)	
April	National Reform Programmes (MS)	Stability / Convergence Reports (MS)
May / June / July	Country Specific Recommendations (EC)	
October	Eurozone budget appraisal (EC)	

EC = European Commission; MS = Member States

The key stages in the European Semester are as follows:

- **In November**, the Commission issues its [Annual Growth Survey](#), which sets out EU priorities for the coming year. It is discussed in the European Parliament and the Council.
- **In September-December**, the Commission holds fact-finding missions and bilateral meetings with the Member States, on the process and priorities, and what they mean for each country, as well as the state of play of the implementation of Country Specific Recommendations.
- **In February**, the European Commission issues the [Country Reports](#), assessing progress on the EU priorities (as defined by the Annual Growth Survey) and the implementation of the Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) from the previous year (see below), as well as highlighting key areas of intervention for each Member State. In 2017, they were released on 22 February.
- **In February-May**, the Commission holds political missions and bilateral meetings with the Member States, to collect feedback on the analysis presented in Country Reports.
- **In March**, EU Heads of State and Government (i.e. the European Spring Council) take stock of the overall macroeconomic situation and of progress towards the Europe 2020 targets, and provide policy orientations covering fiscal, macroeconomic, and structural reforms.
- **In mid-April**, Member States submit their Stability / Convergence Programmes (SCPs) for 'sound public finances', as well as [National Reform Programmes](#) (NRP), which detail how Europe 2020 targets will be reached, what national policies will be implemented, and how the EU guidance has been taken into account from the Country Reports and CSRs (see below).
- **In May**, the Commission proposes [Country-Specific Recommendations](#) (CSRs) for every Member State, based on the Country Reports and the National Reform Programmes. The CSRs provide tailor-made policy advice to Member States in areas deemed as priorities.
- **In June**, national Governments discuss the proposed CSRs also in Council formations (EPSCO and others), as well as in advisory bodies (Social Protection Committee, Employment Committee), and in the European Parliament.
- **In July**, the Council formally endorses the Country-Specific Recommendations. Policy guidance is thus given to Member States before they finalise their draft budgets.
- **In the Autumn**, the Eurozone Governments [present the draft budgets to the Commission](#) (in October), which then issues a [Communication](#) (as part of the Autumn Package in November).



EUROPEAN SEMESTER: A PARTNERSHIP EU-MEMBER STATES

	November	December	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October
European Commission	Autumn Economic Forecasts		Winter Economic Forecasts			Spring Economic Forecasts						
	Annual Growth Survey and related documents	Fact-finding missions to Member States		Country Report per Member State (reform agenda and imbalances)		Bilateral meeting with Member States		Commission proposes country-specific recommendations for budgetary, economic and social policies				
	Recommendations for the euro area	Bilateral meeting with Member States										
	Opinion on draft budgetary plans											
European Council / Council	Council discusses opinions on draft budgetary plans	Council adopts euro area recommendations and conclusions on AGS + AMR			European Council adopts economic priorities based on AGS			Council discusses the CSRs	European Council endorses final CSRs			
Member States		Member States adopt budgets			Member States present their National Reform Programmes (economic policies) and Stability or Convergence Programmes (on budgetary policies)						Member States present draft budgetary plans	
European Parliament	Dialogue on the Annual Growth Survey						Dialogue on the proposals for CSRs				Debate / resolution on the European Semester and the CSRs	Dialogue on the Annual Growth Survey

Glossary: **AGS**: Annual Growth Survey - **AMR**: Alert Mechanism Report - **CSR**: Country-Specific Recommendations - **EDP**: Excessive Deficit Procedure

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Key Instruments – Country Reports, NRPs, CSRs

Country Reports

Between 2010 and 2014, Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs - see below) for each country were accompanied by a Staff Working Document, released at the end of May, which included a more detailed analysis of the challenges faces by that particular Member State, as well as policy suggestions for tackling these. The document underpinned the CSRs and provided assessments also for areas not picked up by the Recommendations themselves – as the latter were said to only pick up on the most salient challenges.

From 2015, the system has changed, and the European Commission now issues [Country Reports](#) in February, containing the detailed national analysis previously included in the Staff Working Document which accompanied the CSRs. These Country Reports assess the progress of each Member State in addressing the issues identified in the previous CSRs, including an in-depth review under the Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure. For Member States with a macro-economic adjustment programme, the Report discusses progress with the implementation of reforms. Individual Country Reports were presented this year on 22 February. They were accompanied by a summarising [Communication](#). The new model, with releasing these Reports in February, aims at them providing the basis for dialogue with Member States in bilateral meetings and feeding into the preparation of National Reform Programmes (as well as Stability / Convergence Programmes), to be submitted by Member States in mid-April (see below). They also provide a key moment for stakeholder engagement.

National Reform Programmes (NRPs)

[National Reform Programmes](#) are the yearly reports prepared by the Member States, demonstrating how they are implementing the Europe 2020 Strategy (past and future actions), the priorities of the Annual Growth Survey, and the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs – see below) of the previous year. They should describe their implementation of the 5 overarching EU targets to be reached by 2020 (see above), translated into national targets by each Member State. Key for EAPN are:

- the poverty target – to achieve a reduction of people at risk of poverty and social of at least 20 million people, implemented through 3 indicators (at risk of poverty, severe material deprivation, and low work intensity)
- the target to reach 75% employment rate
- the target aimed at reducing early school leaving to below 10%, and bringing completion rate for tertiary education up to 40%.

Measures described in the NRPs should be correlated to the national targets, and should be concrete, reflect urgency, and detail budgetary consequences. Each year's NRP should build on the previous, and give emphasis to implementation of the CSRs.

Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs)

The [Country Specific Recommendations](#) are policy recommendations made by the Commission for each country within the European Semester, based on a review of that Member State's economic and social performance in the previous year, and on how far they are delivering on the EU-wide priorities set out in the Annual Growth Survey. The recommendations are concrete, targeted and measurable, and concentrate on what can realistically be achieved in the next 12-18 months. As countries face different challenges, the recommendations tailor the Annual Growth Survey priorities to the situation in each Member State, as identified in the Country Reports. The CSRs are drafted by the European Commission, after a thorough assessment of progress since the previous year's CSRs, and a detailed analysis of the National Reform Programmes and Stability / Convergence Programmes, submitted by Member States in April. The CSRs are debated in the Council formations (EPSCO etc) and their advisory bodies (EPC, EMCO, and SPC), before being discussed and endorsed by Heads of State or Government at the European Council in June. The final adoption of the CSRs in July concludes the European Semester. The work is then handed over to the Member States for implementation.

Other elements

National Social Reports (NSRs)

The [National Social Reports](#) are not officially part of the European Semester or Europe 2020, but they are supposed to play a crucial link role between Europe 2020 and the Social OMC, underpinning the social dimension of the NRPs in the Semester. The Social Protection Committee (SPC) is the advisory body of the Council which coordinates this process, composed of national delegates from the Ministries of Employment and Social Affairs of the Member States. It insisted, in its Opinion of June 2011, on the importance of the strengthening of the [Social Open Method of Coordination](#) (OMC), based on the Common Objectives, and addressing access to rights, resources and services, across 3 pillars: Social Inclusion, Pensions, Health and Long-term Care. Progress is monitored through [Common Social Indicators](#), which have now been incorporated into the [Social Protection Performance Monitor](#). Then mutual learning is promoted through internal SPC [Peer Reviews](#), and external ones, involving other stakeholders, as well as studies and reports, including by the Independent Experts, who review national performance and report to the Commission.

National Social Reports (NSRs) are prepared to chart how the Common Objectives are being delivered at national level, and to highlight new trends and concerns. They also provide the basis for the SPC's report to the October EPSCO, which underpins the social priorities in the context of the Annual Growth Survey and the Joint Employment Report and assesses the implementation and impact of policy reforms in the field of social protections, health and long-term care.

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Indicative Semester Timeline and Checklist for EAPN members

<i>Timeline</i>	<i>Europe 2020 / National Reform Programmes</i>	<i>EAPN Action National level</i>
September 2016 – January 2017	16 November - The European Commission issues its Autumn Package, including the Annual Growth Survey (AGS), which sets out EU priorities for next year. The Commission also holds bilateral meetings and fact-finding missions in countries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact key interlocutors (see <i>Who To Contact</i> section) to provide your input for the Country Reports, and to find out more about the process, the timing, and further consultation opportunities. • Try to get involved with the bilateral meeting / fact-finding mission in your country. • Provide feedback on EAPN’s draft response to the AGS by the staff team.
February 2017	22 February – The Commission issues Country Reports, followed by a second round of bilateral meetings carried out by the European Commission in Member States.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working together on Country Reports and CSRs 2017: read your Country Report and prepare for the EU ISG meeting in March. • Continue to press for a stakeholder engagement process, including commenting on any drafts, and try to get engaged with political missions and bilateral meetings in your country.
March 2017	9-10 March - European Spring Council issues guidance for national policies, on the basis of the AGS.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16 - 18 March in Valladolid: Attend EU ISG meeting • Review the Country Report and send written response to the template fiche sent by the staff team: positive and negative impact, new policy developments, analysis, how far have CSRs been implemented, alternative recommendations. • Use the assessment to articulate your proposals for the upcoming NRP), including your prioritisation of key recommendations.
April 2017	15 April - Member States submit their National Reform Programmes.	Read your NRP and review it together with your Network or Organisation, checking it against your inputs; issue a Press Release, send your reaction to your Government and key contacts.

May 2017	The Commission assesses the NRPs and adopts Country Specific Recommendations	Read the proposed Country-Specific Recommendations for your country, review and validate the quick response prepared by the staff team on them. Disseminate this response to key contacts.
June 2017	The Council formations and the European Parliament discuss the CSRs. The European Council endorses them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15-17 June, in Brussels: Attend EAPN's policy conference and EU ISG meeting (joint work on the NRPs / CSRs). • Send the completed NRP questionnaire to the staff team after the meeting • Begin development of national poverty watch assessment.
July 2017	The Council formally endorses the CSRs.	Send your comments on the draft joint NRP assessment report prepared by the staff team.
September 2017	National Semester: Member States present their draft budget to their Parliaments and implement their NRPs and the CSRs. The European Parliament adopts resolution on the CSRs. The Commission holds national bilateral meetings and fact-finding missions (till December)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disseminate the EAPN synthesis report and your own inputs / reactions to your key contacts. • Reflect on key messages for the upcoming Annual Growth Survey • Continue work on national poverty watch assessment
October 2017	15th October - Member States in the Euro area present their national draft budgets to the European Commission.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • October (tbd), in Dublin – Attend EU ISG meeting and GA, joint work on the European Semester and next steps. Agree input to the upcoming 2017 Country Reports and Annual Growth Survey. Continue work on national poverty watch assessment. • Try to get involved with the bilateral meeting / fact-finding mission in your country.
November - December 2017	The Commission continues to hold bilateral meetings and fact-finding missions in countries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide input on the draft response to the AGS prepared by the staff team. • Prepare your assessment of the Country Specific Recommendations and your ideas on what Country Reports should focus on for the subsequent year, including your analytical input. • Try to get involved with the bilateral meeting / fact-finding mission in your country.

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Recent EU Policy Hooks

In formulating your positions, you might find it useful to refer to the following “policy hooks”, put together from recent European-level documents. For a complete list of useful quotes from the same documents regarding stakeholder engagement, please see the Annex.

Annual Growth Survey (AGS)

As indicated in the first section of this Toolkit, the AGS is the document that launches the European Semester, by setting out the broad EU economic priorities for the year to come. It is the first step in the annual cycle. The Annual Growth Survey 2017 was adopted on 16 November 2016, and it was, as usual, accompanied by the Joint Employment Report (JER), among other Annexes. The EAPN staff team, sent a [letter to European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker](#) in advance of the release, posted a [Press Release](#) following the launch, prepared a [short response](#), which highlights positive areas that may be useful to quote, as well as missed opportunities and key Recommendations (AGS & JER).

The AGS is organised around 3 main priorities, the similar to the previous year:

- 1) Boosting investment
- 2) Pursuing structural reforms
- 3) Responsible fiscal policies

EAPN’s Key Recommendations are:

1. Prioritise Inclusive Growth by rebalancing economic and social objectives
2. Increase social investment in quality jobs, public services and social protection
3. Mainstream the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights explicitly through the European Semester
4. Develop an integrated EU poverty strategy to deliver on the Europe 2020 poverty target
5. Make civil society equal partners at national and EU level

The document offers some positive developments in terms of the language and rhetoric used, combined with some significant actions which could help to support a stronger Social Europe. However, the detail of the implementation will be key.

What opportunities?

- The decision by the Commission to **not pursue a suspension of EU funding against Spain and Portugal, and a softening of the approach on austerity** – putting more emphasis on flexibility and room for more expansionist policies, are very positive signs, essential if support is to be built for a more Social Europe.
- Reaffirming the European Commission’s **commitment to mainstreaming social concerns alongside economic goals** and the focus on inclusive growth, though it will depend on how priority is allocated and whether this will mean a true rebalancing of social priorities.
- **Mentioning of Europe 2020** and explicit references to the targets, which was missing in previous years.
- The recognition of the **need to tackle the high poverty rate** (1 in 4 of the population) and high inequality rate.
- The **focus on social policy as a productive factor** is welcomed, as long as it is understood that social policy must first be about achieving social goals, also through economic policy.

- The **call for progress on strong social standards** - adequate minimum income systems and pensions quality work as well as support to universal access to health and care services, rather than just a focus on cost efficiencies.
- A **support to increasing housing** and support including social housing.
- The **recognition that tax systems should play a role in combating inequality**.
- Although social investment isn't specifically mentioned in the investment section, **the call to double the European Fund for Strategic Investment (ESIF) and invest in human capital and social infrastructure** – particularly long-term care services, and affordable and flexible childcare could be positive depending on how it is implemented and who benefits.
- The reference to achieving a **smooth welcome for migrants including refugees**, although positive, needs a big shift in practice to be credible.
- Explicit references in **support of quality jobs, reducing precariousness and supporting transitions**, including adequate income support for dignified lives.

The main threats lie in the lack of an explicit re-balancing of the economic and social agenda and new priority on social rights. Without this, isolated social measures run the risk of being undermined by mainstream economic priorities and governance, rather than contributing to social goals, and to building inclusive growth and shared prosperity. The overall impact on the Europe 2020 goals and particularly the poverty target is very unclear and uncertain.

Key concerns:

- **Stability and Growth remain the overarching economic** framework with the same 3 economic priorities, making it difficult to see how social investment can be realized.
- The **European Pillar of Social Rights is not explicitly mentioned**, nor proposals made for how it will be mainstreamed and implemented.
- Although Europe 2020 targets are mentioned, the **overall narrative and goals are not included**.
- A **continued focus on “modernising social protection, flexibilizing labour markets** although at the same time emphasising transitions and ending precariousness and segmentation, expanding privatisation and liberalisation of services to promote the internal market” appears to undermine the commitments to quality jobs, and improving access to social protection and services.
- The **continuing priority given to ensuring the financial sustainability of budgets as the main priority**, raises concerns about how ‘fiscal flexibility will be introduced in practice’.
- The **lack of a clear assessment of the likely overall impact on poverty and social inclusion** or signs that the EU is ready to invest in an explicit rights-based integrated strategy is a concern.
- **No mention is made of the key role of civil society**, only social partners, despite the pressing need to engage with citizens and convince them of the benefits of a stronger and deeper EU.

[Joint Employment Report \(JER\)](#)

The Joint Employment Report forms an Annex of the AGS and reviews national policies meant to reach the employment, education, and poverty-reduction targets of Europe 2020, as presented in the National Reform Programmes.

What opportunities?

- Explicit **recognition that poverty remains high**, with groups at particular risk specifically highlighted (children and young people, people with disabilities, third country nationals, the unemployed).

- Explicit **recognition that income inequalities are also at a historical high**, as well as of the fact that income inequalities underpin poverty and social exclusion, as well as hinder growth. The crucial role of taxation and minimum wages is underlined in this context.
- Acknowledgement of **the need for integrated Active Inclusion strategies**, with the three strands mentioned (adequacy and coverage of benefits, accessibility and quality of services, support towards employment and inclusive labour markets).
- Acknowledgement of **the need to tackle in-work poverty**, with the link made to precarious employment and increased segmentation, where temporary contracts are qualified as ‘dead ends’ rather than ‘stepping stones’.
- Clear **support for integrated, individualised activation approaches**, with full involvement of the beneficiary, and improving the capacity and training of Public Employment Services in that direction, highlighting that lack of resources is hindering their positive impact.
- **Adequate income support consistently mentioned**, for both benefits that target the working age population through supporting secure transitions, as well as adequacy of pensions, stressing that adequate standards of living must be ensured.
- The **pay and pension gender gap is highlighted**, as well as the need for more supportive measures for women to access employment, such as better work-life balance measures.
- Clear **recognition of the link between socio-economic background and educational attainment**, while stressing ongoing efforts in Member States to make education more inclusive and reached disadvantaged groups (including through financial support).
- Acknowledgement of **persistent unmet health needs**, particularly for low income households, as costs remain the main barrier and substantial of out-of-pocket spending.
- **Social inclusion of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers mentioned alongside professional integration**, arguing that this should form an integral part of countries’ social inclusion strategies.

Key concerns

- The **employment target continues to dominate the discourse**, as it is referred to much more frequently than other Europe 2020 targets, and the others are frequently interpreted in relation to it – i.e., the importance of the education target in improving the employment rate, or the poverty target still being perceived as mainly a matter of employment.
- The **increase in employment is not accompanied by a quality analysis** – while the report mentions that unemployment has decreased, including youth and long-term unemployment, and that 8 million new jobs have been created, the quality of the employment created and proposed is not systematically monitored through indicators.
- High **risk of encouraging negative activation practices**, marred by sanctions and conditionality, as the link between income support, access to quality services, and providing active labour market policies remains tenuous, and Active Inclusion may be wrongly understood as using benefits and services as a lever to push people into any job.
- **No measures to tackle child poverty and the intergenerational transmission of poverty**, although both are rising; the focus is on getting women into employment, rather than quality early childhood education and care, and no wrap-around support for families and parents, including lone parents, is reviewed.
- **No mention is made of the impact of austerity cuts and tight budgetary discipline**, while the Annual Growth Survey continues to indicate fiscal discipline as the overall priority, which raises serious doubts about what space is left for social investment.
- **The Roma are not mentioned** in the document at all, despite a recent report of the Fundamental Rights Agency highlighting that 80% of Roma are at risk of poverty in the EU.

- **The sharp increases in homelessness in many Member States during the last few years is not picked up** in the text. This omission is all the more problematic because it is at odds with the at risk-of-poverty trends, which show a slight decrease for the European Union as a whole. It is not because Eurostat does not specifically measure homelessness that it should not be an issue of concern in the framework of the European Semester.
- **Civil society is not mentioned once**, nor civil dialogue, while the key role of social partners is consistently monitored and highlighted.

Communication accompanying the Country Reports

Opportunities:

- Recognition that high unemployment, poverty and inequality remain key concerns (p. 2, 4). It states that poverty is at the lowest for 5 years, and doesn't highlight that there still no progress on the poverty target. However, important reference to recognition that "increase in perception of unequal burden sharing in society and... rich capturing an increasing share of wealth".
- Stagnant pay acknowledged (p. 6), as well as recognition that pay levels should ensure decent standards of living and recommendation to reduce tax wedge on low income earners (p. 13)
- Call to integrate distribution in structural reforms, acknowledging that there is no trade-off and that measures such as quality and inclusive education support both growth as well as inequality reduction objectives (p. 9, 13)
- Taxation needs to be further improved to secure funds for public investment, welfare and social justice, and high tax burden on low income earners acknowledged (p. 9)
- "Social investment is a prerequisite for a successful and lasting recovery"- but understood as active labour market policies (ALMP) and boosting human capital (skills)
- Speaks about young people, women, migrants and refugees, but only from a labour market perspective (p. 13)
- The three pillars of Active Inclusion mentioned (though not the strategy by name), and "adequate" social protection and "quality" services are underlined, but only for those who can work, as a labour market strategy (p. 13)
- Importance of redistributive impact of taxation systems and social transfers in addressing inequalities, and minimum income in CY mentioned, including its impact on poverty (p. 14)

Key concerns:

- The primary focus continues to be on growth, without social dimension. A more balanced approach between economic and social objectives is missing, particularly by underlining thematic coordination on the Seminar, promotion of inclusive and sustainable growth, and Europe 2020 goals and targets. There are consideration only of macroeconomic imbalances but not social – with new proposals for restrictive surveillance in several countries.
- The document says recovery is mainly supported by structural reforms and fiscal measures – an encouragement to do more of the same. Boosting employment and ensuring sustainability of public finances are priorities. Flexibility on the labour market is encouraged (p. 8)
- Proposal to tackle income inequalities and improve wages by spreading productivity growth across firms, sectors, and regions, to reduce the pressure on public finances to mitigate the former (p. 8-9)
- "Modernising social protection systems is vital to ensure their sustainability and effectiveness and their links to the labour market" – adequacy not mentioned, sounds like benefits are conceived not as a right, but a tool for activation
- Pensions and healthcare heavily mentioned from a sustainability and cost-effectiveness perspective, with adequacy of pensions only mentioned once.

[European Commission High-Level Conference on a European Pillar of Social Rights](#)

In March 2016, the European Commission launched a public consultation to assess the present EU social "acquis", to reflect on new trends in work patterns and societies, and to gather views and feedback on the principles identified in a preliminary outline of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The consultation ran until 31 December 2016. The Commission held a European conference on the Pillar of Social Rights in January 2017, which was an important milestone in wrapping up the consultation and defining the future direction of the European Pillar of Social Rights. A consolidated version of the European Pillar of Social Rights should be presented early in 2017. Once adopted, the Pillar should become a reference framework to screen employment and social performance of participating Member States and to drive reforms at national level.

- [Marianne Thyssen, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility](#)

The Commissioner highlighted that the Social Pillar will focus, among other areas on “creating better life chances for young people; ensuring a good work life balance; making sure peoples skills keep pace with change; and ensuring nobody is left behind.” She also stressed that the importance of decent job opportunities and workers’ rights, income levels that cater for quality of life, tackling inequalities and poverty head on, of everybody having access to social protection, and of safeguarding rights and secure transitions. The Commissioner insisted also on the “need to broaden our social safety net now to cover new risks”, and “provide a long-term sustainable and appropriate social protection to citizens throughout life.” She also acknowledged that 119 million people are still at risk of poverty, while pointing out that the trend has finally reversed and there are now nearly 5 million fewer people in poverty than in 2012.

- [Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis, Commissioner for Social Dialogue and the Euro](#)

The Commissioner indicated that the public consultation on the Social Pillar yielded “broad support for an enhanced social dimension of European integration”, and that “our social model is a key component of what it means to be European.” He also stressed that “The emphasis is especially on social fairness to deliver more inclusive growth” and “...an economic recovery that benefits all, especially the weaker in our societies.”

- [Antonio Tajani, President of the European Parliament](#)

President Tajani stressed that Europe was going through a social and confidence crisis, marked by high unemployment, especially for young people, rising inequalities, a lowering of quality of life and increased poverty. He highlighted the crucial importance of progressing the social dimension of the Economic and Monetary Union: “About 100 million persons are living at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This corresponds to 20% of the total EU population.”

- [Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission](#)

Mr Juncker’s speech is not available in written form, but you can watch a video of his intervention by clicking on the link above.

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General Tips for Engaging in the European Semester/Europe 2020 at the national level

In addition to the tips provided in this section, members are invited to consult EAPN's publication [Giving a Voice to Citizens – Building stakeholder engagement for effective decision making](#) (2014), launched at the European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty in Brussels. It provides common principles, concrete tools and tips to help policy makers take the important step of putting effective stakeholder dialogue into practice, drawing on concrete inspiring practice – at the EU, national and subnational levels. See below for more tips on how to engage.

1. Identify who is responsible for the European Semester in your country and at the EU level

Based on previous years' experience, and according to our members' input, it is often the Economy or Finance Ministry, or Prime Minister's Office, who drafts the NRPs, with more or less (depending on the country) input from other Ministries, such as Employment and Social Affairs, Environment etc. In each delegation of the European Commission's representation in your country, a European Semester Officer is charged with ensuring the link on all European Semester matters. Equally, the Directorate General for Employment in the European Commission in Brussels has dedicated country desks working on Europe 2020, as well as on Structural Funds. These players are important both as sources of information, as well as key targets for your lobbying, so it is key to establish and maintain contact. Find all relevant information in the [Who to Contact?](#) section below.

2. Ask to be invited to participate in stakeholder engagement

Write, e-mail or call the relevant contacts now (early 2016) and ask what process will be developed to involve stakeholders in the discussions on the Country Reports, the NRP and CSRs this year. Ask to be invited as one of the stakeholders representing anti-poverty organisations and working with people experiencing poverty, highlighting your expertise and previous engagement with these processes. You can find a suggested template letter [here](#). You should ask what form this engagement will take and whether you will be able to comment on a draft, or can send a separate contribution. You should insist on your Government's responsibility to ensure a meaningful, timely, and structured process of consultation and involvement. You will find useful the references supporting stakeholder involvement in European documents – please see the [Annex](#) at the end of this document. EAPN's overall aim is not to be only involved in one-off consultations, but to build strong regular dialogue platforms – eg, national platforms against poverty, where stakeholders regularly meet with Government representative to discuss progress on poverty reduction, and propose new actions. These should provide input to the Europe 2020 Strategy process, but not be limited only to it. See examples of [Good Practices](#) in the chapter below.

3. Brief members and build a common position

If you are going to be able to make a submission or contribution, it is important to stimulate debate with other members of your Network or Organisation, and to develop together a common position. This brings a lot of added value to any response you might want to make, and engages the Network / Organisation in the work. Some members strive to include the direct participation of people experiencing poverty, which is a good practice that EAPN fully encourages. This means briefing them, using this Toolkit and the other examples, and analysing together your national context. Organizing capacity building sessions can be very useful. You should start by analysing the current social situation in your country, the key trends, and the impact of policy decisions and the EU policy recommendations on people experiencing poverty, building consensus on the main policy changes you think are necessary. In this context, you can make full use of your assessment of the Country Reports and the alternative CSRs you prepared.

4. Making your input: Developing key messages

Starting from the analysis and common position above, members should clarify the key weaknesses of the Country Report against your list of what you consider key requirements. Then to use this as a basis for sending input to try to influence the National Reform Programme, but also communicate this feedback to European Commission representatives, such as the European Semester Officers and the country desk officers. Be prepared to send at short notice the key messages that you want to put forward, based on your analysis of the main trends. Sometimes, a few crucial points make more of an impact than a long list of demands. If you are able to see a draft, you will often have a very short time to respond. Having prepared your key messages beforehand will help you to be able to provide quick, but effective input within the tight deadlines. In preparing your position, look at your country's last year's National Reform Programme and Country Specific Recommendations and the recently released Country Reports. You can also refer to the joint EAPN review of the NRPs for [2011](#), [2012](#), [2013](#), [2014](#), [2015](#), and [2016](#), members' shadow Country Specific Recommendations for [2012](#), [2013](#), [2014](#), [2015](#), and [2016](#) (the latter including a review of the Country Reports). Another useful document is [EAPN's response to the Annual Growth Survey package](#). These may help you devise your key messages – although, in the end, each national context will be different.

5. Review your country's Country Report and CSRs

The starting point is reviewing the Country Report and trying to obtain meetings with your European Semester Officer to discuss your views. The aim will be to influence the NRP, produced by your Governments, as well as the CSRs, produced by the European Commission. In [2012](#), [2013](#), [2014](#), [2015](#), and [2016](#) EAPN members analysed the Commission's Country-Specific Recommendations, as well as their implementation, and developed their own alternative proposals. It is clear that the CSRs are increasingly important, impacting on national policy priorities. Compare the CSRs prepared by your Network for your country to those issued by the European Commission, commenting on how far the proposals are the same, and highlighting gaps, and also check the newly-released Country Reports. Prepare comments on the implementation of the CSRs – negative and positive points. Propose new Country-Specific Recommendations. This work will be carried out with the support for the staff team, by means of a pre-dispatched questionnaire fiche, as well as through the EU ISG meeting in March 2016. The resulting proposals will feed directly into the NRP process, at national and EU level: you should send your proposals to your Government, as part of your NRP and input to the Semester, but also to the other key interlocutors identified in this section. Find all relevant information in the [Who to Contact?](#) section below.

6. Build alliances

Last years' experience of stakeholder involvement showed that there is still a lot to be desired in most countries. In the current negative context, it is also difficult to make progress on poverty on our own. It is important that you try to build strong alliances with other organizations that share our values and concerns – for example - with trade unions, but also with other NGOs (including environmental NGOs) or NGO platforms, academics, politicians, the media. Key interlocutors, resource and allies can be the Social Protection Committee members, the European Semester Officer, and the country desk officers, as mentioned above. It is important to send your inputs/messages and proposals of Recommendations to them, and to try to establish a more on-going dialogue with them. If possible, try to get your National Parliaments engaged, as there was little parliamentary involvement last year, and involve your MEPs. Also, think creatively to find ways to support the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs to have their say in all policy areas, and not to be squeezed out by overarching economic and financial constraints in the drafting process.

7. Disseminating your message and promoting public debate

Given the current weakness of the stakeholder engagement process, it's important not to keep your messages internal to your dialogue with the Government. Think how best you can disseminate your messages to key actors and how to get your messages out to the public. This can mean sending letters, thinking of more attractive ways of presenting your messages and input and circulating them through different channels and groups. Working in alliances (see above) will be crucial to this. If possible, it is always useful to involve media (including social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn, blogs, forums) to convey your messages more widely to the general public, and raise awareness on the process and concerns.

Please send the EAPN Europe [staff team](#) a copy of anything you contribute – in any language.

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Examples of Good Practices

Members of EAPN's EU Inclusion Strategies Group have identified different ways of engaging in a more pro-active way with Europe 2020 and the European Semester, and more broadly with anti-poverty policy. In 2017, the EU ISG will work together to develop a common template for a national 'poverty watch' assessment, which can serve as a very useful basis to input into the European Semester in 2018. Some good practices from our members' experiences are summarised below. For more information and support, please contact the [staff team](#).

Get involved with the process in your country

Several EAPN networks have succeeded in participating in meetings with European Commission officials, whether from the EC Representation in their country, or visiting officials on fact-finding missions and bilateral meetings with the Government. Our members have also managed to get involved in different forms of dialogue with their Governments around the European Semester processes. Please see some positive experiences below, extracted from EAPN's assessment report of the NRPs in 2016.

EAPN Poland

The official body (Międzyresortowy Zespół do Spraw Strategii "Europa 2020") for stakeholder involvement is in operation from 2012 and, after initial problems, now it enables all stakeholders to participate in the NRP drafting process. We have also one a year special working meeting focusing on poverty. Our representative was active in Europe 2020 body meetings, raising issues related to poverty. We sent opinions and proposals of amendments to the Country Report and to draft of NRP. We get answers to all of them mainly explaining why they are ignored or rejected. Some of our minor amendments were included in the NRP text.

For more information, please contact [Ryszard Szarfenberg](#) (EAPN Poland).

EAPN Portugal

For the first time since Portugal implemented the European Semester, there are more concerns to make the Semester more visible at national level. This is done through the media, but also through the web, in particular the official website of the Government (<http://www.portugal.gov.pt>). The Government has also provided, for the first time, a Balance Report of the first 6 months of the NRP, giving inputs for the work that was already done and what's still missing to achieve the aims defined. Another important action was the development of a set of public debates (6 in total) on some of the key subjects addressed in the NRP (between March and April). This is an important process for the dialogue with civil society. EAPN Portugal participated in two of these debates (about Child Poverty and School Success), and we prepared a position paper with our views for 2017.

For more information, please contact [Paula Cruz](#) (EAPN Portugal).

EAPN's involvement with the Semester Alliance project (2014-)

In 2014, EAPN led a project called the *Semester Alliance*, which built a cross-sectoral alliance among European NGOs, to work together and impact the European Semester and Europe 2020, from a social, equality, and environmental perspective. Three national projects were financed to pilot broad, cross-sectoral alliances to engage in the European Semester, all led by the EAPN National Networks in those countries – Bulgaria, Denmark, Ireland. These national alliances fostered joint engagement in European Semester processes, such as the Annual growth Survey, Country Reports, National Reform Programmes, and Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs). The coalitions involve a wide range of organisations, including social, environmental/climate and/or other sectors in the three selected Member States, including the national members of the Brussels-based Semester Alliance. While the Alliance does not receive funding anymore, both the Brussels-level, as well as the national level cross-sectoral alliances continue their activities. See the [blog](#) for more information on each, and below for details about the work in Ireland.

EAPN Ireland

The *Better Europe Alliance*, Irish Civil Society Organisations for a Social and Sustainable Europe, involves a range of social and equality NGOs, the Environmental Pillar and the SIPTU trade union. The Alliance was formed in 2014, initially as a national pilot under the EU level European Semester Alliance. The overall objective of the Alliance is to strengthen progress towards the social and environmental goals of the Europe 2020 Strategy, and to improve the level of debate and engagement of all stakeholders in progressing the Europe 2020 Strategy and the European Semester. The Alliance is coordinated by the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland. During the initial period of activity in 2014, the Alliance received some funding from the European Commission, which allowed it to carry out a range of activities, and enabled it to build its visibility and its credibility with different policymakers at official and political level. After its funding ended, the Alliance has continued to engage at strategic moments. In 2016, the Alliance concentrated its energies on providing its response to the European Commission's 2016 Country Report for Ireland². This response included proposals for 2016 Country Specific Recommendations and National Reform Programme for Ireland. This response was circulated widely including to the relevant Commission officials and Government Departments and Irish MEPs. The Alliance was invited to present its response to the Commission's European Semester Officers in April 2016. The Better Europe Alliance was also participated in a number of national meetings and events organised by the European Commission. These included:

- * March 2016: 2016 Country Report stakeholder event
- * June 2016: Roundtable on Completing Economic and Monetary Union
- * September 2016: Meeting with the Commission fact finding mission to Ireland
- * December 2016: Roundtable on the 2017 Annual Growth Survey with DG ECFIN Director Martínez Mongay
- * March 2017: Seminar on the 2017 Country Report for Ireland and the Investment Plan for Europe

The Alliance was invited to make initial comments on the Annual Growth Survey and the Country Report and Alliance members did so on an individual basis.

For more information, please contact [Paul Ginnell](#) (EAPN Ireland)

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² **Better Europe Alliance**, *Response to European Commission 2016 Country Report for Ireland*, available on: <http://www.eapn.ie/eapn/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/better-europe-alliance-response-to-european-commission-country-report-for-ireland-2016.pdf>

Who to Contact?

Europe 2020 Country-Specific Information

On the link below, click the shape of your country on the interactive map. You can access all relevant information, including the previous National Reform Programmes, the Country Specific Recommendations, the Country Reports, the Macroeconomic Indicators, and the national targets for Europe 2020: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/europe-2020-in-your-country/index_en.htm

European Semester Officers

The Commission has deployed the so-called *European Semester Officers* in the Commission's Representations in the Member States. They are supposed to be working in partnership with stakeholders and oversee the implementation of the Country-Specific Recommendations. To find the European Semester Officer in your country, please consult the [websites of the European Commission Representations](#), or access a full list with contact information [here](#).

Country Desk Officers in DG Employment

Within DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission, there are country desks, with teams dedicated to policy analysis and recommendations for each country. Within these desks, there are assigned desk officers, working particularly on Europe 2020 and the European Semester for a certain country. You can access a full list with contact information [here](#).

Members of the Social Protection Committee

The [Social Protection Committee](#) (SPC) is an EU advisory policy committee for the Employment and Social Affairs Ministers in the Employment and Social Affairs Council (EPSCO). Its mandate:

- monitors social conditions in the EU and the development of social protection policies in member countries
- reports on social inclusion, health care, long-term care and pensions under the social open method of coordination
- promotes discussion and coordination of policy approaches among national governments and the Commission
- prepares Council discussions on social protection and on the country-specific recommendations in the context of the European Semester
- produces reports and opinions on its own initiative or at the request of the Council or the Commission.

[Click](#) to download list of contacts, and find your country's representative (from your national Ministry). These are your best first point of entry. You should develop an on-going relationship.

Members of the Employment Committee

The [Employment Committee's](#) (EMCO) primary role is to advise the Employment and Social Affairs Ministers in the Employment and Social Affairs Council (EPSCO). Most of EMCO's work nowadays is centred around advising Ministers on the main products coming out of the European Semester. [Click](#) to download list of contacts. They are very useful contacts for employment policy matters, and they are supposed to be working closely with the SPC on Europe 2020.

European Social Policy Network members *(previously Independent Experts on Social Inclusion)*

The [European Social Policy Network](#) (ESPN) was established in 2014 to provide the Commission with independent information, analysis and expertise on social policies. In particular, the ESPN supports the Commission in monitoring progress towards the EU social protection and social inclusion objectives set out in the Europe 2020 strategy, including lifting at least 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion, and in the European Semester. The ESPN brings together into a **single network** the work previously carried out by:

- the [European Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion](#)
- the network responsible for the [Analytical Support on the Socio-Economic Impact of Social Protection Reforms \(ASISP\)](#).

It also acts as the staff team to the [MISSOC \(Mutual Information Systems on Social Protection\)](#). [Click](#) to download list of contacts. There are very useful allies.

All these contacts (in your Government, the European Semester Officers, the country desk officers, the SPC, EMCO, and European Social Policy Network members) are nationals from your own country, or at least people who speak the country's language and are familiar with its context – so you can address them in your own language, invite them or inform them of national events and initiatives, etc.

For more information, please contact the EAPN Staff team:

Sian Jones, Policy Coordinator: sian.jones@eapn.eu

Amana Ferro, Senior Policy Officer: amana.ferro@eapn.eu

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Annex:

Useful References in EU Documents about Stakeholder Engagement

Europe 2020 Communication

The original Europe 2020 Strategy Communication of the European Commission underlined the importance of a partnership approach:

This partnership approach should extend to EU committees, to national parliaments and national, local and regional authorities, to social partners and to stakeholders and civil society so that everyone is involved in delivering on the vision.

and

The success of the new strategy will therefore depend critically on the European Union's institutions, Member States and regions explaining clearly why reforms are necessary – and inevitable to maintain our quality of life and secure our social models -, where Europe and its Member States want to be by 2020, and what contribution they are looking for from citizens, businesses and their representative organisation.

Finally, the European Commission calls on all parties and stakeholders (e.g. national/regional parliaments, regional and/or local authorities, social partners and civil society, and last but not least the citizens of Europe) to help implement the strategy, working in partnership, by taking action in areas within their responsibility.

Integrated Guidelines

The Council Recommendation on broad guidelines for the economic policies of the Member States and the Union, **Recital 6** clearly states:

While the Europe 2020 integrated guidelines are addressed to Member States and the Union, they should be implemented in partnership with all national, regional and local authorities, closely involving parliaments, as well as social partners and representatives of civil society.

The Council Decision on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States contains identical wording in its Recital 9.

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The official website of the European Commission of the Europe 2020 Strategy has a [section dedicated to the role and involvement of civil society](#), acknowledging it as an important element for the drafting, implementation and assessment of the NRPs.

Annual Growth Survey

In **2017**, there are no explicit references to civil society as a key stakeholder in Europe 2020. There is one reference to the governance process around the National Reform Programmes, which unfortunately only mentions social partners:

To prepare the national programmes, the Communication calls for a strong role of national Parliaments and a stronger involvement of social partners. The inclusive preparation of these programmes contribute to their ownership and to the broader reform support, and the Commission stands ready to facilitate contacts at all levels.

Effective social dialogue is crucial for a well-functioning social market economy. Better performing Member States tend to have a more strongly established social dialogue. The success of social dialogue is dependent on a number of factors, including the willingness and capacity of different partners to engage and work towards solutions, for example where it concerns wage setting. The engagement of social partners at EU and national level is crucial for striking the right balance when designing and implementing economic and social policies in a comprehensive and forward-looking manner.

Communication accompanying the Country Reports 2017

The main Communication does not contain any useful references to civil society, which is not mentioned, while some wording in support of ownership and stakeholder consultation are reprised below - they only explicitly mention social partners, national parliaments and local authorities, as well as an ambiguous “other stakeholders”:

The analysis presented in the country reports will be discussed with the Member States in bilateral meetings. Commission Vice-Presidents and Commissioners will visit Member States to meet the governments, national parliaments, social partners and other stakeholders.

The European Semester process goes well beyond an individual assessment of each Member State’s performance. It is also a vehicle to facilitate more policy coordination within the Member States, including their national parliaments and the closer involvement of social partners.

New policy measures need to be designed and implemented with the close involvement of social partners to ensure ownership by a wider range of stakeholders. More complex reforms require several years for full implementation. For that reason, their design must be evidence-based and agreed with key stakeholders, such as regional and local authorities and the social partners.

Conference on a European Pillar of Social Rights

[Speech by Marianne Thyssen, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility](#)

This is an agenda which needs to fully engage all stakeholders, in particular Member States, in line with the subsidiarity principle.

We look forward to hearing your views and your proposals in these sessions, in particular I welcome those voices which we don't normally directly hear in Brussels - national representatives of employers, both big and small, trade unions, social partners, of civil society.

[Speech by Antonio Tajani, President of the European Parliament](#)

The European Parliament is looking forward to the publication of the White Paper by the Commission and is ready to engage with all actors involved to work for social progress and cohesion, reducing inequality, job creation and focusing on human capital.

The EU Alliance for a democratic, social and sustainable European Semester (Semester Alliance)

As mentioned above, EAPN led a project in 2014 called the "[Semester Alliance](#)", aimed at building a cross-sectoral alliance among European NGOs, to work together and impact the European Semester and Europe 2020, from a social, equality, environmental, and democratic perspective. Its comprehensive, joint analysis report on the European Semester ([Let's make the European semester smart, sustainable and inclusive](#)) includes a whole section (page 19, in the National Reform Programmes chapter) dedicated to "Stakeholder Engagement – Some positive examples of participatory practice". The short video on the work of the Alliance, [A Beating Heart for a Better Europe](#), also includes very useful quotes from MEPs Jean Lambert (UK, Greens/EFA) and Marian Harkin (IE, ALDE), as well as Commission officials and other interlocutors, about the added value and necessity of meaningful stakeholder engagement.

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For more information on EAPN general publications and activities, see www.eapn.eu

The European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) is an independent network of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and groups involved in the fight against poverty and social exclusion in the Member States of the European Union, established in 1990.



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