21 September 2018

President of the European Commission

Mr Jean-Claude JUNCKER

Dear President Juncker,

**AGS 2019: Priority to implementing Social Rights and Participation of Civil Society!**

We are writing to you on behalf of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), the largest platform of anti-poverty organizations in Europe, representing more than 6000 organisations across 31 countries, working with and for people with direct experience of poverty.

You are currently preparing the **2019 Annual Growth Survey**, which will drive the European Semester in 2019. EAPN has actively engaged with its members in the European Semester since its inception at national and EU level to try to get delivery on the Europe 2020 poverty target, and now the Social Pillar. We now write to you to highlight our key messages for the new AGS, in the context of the **State of the Union address 2019[[1]](#footnote-1).**

*General Points*

In the SOTEU speech, **EAPN welcomed your proposal thatthe European Union should ‘*take better care of its social dimension’****,* demanding that the promises made in Gothenburg should be turned *‘into law’.* However, we were disappointed that this was not backed by concrete proposals around the **implementation of the Social Pillar**, including a **specific road map or action plan**. Unless a systematic plan is laid out for how all 20 Social Principles will be implemented, clarifying how progress can be made towards a framework of obligatory rights backed by EU funding and through the European Semester, the pillar will continue to be merely a paper exercise.

We were also concerned to see that your overview of ‘progress made’ failed to mention the continuing emergency situation regarding **poverty and social exclusion**, with 1 in 4 of the population still affected (118 million), nor recognition of the failure of the Europe 2020 poverty target, nor solutions proposed of an **integrated strategy** ensuring access to quality jobs, social protection and services, underpinned by the Social Pillar.

The focus on the ‘future of Europe’ is vital but needs to embrace a 6th scenario[[2]](#footnote-2)**, which can offer a more ambitious social, sustainable and democratic vision rooted in the SDGs and the Pillar of Social Rights.** EAPN members are alarmed that no mention is made of proposals nor process of democratic consultation for a post Europe 2020 strategy.

*Messages for the AGS 2019*

EAPN members have engaged in every stage of the European Semester, inputting and reviewing the [Country Reports](https://www.eapn.eu/making-social-rights-the-compass-in-the-european-semester-eapn-assessment-of-the-country-reports-proposals-for-country-specific-recommendations-2018/), the [Country-specific Recommendations](https://www.eapn.eu/20206-2/) and now the National Reform Programmes. The main message is that despite the joint adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights and some references to Europe 2020 targets, Member States appear to be giving little priority to social rights and currently inadequate responses to fighting poverty.

Despite **important promises to ‘rebalance’ the European Semester promoting social and economic convergence, the overall EU approach continues to be dominated by macroeconomic priorities** of austerity and marketisation. There is a failure to analyse and address who benefits and who loses, particularly from changes to tax/benefit policies, but also the social impact of policies to make labour markets more flexible and promote privatisation. There are evident political consequences of this failure. Most importantly there is inadequate commitment to a step-change to a more social and sustainable model of growth – in line with the SDGs and Social Pillar where social investment in quality jobs and universal welfare states financed through tax justice are treated as pre-requisites to guaranteeing social rights for all, sustainable growth and cohesive societies. The assessment also underlines the key role of participation. Civil society organizations working with people in poverty are a pre-requisite to ensuring delivery on social rights, but they are still not treated as key partners in the Semester process. With the adoption of the new Employment Guidelines [[3]](#footnote-3)Recital 11 with civil society specifically referenced, we would expect this to change.

**AGS 2019 must give explicit priority to implementing Social Rights and participation of Civil Society!**

1. ***Ensure macroeconomic policies promote social rights and poverty reduction!***
* **Mainstream social/distributional impact assessment** of macroeconomic policies to ensure they deliver on social rights and reduce poverty and inequality.
* **End austerity and recognise social spending as an investment in education, health, security and productivity** including through allowing greater fiscal flexibility on investment in social protection and key public services including quality, affordable health/long-term care, social services, education and social housing.
* **Increase tax revenues and re-energise their primary role as a redistributive mechanism for public good:** promote more progressive taxation, stronger legal and enforcement measures against tax evasion and avoidance and the introduction of new or reinvigorated financial instruments – eg a Financial Transactions Tax and wealth taxes.
1. ***Progress on poverty + social rights with a rights-based integrated strategy/action plan***
* **Accelerate progress on the poverty target and set new ambitious targets** with clear triggers for policy recommendations (CSRs) when sufficient progress isn’t made; ensure a continuation and strengthening of the targets in any post 2020 strategy, linked to the SDG goals.
* **Prioritize development of an ambitious rights-based integrated anti-poverty strategy** ensuring universal access to quality social protection including adequate minimum income, public quality services, quality jobs and social participation, across the life-cycle. For target groups support agreed EU integrated approaches e.g. in “Tackling housing exclusion and homelessness” and “Investing in Children”.[[4]](#footnote-4)
* **Implement the Social Pillar by driving up social standards and social rights –** adopt an Action plan and monitor progress on all principles, extending the scoreboard in the European Semester, starting with adequate minimum income, universal social protection, fair wages, access to services (particularly housing and health) and education/lifelong learning.
1. ***Implement quality employment policies that******ensure that nobody is left behind***
* **Step up strategies to promote gender equality and close the gender pay gap, and targeted support for specific groups** eg minorities, migrants, young/old people, people with disabilities;
* **Promote decent, sustainable and good-quality jobs**by investing in quality job creation, fostering living wages and security in the workplace and by curbing precariousness
* **Prioritize the fight against in-work poverty and ensure that paid work can provide a sustainable route out of poverty** by adjusting tax, subsidy and regulation to create a more level playing field.
* **Support comprehensive Active Inclusion approaches**, particularly for long-term unemployed people, guaranteeing personalized, integrated support that goes beyond employment (i.e. encompassing adequate income support and quality, affordable services).
* **Recognize the value of positive incentives** and eliminate practices and narratives of negative conditionality that injure autonomy, health and social respect, increase social divisions and are ineffective in supporting access to sustainable work that takes people out of poverty.

***4. Invest in equal access to universal, free, quality public education and holistic lifelong learning, as well as vocational training***

➢ **Adopt a comprehensive vision of education and lifelong learning** that goes beyond the

 needs of the labour market, ensuring that targets and indicators capture reality.

➢ **Promote free, inclusive and universal public education;** ending discrimination and segregation ensuring nobody is left behind.

➢ **Raise the quality of education and integrate anti-poverty goals in educational policies and budgets**: ameliorating and making more accessible the curricular and extra-curricular offer of schools; investing in infrastructures; increasing childcare support, early childhood care.

**➢ Ensure access for workers and jobseekers (especially youth) to adequate upskilling and/or training programmes,** adapting them to the needs of disadvantaged people, and ensuring universal access to adult education, including 2nd chance.

➢ **Reinforce quality and inclusive lifelong learning**, beyond merely employment-related needs, by supporting informal or non-formal learning approaches supporting personal and community development.

***5. Increase EU funds for measures supporting integrated anti-poverty strategies, delivered with civil society organizations!***

* **Social Inclusion is not just about employment! –** Projects must deliver on anti-poverty right-based strategies founded on integrated active inclusion and concrete anti-discrimination measures.
* **Increased role of EU funds to fight poverty and social exclusion in the MFF**

EAPN calls for a Budget that should respect the SDG principle of ‘Leaving No-One Behind’ and recognize the eradication of Poverty and Social Inclusion as public goods and collective responsibility, with 30% of ESF+ and a dedicated poverty programme.

* **Enforce delivery of the partnership principle involving small NGOs and people in poverty** with more pro-active monitoring and enforcementofthe code of conduct regarding quality of engagement of civil society actors allowing them to be effective partners in the Monitoring Committees and in delivery.

***6. Make partnership with people in poverty a driver for Social Rights - embedding regular, meaningful dialogue with people facing poverty and NGOs***

* **Make the NRP a true strategic plan for social and inclusive development** drawing on the European Pillar of Social Rights and the SDGs and embracing Civil Society as a key partner. Establish ambitious **new goals** and **clear, compulsory common guidelines** on the Semester governance processes underpinned by the new employment guidelines, involving all relevant actors in a quality engagement.
* **Embed quality standards for meaningful participation of people experiencing poverty and NGOs** at all stages of the policymaking process, providing them with support and **financial resources to build capacity** to contribute equally and effectively, supported by EU funds. **Quality standards indicators** should be agreed and monitored throughout the Semester process (NRPs, Country Reports, bi-lateral dialogues, AGS/ Joint Employment Report). **Mutual learning** on best practices to encourage upward convergence.

We hope that you will give full consideration to our proposals in your deliberations on the AGS 2019. We would like to have a meeting with you at the earliest opportunity to discuss our recommendations, the next steps for implemention of the EPSR in the Semester and how EAPN, as a key civil society partner working directly with people experiencing poverty, can contribute.

Yours sincerely,

 

Sergio Aires Leo Williams

EAPN President EAPN Director

1. EC SOTEU 2019 (September 2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. EAPN Position Paper: Future of Europe (September 2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Employment Guidelines (July 2018) Recital 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)