

TOOLKIT for EAPN members ON ENGAGING with the European Semester

2020

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Introduction

In 2010, the European Council agreed on the **Europe 2020 Strategy** which broke new ground, by establishing five concrete targets for delivering on smart, social, and sustainable growth. It relies on five headline targets for the EU to achieve by the end of the decade. These cover employment (75% employment rate); education (reduce the early-school-drop-out rate below 10% and foster tertiary education); research and innovation; climate/energy; social inclusion and poverty reduction (lifting at least 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion). As of 2018, this poverty reduction target was still missed by 14 million people. Europe 2020 for the first time included an EU-level and EU-wide numerical target for the reduction of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion (see more information below). This process is implemented annually through a cycle called the **European Semester**, the main instrument for the coordination of (macro-)economic, employment and labour-market policies of Member States – but also increasingly touching upon policy fields such health care, elderly care, early childhood education and care, and vocational education and training – for achieving the common objectives and targets of Europe 2020. This year is the last year of this strategy. As explained in more details in our proposals for a Post Europe 2020 Strategy, for EAPN a new integrated strategy, built on the learning from Europe 2020 and underpinned by UN Agenda 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) is needed to achieve real improvements for people and planet. Such a Europe 2030 Strategy needs to contain ambitious EU Poverty Target, an action plan to implement social rights as well as a high-level political commitment and a paradigm shift also reflected in the European Semester. As of early 2020 the European Commission has not yet confirmed its intention to come up with such a comprehensive and overarching strategy.

On 17 December 2019, the new European Commission adopted the '[Autumn Package](#)'¹, including the **2020 Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (ASGS)** – renamed from “Annual Growth Survey” (AGS) – and the **Joint Employment Report (JER)**. The EAPN response to these two documents was published on 28 January 2020². It contains a comprehensive and critical assessment of both documents and identifies a number of opportunities, but also main concerns for EAPN. Some of the key recommendations drawn from our assessment of the 2019 European Semester³ have been taken up, e.g. that “economic growth is not an end in itself and the economy must work for people and planet”. They are included in a letter EAPN had sent on 9 October 2019 to the old and new Commission Presidents Juncker and Von der Leyen⁴.

¹ The 2020 Autumn Package is comprised of five documents. It includes the ASGS, a proposal for the JER, the Alert Mechanisms Report, the Euro area Recommendation and the Single Market Performance Report.

² Working for a Green and Social Deal that ends poverty! | EAPN Response to the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy 2020, <https://www.eapn.eu/working-for-a-green-and-social-deal-that-ends-poverty-eapn-response-to-the-annual-sustainable-growth-strategy-2020/>

³ EAPN Assessment of the European Semester 2019: Is the 2019 European Semester more social?, <https://www.eapn.eu/is-the-2019-european-semester-more-social-eapn-assessment-of-the-european-semester-2019/>

⁴ EAPN letter, 9 October 2019, <https://www.eapn.eu/ags-2020-move-from-aspiration-to-inspiration-on-social-rights-and-poverty-reduction-letter-to-president-juncker-and-von-der-leyen/>

For EAPN, the 2020 ASGS takes an important step forward in embracing the rhetoric of a more social, inclusive and sustainable economic model which also incorporates the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁵. It also affirms that the new economic agenda must “ensure that the transition is fair and inclusive and puts people first” and that “the costs must not be borne by the most vulnerable”.

For EAPN 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 effectively moving towards a social and sustainable Europe. The main reasons are:

1. The European Semester is 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.

2. It also is a **direct driver for EU funding opportunities**, most significantly Structural Funds - currently the European Social Fund (ESF), as of 2021 the ESF+ -, which are explicitly linked to the Europe 2020 targets, hence it brings clear benefits to national organisations who engage.

3. The Europe 2020 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 rather marginal, with limited engagement and minimal impact on the policy proposals.

5. The European Pillar of Social Rights provides a **framework rooted in a rights-based approach** and covers **key social policy domains crucial to the fight against poverty**. The EPSR Action Plan will also play a significant role in shaping the strategic EU policy framework for the period post Europe 2020 Strategy as well as the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027. A [public consultation](#) on its concrete shape and focus - [“Have your say on reinforcing Social Europe”](#) - has been launched by the European Commission and is open until 30 November 2020.

The [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) (EPSR) – adopted on 17 November 2017 as an [Interinstitutional Proclamation](#) and thus far committing the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council – can function as a springboard for policies, programmes, strategies and legislation⁶ to support well-functioning and fair labour markets and social protection systems in all EU MS. One focus is on better integrating and delivering on social concerns and policies, including those for the fight against poverty and social exclusion. Key elements are **20 principles** for different social policy areas⁷ – presented under the three headings “Equal Opportunities and access to the labour market”, “Fair Working Conditions” and “Social

⁵ A factsheet issued by the European Commission together with the 2020 Autumn Package contains some information on how this objective should be achieved and what already has been done, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/semester_sdgs.pdf

⁶ While it falls short of being a transformative, integrated European strategy to eradicate poverty, EAPN’s focus is to push for it to go beyond a framework of principles and become a framework of rights that can make a real difference to people’s right to a life free of poverty. You can read our detailed analysis and recommendations in [EAPN’s Response to the European Pillar of Social Rights](#) (September 2017) and in [EAPN’s Position Paper on the European Pillar of Social Rights](#) (September 2016).

⁷ In the June 2017 EU ISG meeting it was decided that EAPN focus on five of the [twenty policy domains](#) of the EPSR, namely on the principles 1. Education, training and lifelong learning, 6. Wages, 12. Social Protection, 14. Minimum Income and 20. Access to essential services. EAPN advocates for a continued reference to the [2008 Commission Recommendation on Active Inclusion](#) as a key framework to support implementation, ensuring access to adequate income support, and quality and affordable services.

Protection and Inclusion” – , a **Social Scoreboard of 14 indicators** to monitor the implementation of the principles and **a number of key legislative and non-legislative initiatives** to deliver on the principles⁸. The re-shaped and partly re-conceptualised **European Semester** will serve as **main framework for the implementation of the 20 policy principles of the EPSR**, at national and EU level – with the main responsibility lying with national governments. This explains well reason 5.

This **Toolkit** is designed to help EAPN members engage during 2020 with the European Semester, delivering on Europe 2020 goals and targets, especially the poverty target, as well as the policy priorities of the European Pillar of Social Rights. It is in line with EAPN’s Strategic Plan and Work Programme 2020 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. In order to facilitate the activities of EAPN members it contains links to the lists of the European Semester Officers (have also updated a template for a letter to be addressed to them) and the DG EMPL Country Desk Officers for all EU MS. It also contains links to the list of government representatives for all Member States in the Social Protection Committee (SPC) and in the Employment Committee (EMCO). It finally refers to the national experts and key publications of the European Social Policy Network (EPSN).

All EAPN publications thematically linked to the European Semester and the recurrent annual cycle (reaching back to 2014), starting with the ASGS (as of 2020)/AGS (until 2019), JER, Country Reports, NRP and ending with the CSRs, can be accessed on this [page](#).

If 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](#).

⁸ In the second phase of the mandate of the last European Commission key initiatives inspired by the EPSR dealt with the access to social protection, access to information on employment rights, work-life balance arrangements and the posting of workers.

What is the Europe 2020 Strategy?

[Europe 2020](#) is a 10-year strategy, proposed in a [Communication](#) 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 Europe 2020 Strategy identifies five headline targets focusing on its EU-level key objectives:

- To raise the employment rate of the population aged 20-64 to at least 75%.
- To achieve the target of investing 3% of the GDP in research & development (R&D).
- 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.**

According to the most recent [Eurostat](#) data, progress on these targets has been unequal. We are highlighting below the four most important targets for EAPN and for our joint work:

Europe 2020 Strategy headline target	2010 data	2018 data	Shortfall/ Achievement
<i>1. Employment: Increasing the employment rate of the population aged 20-64 to at least 75%</i>	68.6%	73.2%	-1.8%
<i>4a. Education: Reducing school drop-out rates to less than 10%</i>	13.9%	10.5%	-0.5%
<i>4b. Education: Increasing the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary education to at least 40%</i>	33.8%	40.7%	+0.7%
<i>5. Poverty and social exclusion: Lifting at least 20 million out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion</i>	1.8 million increase (compared to the 2008 base year)	5.8 million decrease (compared to the 2008 base year)	-14.1 million People

What is the European Semester?

Monitoring progress and ensuring the active involvement of Member States are key elements of the Europe 2020 Strategy. This is done through the [European Semester](#), an annual cycle (until end of 2020) of macro-economic, budgetary and structural policy coordination involving all 28 EU MS. With the new Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy the scope as of 2020 has been enlarged to the policy fields of environmental protection and climate change. In this framework, the European Commission starts with a detailed analysis of each country's plans for budget, macroeconomic and structural reforms and concludes each cycle with the elaboration of country-specific recommendations to be tackled in the next 12 to 18 months.

With the European Semester the European Commission pursues four goals: 1) ensuring sound public finances (avoiding excessive government debt); 2) preventing excessive macroeconomic imbalances in the EU supporting; 3) proposing and pursuing structural reforms, with the aim to create more jobs and economic growth and 4) boosting investment. Over the years the European Semester has established itself as the key tool for the coordination of national economic and employment policies and for monitoring progress in view of agreed EU-level targets and benchmarks.

As of 2020 this process will comprise the integration of the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an integral part of what the European Commission announced as a strategy to build an economy that works for people and the planet.

The delivery of the European Semester is underpinned by the Integrated Guidelines⁹ and the Employment Guidelines¹⁰. The latter set common priorities and targets for the national employment policies, frame the scope and direction for Member States' policy coordination and provide the basis for the Country-Specific Recommendations. They were adapted on 22 November 2017 to align the text with the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

In 2019, EAPN asked its members to assess progress made towards the delivery on social rights and the Europe 2020 poverty reduction target, as well as promoting participation of civil society and people facing direct experience of poverty. EAPN members still felt that the European Semester is primarily aimed at macroeconomic and financial coordination rather than achieving Europe 2020 goals and targets or the ensuring the Social Pillar principles. For them the poverty target was not seen as a clear priority nor the 20 principles of the EPSR, even less so inequality, or encouraging fairer distribution, including fairer tax. More positively, 50% saw more focus on

⁹ The [Europe 2020 Integrated Guidelines for the economic and employment policies of the Member States](#) were adopted in 2010. They set out the framework for the Europe 2020 Strategy and reforms at Member State level and the basis for them to draw up their National Reform Programmes. The European Commission announced that in the context of Europe 2020 macroeconomic, structural, and competitiveness developments and overall financial stability will be examined simultaneously.

¹⁰ These are guidelines 5 to 8, entitled "Boosting the demand for labour" (Guideline 5), "Enhancing labour supply and improving access to employment, skills and competences" (Guideline 6), "Enhancing the functioning of labour markets and the effectiveness of social dialogue" (Guideline 7) and "Promoting equal opportunities for all, fostering social inclusion and combatting poverty" (Guideline 8). The version currently in force is contained in the [Council Decision \(EU\) 2018/1215 of 16 July 2018](#). The third chapter "Employment and Social Reforms – Member States Performance and Action" of the Joint Employment Report is structured by these four guidelines, too, subdivided into a "Key indicators" and a "Policy response" section respectively. For more information see also on this [page](#).

social investment in services (health, housing, education), while deploring that social protection is still not seen sufficiently as an investment, but rather as a cost. Insufficient progress was flagged up in view of the reduction of child poverty and tackling homelessness and housing exclusion.

WHEN?	EUROPE 2020 (thematic surveillance)	STABILITY AND GROWTH PACT (macroeconomic & fiscal surveillance)
November*	Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (EC)	Alert Mechanism Reports (EC)
February	Country Reports (EC)	
April	National Reform Programmes (MS)	Stability [€ zone] / Convergence [non-€ zone] Programmes** (MS)
May / June / July	Country-Specific Recommendations (EC)	
October		Eurozone budget appraisal (EC)

EC = European Commission; MS = Member States

* For this 2020 edition of the European Semester process there was a delay due to the late confirmation of the new European Commission and the European Semester Autumn Package was issued on 17 December 2019 only.

Five key instruments

Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy

As explained above in the “Introduction” section, the 2020 [Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy](#) (ASGS), together with the [Joint Employment Report](#) (JER), is part of the so-called “[Autumn Package](#)”. It launches the European Semester cycle and sets the objectives and general economic and employment priorities. Those priorities will form the basis for the policy recommendations addressed to each Member State at the end of the Semester cycle. The ASGS is structured around four dimensions: environmental sustainability, productivity gains, fairness and macroeconomic stability. From the angle of the fight against poverty and social exclusion it is important to note that for the first time the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been integrated and will be taken up in the entire Semester Process alongside the four main priorities mentioned above. In the last years EAPN has always published a critical assessment of both the Annual Growth Survey – this was the term used until the 2019 cycle – and the Joint Employment Report. All EAPN publications thematically linked to the European Semester and the recurrent annual cycle (reaching back to 2014), starting with the ASGS (as of 2020)/AGS (until 2019), JER, Country Reports, NRP and ending with the CSRs, can be accessed on this [page](#).

Country Reports

As of 2015, the European Commission issues its [Country Reports](#) in February. They contain a detailed analysis of the challenges faced by each particular Member State, as well as policy suggestions for tackling these as identified by the EC. The reports aim at tailoring the priorities of the ASGS on the backdrop of the Integrated and Employment Guidelines to each country’s specific national context, as well as assessing the progress of each Member State in addressing the issues identified in the previous year’s Country-Specific Recommendations (see below), including an in-depth review under the Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure. It is important to note that the executive summaries of the Country Reports contain the main priorities for the CSRs. In line with the conceptual changes in the European Semester as elaborated upon above they this year also an Annex E “Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”. The Country Reports are intended to provide the basis for dialogue with Member States in bilateral meetings which follow their release, and to feed into the preparation of National Reform Programmes (as well as [Stability or Convergence Programmes](#))¹¹, to be submitted by Member States in mid-April (see below). They also provide a key moment for stakeholder engagement. Given the broader focus of the 2020 ASGS and following the inclusion of the SDGs in the European Semester it might also be advisable for EAPN members to reach out to environmental and other social actors in order to build alliances and, where possible, coordinate key messages. The individual Country Reports were presented this year on 26 February.

Until the 2019 AGS cycle including, the Country Reports contained an Annex D looking at priority investment areas which will provide the basis for a dialogue between Member States and the European Commission in view of the programming of the cohesion policy funds, i.e. the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF) and proposing the use of these EU funds to support the realisation of the CSRs. As of the 2020 ASGS, this Annex D for all countries contains the European Commission’s views on priority investment areas and

¹¹ The Stability Programmes for Eurozone countries) or Convergence Programmes (for Member States outside the Eurozone) consist of 3-years budget plans indicating how the countries plan to comply with the CSRs and the EU general fiscal rules.

framework conditions for effective delivery for the 2021-2027 Just Transition Fund investments. These priority investment areas are derived from the broader analysis of territories facing serious socio-economic challenges deriving from the transition process towards a climate-neutral economy of the Union by 2050, as assessed in the Country Reports. Annex D provides the basis for a dialogue between the countries and the Commission services as well as the relevant guidance for the Member States in preparing their territorial just transition plans, forming the basis for programming the Just Transition Fund. The Just Transition Fund investments complement those under Cohesion Policy funding for which guidance in the form of Annex D was given in the 2019 Country Reports.

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 ASGS – until the 2019 cycle called “Annual Growth Survey” (AGS) –, and the Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs – see below) of the previous year. Reflecting the Integrated and Employment Guidelines they should describe their implementation of the 5 overarching EU targets to be reached by the Europe 2020 Strategy (see above), translated into national targets by each Member State. 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 put emphasis on the implementation of the CSRs.

Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs)

The [Country-Specific Recommendations](#) are policy recommendations made by the European Commission, based on a review of every Member State's economic and social performance and environmental in the previous year (Country Reports), and on how far they have been delivering on the EU-wide priorities set out in the ASGS. They are drafted based on the executive summary of the Country Reports after a thorough assessment of progress since the previous year's CSRs, and a detailed analysis of the NRPs and Stability Programmes (for Eurozone countries) or Convergence Programmes (for countries outside the Eurozone), submitted by Member States in April. The recommendations are concrete, targeted and measurable, and concentrate on what can realistically be achieved in the next 12-18 months. 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. The CSRs will very likely be presented at the end of May. In line with the conceptual changes in the European Semester as elaborated upon including e.g. the incorporation of environmental and climate change objectives and the SDGs, as also shown by the integration of Annex E “Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” in the Country Reports, it is likely that CSR will also reflect this shift.

Social Scoreboard

The [Social Scoreboard](#) tracks trends and performances across Member States with 14 headline indicators, also set to monitor the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights through the European Semester. It feeds into the European Semester, including into the Joint Employment Report. The monitoring process looks at levels and yearly changes of the headline indicators, as compared to EU averages, and classifies Member States in one of seven categories: *best performers, better than average, good but to monitor, on average / neutral, weak but*

improving, to watch, and critical situations. The 2020 JER for the first time contains a regional dimension of 10 indicators contained in the Social Scoreboard in order to better understand where different regions in a country stand and how they develop, and to help monitor “convergence within countries, assess the impact of regional policies and shape regional policy-making”. The statistical results are to be interpreted in conjunction with qualitative analysis provided in the Country Reports (released on 26 February 2020), which will underpin the Country-Specific Recommendations (to be released end of May 2020).

The 14 headline indicators of the Social Scoreboard are:

Equal opportunities and access to the labour market:

1. Share of early leavers from education and training, age 18-24
2. Gender gap in employment rate, age 20-64
3. Income inequality measured as first to fifth quintile share ratio - S80/S20
4. At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE)
5. Young people neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET rate), age 15-24

Dynamic labour markets and fair working conditions:

6. Employment rate, age 20-64
7. Unemployment rate, age 15-74
8. Long-term unemployment rate, age 15-74
9. Gross disposable income of households in real terms, per capita
10. Net earnings of a full-time single worker earning the average wage

Public support / Social protection and inclusion:

11. Impact of social transfers (other than pensions) on poverty reduction
12. Children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare
13. Self-reported unmet need for medical care
14. Share of population with basic overall digital skills or above

Compared to the data included in the Social Scoreboard for October 2018 labour market and social trends in the EU, 9 out of the 14 headline indicators presented in the 2020 JER improved on average across the EU, while the 5 remaining headline indicators (early leavers from education or training, gender employment gap, impact of social transfers on poverty reduction, income quintile share ratio and self-reported unmet needs for medical care) either remained stable or recorded a slight negative development. All these 5 indicators are key indicators that directly impact on poverty levels and the depth of poverty. Persisting challenges to specific principles are identified for a large number of Member States.

While the Social Scoreboard is a useful addition to the toolbox used for monitoring the social situation on the ground, some areas of concern remain for EAPN. E.g. there are no clear procedures to trigger policy recommendations (including Country-Specific Recommendations). The Social Scoreboard only measures convergence, and not even upward convergence, i.e., how close or far the performance of a Member State is compared to the EU average. EAPN advocates for complementing the existing Social Scoreboard with more in-depth indicators on extreme poverty (i.e. persistence and/or intensity of poverty and homelessness), in-work poverty, benchmarking of minimum income, adequacy of social protection and unemployment benefits, as well as child poverty, and the full integration of the EIGE gender equality index.

Timeline for each annual cycle

For each annual cycle the key stages in the European Semester are as follows:

- In **November**, the European Commission issues its [Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy](#) (ASGS), which sets out EU priorities for the coming year and is discussed in the European Parliament and the Council – called Annual Growth Survey (AGS) until the 2019 edition –, and the Joint Employment Report (JER)¹².
- In **December and January**, the European Commission holds bilateral meetings with the Member States, on the process and priorities, and what they mean for each country, as well as the upcoming Country Reports and the state of play of the implementation of Country-Specific Recommendations.
- In **February**, the European Commission issues the [Country Reports](#), tailoring EU priorities (as defined by the ASGS) to national contexts, assessing the implementation of the Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) from the previous year (see below), and highlighting key areas of intervention for each Member State. In 2020, they were released on 26 February.
- In **March**, the Commission holds a second round of bilateral meetings with the Member States, to collect feedback on the analysis presented in Country Reports. In the same month the EU Heads of State and Government (i.e. the European Spring Council) take stock of the overall macroeconomic situation and of progress towards the targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy, and provide policy orientations covering fiscal, macroeconomic, and structural reforms.
- In **mid-April**, Member States submit their [National Reform Programmes](#) (NRP), which detail how the 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). They also prepare Stability Programmes (for Eurozone countries) or Convergence Programmes (for countries outside the Eurozone) for “sound public finances”.
- End of **May**, the European 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 (e.g. in the EPSCO Council bringing together the ministers of employment, social affairs and health), as well as in advisory bodies (Social Protection Committee, Employment Committee).
- 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 European Parliament adopts a resolution on the CSR (in September). The governments of the Eurozone [present the draft budgets to the European Commission](#) (in October), which then issues an opinion on each (which accompany the ASGS). The European Commission starts with the preparation of bilateral meetings, including with relevant stakeholders, in view of the drafting for the Country Reports.

¹² This was the timing for all the last years, including the 2019 cycle launched in November 2018. For the European Semester process in 2020 a slight delay occurred due to the fact that the confirmation of the new European Commission by the European Parliament happened one month later than initially planned. It only officially started to work on 1 December 2019. The European Semester [Autumn Package](#) was then issued on 17 December 2019.

Indicative timeline and checklist for action by EAPN members

<i>Timeline</i>	<i>Europe 2020 / European Pillar of Social Rights</i>	<i>EAPN Action National level</i>
December 2019	17 December – The European Commission issues its Autumn Package, including the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (ASGS) and a proposal for the Joint Employment Report (JER).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact key interlocutors (see Who To Contact section) to disseminate the Poverty Watch and to provide input for the Country Reports. • Provide feedback on EAPN’s draft response to the ASGS and the JER by the staff team.
January 2019 – February 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The European Commission holds bilateral meetings in Member States on the Country Reports. • On 26 February 2020 it issues the Country Reports. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to contact key interlocutors, press governments for a participative process and try to get engaged with or organise bilateral meetings. • Read the Country Report and prepare for the session in the EU ISG meeting.
March 2020	<p>26–27 March - European Spring Council issues guidance for national policies, on the basis of the ASGS.</p> <p>The European Commission holds a second round of bilateral meetings in Member States.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20-21 March in Madrid: Attend EU ISG meeting, including a joint assessment of the Country Reports 2020 and of the CSRs 2019 for all Member States. • Send written input on your analysis of your Country Report and put forward proposals for alternative CSRs; provide feedback on the synthesis response report prepared by EAPN staff. • Contact key interlocutors to give input to NRPs in April, based on Poverty Watches, Country Reports and template letter, try to participate in political missions and bilateral meetings.
April 2020	Member States submit their National Reform Programmes (NRP).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 policy contacts. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin elaboration of assessment of national policies and data for Poverty Watch reports. • Start organising national events to present and discuss the contribution of your network or organisation into the

		consultation on the Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights and/or your Poverty Watch.
May 2020	The European Commission proposes Country-Specific Recommendations (mid to end of May , exact date not yet known), after having assessed the NRPs.	Continue engaging at the national level with key stakeholders and/or organise events (preparation of input in Action Plan EPSR; Poverty Watch)
June 2020	The different Council formations and the European Parliament discuss the CSRs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25-27 June in Brussels: Attend EAPN's Policy Conference and EU ISG meeting (joint work on the NRPs / CSRs). • Review your CSRs, read and validate the response prepared by the EAPN Policy Team. • Send the completed European Semester questionnaire to them. • Start joint advocacy on key messages for the upcoming Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy.
July 2020	The Council formally endorses the CSRs.	
September 2020	<p>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.</p> <p>European Commission staff (Country Desk Officers) begin the drafting of the Country Report.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24-26 September in Berlin: Attend EU ISG meeting and GA, joint work on the European Semester, new Poverty Watch reports, finalisation of EAPN contribution to Action Plan on EPSR. • Finalise and start disseminating updates on Poverty Watch reports to key contacts. Lobby for input from the Poverty Watch reports into the Country Reports and organise national events.
October 2020	Member States in the Euro area present their national draft budgets to the European Commission.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue pressing for stakeholder engagement and try to feed into the drafting of the Country Report, using the national Poverty Watch assessment, as your other inputs. • Continue organising national events.
November 2020 - January 2021	<p>The European Commission issues its Autumn Package, including the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (ASGS), which sets out EU priorities for next year.</p> <p>The Commission begins a new round of bilateral meetings and fact-finding missions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide input on the draft response to the ASGS and proposal for a JER prepared by the EAPN Policy Team. • Continue pressing for stakeholder engagement and try to feed into the drafting of the Country Report, using the national Poverty Watch assessment, as your other inputs.

Engaging at the National Level: Tips, Good Experiences, Webinar

This section first presents seven tips on how to engage well in relevant European Semester processes, building on feedback received from EAPN members and insights from the EAPN Secretariat during the last years, as also reflected in earlier versions of this Toolkit.

Contrary to previous editions it does not contain a detailed description of promising practices, but rather refers interested EAPN members to the Toolkits issued in the last years. The sub-section on “Promising Practices – Webinar” however, contains reference to an assessment of EAPN member of the reasons in favour of engaging in the European Semester and the still existing problems or shortcomings and also lists “success factors” for a more meaningful involvement.

EAPN members are finally invited to watch and listen to the recording of a webinar on effective engagement in the European Semester organised on 2 December 2019 which also comprises three examples not only of the various activities of EAPN members in the context of the European Semester processes “back home”, but also of the progress made in recent years.

Tips

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

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, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) in the European Commission in Brussels has dedicated *Country Desks* working on Europe 2020, as well as on Structural Funds. Find all relevant information on the European Semester Officers and the Country Desk Officers in the [Who to Contact?](#) section above. All these interlocutors are European Commission staff and are important both as sources of information, as well as key targets for your lobbying, so it is key to establish and maintain contact. In addition, it is key and equally important for EAPN members to reach out to and lobby their national governments and the relevant ministries in order to have impact on national policies, legislation and the good use of ESF money and to achieve(longer lasting) policy change. 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/Labour and Social Affairs, Health, etc. It is therefore important for you to find out about the interplay of the various ministries, which ministry is leading, etc. from your Employment/Labour and Social Affairs Ministry.

2. Ask to be invited to participate in stakeholder engagement

Write a letter or e-mail or call the relevant contacts in your own country and government now (i.e. early 2020) and ask what process will be developed to involve stakeholders in the discussions on the Country Reports, the NRPs and CSRs this year. You can also ask if your government plans

specific activities in view of the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and/or the Action Plan (see Section “Introduction”). 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. Also ask to be able to present your own analysis of national (and if applicable) regional policy, evidence, data and testimonials from people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, also backed up by Poverty Watch reports, but also your alternative CSRs. You can find a template letter [here](#), and useful references supporting stakeholder involvement in European documents in the [Annex](#): at the end of this document. You should insist on your government’s responsibility to ensure a meaningful, timely, and structured process of consultation and involvement. EAPN’s overall aim is not to be only involved in one-off consultations, but to also build strong and regular dialogue platforms.

3. Brief members and build a common position

If you can 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 your network or organisation in the work on the European Semester. Some members also aim for a direct participation of people experiencing poverty in this work, 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. Organising 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. This will help you in the preparation of Poverty Watches, in providing concrete input into this year’s European Semester processes and the consultation on the Action Plan for European Pillar of Social Rights. In doing this work you are invited to build your national messages, demands and proposals on the joint EAPN messages, requests and recommendations as contained in the relevant publications issued every year by the EAPN Secretariat to accompany the European Semester process.

4. Making your input: Developing key messages

Starting from the analysis and common position above, members should put together their national Poverty Watch assessment, and engage in stakeholder processes to feed it into the Country Reports in their country. Communicate your position to European Commission representatives, i.e. the European Semester Officers and the Country Desk Officers. This work can also be used as a basis for trying to influence the National Reform Programme – 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 have the possibility to see the draft NRP, 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. Finally, this work will enable you to quickly assess your Country-Specific Recommendations in May and June. You can take inspiration from EAPN’s joint reviews of the NRPs and common work on Country Reports and CSRs (see [here](#)).

5. Review your country’s Country Report and CSRs

Analyse the key weaknesses of the Country Report against your own Poverty Watch and key messages, stressing also to what extent the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights are taken into account. Try to get involved in bilateral meetings between your government and the European Commission (through your European Semester Officers). You should also aim at

influencing the NRP, produced by your governments, as well as the CSRs, produced by the European Commission. The CSRs are increasingly important, impacting on national policy priorities. Once they are released, compare the alternative 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, concerns, etc. Prepare comments on the implementation of the CSRs, including how far they are taken up by the NRPs. This work will be carried out with the support of the EAPN Policy Team, through detailed work during EU ISG meetings, as well as through collecting written feedback in between. The assessment of the extent to which the priority policy domains for EAPN and EAPN members of the European Pillar of Social Rights, key Sustainable Development Goals (including and in particular SDG 1 “End poverty in all its forms everywhere”¹³) as well as the data and benchmarks of the Social Scoreboard have been taken on board in the NRPs and CSRs should be the recurrent theme. Make sure to disseminate both your national inputs, as well as the EU synthesis reports, to all relevant contacts (see the [Who to Contact?](#) section above).

6. Build alliances

Making allies at all levels is a very important part of the process. Last years’ experience of stakeholder involvement showed that there is still a lot to be desired in most countries¹⁴. It is important that you try to build strong alliances with other organisations that share our values and concerns – a key partner are trade unions, but also with other NGOs (including environmental NGOs) or NGO platforms, academics, politicians, the media. Useful interlocutors and allies can be the European Semester Officer in your country, and the country desk officers in the European Commission as well as the members of the Social Protection Committee and the Employment Committee – both are advisory bodies of the European Commission made up of national ministry officials. Given the broader focus of the 2020 ASGS and following the inclusion of the SDGs in the European Semester it might also be advisable for EAPN members to reach out to environmental and other social actors in order to build alliances and, where possible, coordinate key messages. It is important to try to establish an ongoing dialogue with them and send your inputs and proposals. If possible, try to get your National Parliaments engaged, as well as your Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Also, think creatively of ways to support your 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 weaknesses of the stakeholder engagement process, it’s important not to keep your messages internal to your dialogue with your national 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 organising national lobbying events or getting involved with those organised by other stakeholders. Inviting high-level speakers, such as the European Semester Officer or SPC / EMCO members, can be very useful and can also help strengthen future relations. Working in alliances (see above) will be crucial to this. It is always useful to use the print media, but also social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn, blogs, forums) to convey your messages more widely to the general public and raise awareness on your demands, proposals, and concerns.

¹³ Background information and the Goal 1 Targets can be found on this [page](#).

¹⁴ Please see in the Annex for an assessment of the participation of EAPN members in the European Semester.

Promising Practices – Webinar

Members of EAPN's EU Inclusion Strategies Group (EU ISG) have in recent years 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. Several EAPN networks have succeeded in participating in meetings with European Commission officials, as well as in different forms of dialogue with their Governments. Examples for good experiences and promising practice are included in the EAPN European Semester Toolkits for the years [2017](#), [2018](#) and [2019](#). Countries portrayed there include Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal and Spain. You are invited to look at these examples to get inspiration. "Success factors" are implicitly already reflected in the tips above, but also summarised below, based on a survey EAPN did in 2019 the results of which are published in the report ["Is the 2019 European Semester more social? EAPN Assessment of the European Semester 2019"](#)¹⁵, in addition to examples for concrete actions "back home":

- Putting in place a government body for the involvement of national stakeholders which allows them to meaningfully engage, including in the drafting process of the NRP (PL)
- Government having set up a dedicated webpage on the European Semester (PT)
- Establishment of regular contacts with relevant national ministries and/or participation in dedicated working meetings on poverty reduction strategies or measures, allowing EAPN members to share contributions to and proposals for amendments to the Country Report and the NRP and also to be involved in the fact-finding missions and presentations of the Country Report organised by the European Commission (PL)
- Drafting of proposals to the NRP by EAPN members (ES; LT) and/or proposals and amendments to the Country Report and the draft of the NRP (PL)
- Drafting of shadow CSRs sent to government and other relevant stakeholders (FIN)
- Participation of EAPN members in the follow-up to and monitoring to all state-level plans and programmes and the implementation of the European Structural Funds (ES)
- Setting up or being involved in a broader alliance to facilitate exchange, cooperation and coordination amongst relevant NGOs at national level which are reunited by the aim to work towards a more social and sustainable European Semester. This Better Europe Alliance, operational as of 2014, was initiated by a national pilot project under the EU-level European Semester Alliance. (IE)
- Preparation of joint statements, e.g. on the CSR, with other key actors in the social sector, e.g. the national association for social affairs and health (FIN), and joint publications
- Presentation by national EAPN member of Poverty Watch report at meetings with government officials/ministries (PL) or European Semester Officer (LT)
- Organisation of public debates or seminars on key issues addressed in the NRP, allowing EAPN members to feed in contributions and position papers (PT), also by involving the European Semester Officers (ES)
- Participation in debates in national parliament (FIN)

The recording of the EAPN Webinar "Strengthening and making EAPN's engagement in the European Semester more effective" organised on 2 December 2019 can be accessed and listened to via the Members' Room, in the section for [EUISG documents](#), under the heading "Materials from capacity buildings/conferences" (the [agenda](#) and all presentations can be found there).

¹⁵ This publication also contains a sub-section 5.1 showcasing why it is worth engaging in the European Semester.

Who to contact?

Below you can find your **best points of entry for your work on Europe 2020 and the European Semester**. Whereas the European Semester Officers and the Country Desk Officers are European Commission staff and important both as sources of information, as well as key targets for your lobbying, the members of the SPC and EMCO are civil servants in ministries of your national government. It is advisable to develop an on-going relationship with them, organise joint meetings, and send them all your inputs. These contacts as a rule are nationals from your own country, or at least they speak the country's language and are familiar with your national context.

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. Please consult the [websites of the European Commission Representations](#) for the contact information. Due to data protection rules we were asked not to make their contact details publicly available.

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. They work together with officers working on Structural Funds for that country. They are the main authors of the Country Reports and the Country-Specific Recommendations. Due to data protection rules we were asked by EC staff not to make their contact details publicly available.

Members of the Social Protection Committee / Employment Committee

The [Social Protection Committee](#) (SPC) and the [Employment Committee's](#) (EMCO) are EU advisory policy committees for the Employment and Social Affairs Ministers in the Employment and Social Affairs Council (EPSCO). They are made up of representatives from national Employment and Social Affairs Ministries. Aside close monitoring of the European Semester, the SPC equally engaged with issues such as social protection, social inclusion, health, long-term care, and pensions in Member States, under the Social Open Method of Coordination. You can access a full list with contact information for the SPC members [here](#) and for the EMCO members [here](#).

European Social Policy Network

The [European Social Policy Network](#) (ESPN) was established in 2014 to provide the Commission with independent information, analysis and expertise on social policies, particularly in the framework of the Europe 2020 and the European Semester. There are independent experts for all European Member States. The ESPN issues useful thematic reports on a range of topics, including e.g. on minimum income and in-work poverty, but also country reports. It also acts as the staff team to the [MISSOC \(Mutual Information Systems on Social Protection\)](#).

Europe 2020 Country-Specific Information

Upon clicking on [this link](#), select your country from the list. You can access all European Semester documents (Country Reports, NRPs, CSRs etc) there, as well as statistics and indicators about the progress on the national targets for Europe 2020.

Annex:

Stakeholder Engagement

Quotes from Commission documents

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.

Employment Guidelines

The [Council Decision](#) on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States mentions in **Recital 5**:

[The European Semester's] employment and social focus has notably been strengthened, and dialogue with the Member States, the social partners and representatives of civil society has been deepened.

and in **Recital 11**:

While the 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 the social partners and representatives of civil society.

and in **Guideline 7 - Enhancing the functioning of labour markets and the effectiveness of social dialogue**:

Where relevant and building on existing national practices, Member States should take into account the experience on employment and social issues of relevant civil society organisations.

Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy 2020

EAPN deplores that the 2020 ASGS does not contain an explicit mention of civil society and their involvement in the European Semester. The final sentence of the final paragraph which starts with “Economic governance and democratic accountability must go hand in hand.” only includes civil society (organisations) under the broader term of “other relevant stakeholders” (“... the Commission will continue the dialogue with Member States, and invites the Member States to involve national parliaments, social partners and all other relevant stakeholders”).

The [2019 Annual Growth Survey](#) had still contained two explicit mentions of civil society as a key stakeholder in the European Semester. The first one is in the context of the rule of law, effective justice systems and robust anti-corruption frameworks (*“This needs to be coupled with transparency and integrity in the public sector, effective legal protection of whistle-blowers, the presence of independent media and more engagement with civil society.”*, p. 12), the second one, more important, is the final sentence of the document (*“Member States should ensure that social partners and national parliaments are fully involved in the reform process. Their involvement, along with a broader engagement with civil society, is fundamental to improving ownership and legitimacy of reforms and bringing about better socio-economic outcomes.”*, p. 14)

Communication accompanying the Country Reports 2020

[Country Reports](#) for the last cycle were released on 26 February 2020. They were accompanied, as every year, by an overarching [Communication](#). It contained the following reference:

To provide an appropriate and sustainable response to the challenges, the Commission recommends that those programmes would be prepared with the involvement of all key stakeholders, such as social partners, regional and local authorities, and civil society organisations as appropriate.

EAPN publications

Members are finally 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 practices – at the EU, national and subnational levels.

[EAPN’s assessment of the European Semester 2019](#) contains a detailed assessment (in particular section 4) of the state of play when it comes to the meaningful involvement of EAPN members in the European Semester processes¹⁶, both at national level and at European level.

¹⁶ These experiences were also highlighted at the Third Civil Society Seminar “Strengthening the involvement of civil society in the European Semester” organised by the European Commission on 22 October 2019. You can read EAPN’s report [here](#).

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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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This publication has received financial support from the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014-2020).

For further information please consult: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/easi>

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