

# **POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN LITHUANIA 2020**

**Lithuanian National Anti Poverty Network**

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## INTRODUCTION

This year we are celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the restoration of Lithuania's independence. During this period, Lithuania has made great progress: we became full-fledged members of the international community, the country has reoriented from a planned economy to a market economy, and we are also members of the EU, NATO and the OECD. However, we are still one of the poorest societies in the European Union. Poverty, inequality, and in particular inequality of opportunity, are causing the growth of dissatisfaction not only among citizens but are also increasingly being recognized by international organizations.

Poverty causes hardship and deprivation, has a negative impact on health and, in the long run, has psychological consequences, limiting opportunities for both adults and children. In addition, people living in deprivation are often stigmatized, blamed, shamed and excluded from ordinary life in society. It is important to understand that poverty harms society as a whole - it breaks down social solidarity and trust, results in anxiety and insecurity, wastes the potential of the poor, which inevitably shakes the foundations of democracy.

This review will discuss the concepts of poverty and social exclusion, trends in 2019, difficulties faced by people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, realities of life. Some of the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the gap in its implementation will also be reviewed. Finally, insights and recommendations from members of the National Network of Poverty Reduction Organizations, experts in the field of poverty and social exclusion will be provided.

Unless otherwise stated, data is based on information from The Lithuanian Department of Statistics and Eurostat. The review also uses quotes from research and interviews conducted by the National Network of Poverty Reduction Organizations.

## ABOUT US

The Lithuanian National Anti Poverty Network (LNAPN), established in 2006, unites and strengthens half a hundred non-governmental organizations who are fighting against poverty and social exclusion.

LNAPN objectives:

- uniting Lithuanian non-governmental organizations working in the fields of poverty and social exclusion reduction, and strengthening their institutional capacity and cooperation with national and local authorities in Lithuania;
- participating in the processes of forming and implementing social policy.

## AT-RISK-OF-POVERTY RATES IN 2019

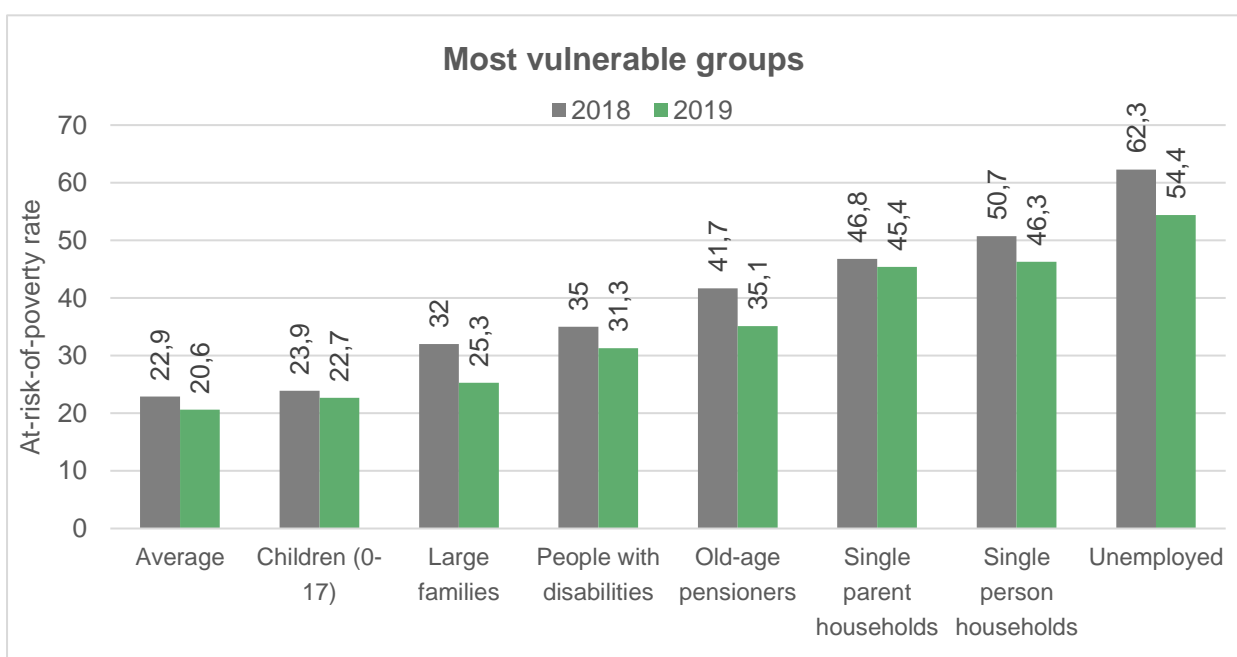
At-risk-of-poverty threshold in 2019 was € 379 per month per resident and € 797 for a family of two adults and two children under the age of 14. In 2019 about 576 thousand people in Lithuania lived below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. **At-risk-of-poverty rate in 2019 in the country amounted to 20.6 percent and decreased by 2.3 percentage points compared to 2018.**

It is important to keep in mind that when calculating the at-risk-of-poverty rate for 2019, the income data of 2018 is used. Therefore, the reduction of the at-risk-of-poverty rate was mainly a result of the commencement of universal child benefit payment in 2018, increased pension and state-supported income, and other changes in monetary support for deprived people.

### The most vulnerable groups

Some social groups are more sensitive to socio-economic challenges and risks and have fewer resources to successfully overcome them. Statistics show that the most vulnerable people in Lithuania in terms of at-risk of poverty are children, large families, single parents raising children, people with disabilities, old-age pensioners, single people and the unemployed.

Compared to 2018, 2019 at-risk-of-poverty rates for all groups have decreased. The largest differences are observed among large families (a decrease of 6.7 percentage points), the unemployed (a decrease of 7.9 percentage points) and old-age pensioners (a decrease of 6.6 percentage points).



# DO WE ENSURE THE SOCIAL RIGHTS OF THE POPULATION?

## PRINCIPLE 1 - EDUCATION, TRAINING AND LIFELONG LEARNING

*Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.*

*Prepared in collaboration with the National Network of Education*

### **Lifelong learning. Can we choose not to learn?**

Lifelong learning could be described as a process that takes place at any stage of a person's life, during which learning, development, acquisition of new competencies and development of various personal skills take place in various forms and ways. Lifelong learning involves a wide range of formal, non-formal learning and self-educational activities, general and vocational, in which adults engage after completing primary education and training.

Today, Lifelong Learning (LL) is not only a human right but also a necessity that can help them to maintain or change jobs, earn more, discover and critically evaluate information, communicate with others and provide help. The challenges of climate change, the transition to a green and digital economy, as well as potentially reoccurring strikes of the pandemic, require the constant updating of general and professional competencies and skills that are necessary for the further development of human, society and the country. Therefore, it is vital to effectively provide LL opportunities for persons excluded from society or persons at risk of social exclusion.

Although Lithuania is a leader in the European Union in terms of people of working age (25–64 years) with at least secondary education, so far, the country has been unable to reach the level of 2008 The Lifelong Learning Strategy aim to increase the adult lifelong learning rate to 15%. According to Eurostat data, in Lithuania in 2019, 7% of adults (25-64 years) studied during the 4 weeks before the comment of this research (EU average in 2019 – 11.3%). In the period of ten years, this indicator increased by only 2.4 percentage points, while in Estonia the number of adult learners has increased from 10.5 to 20.2%. The inclusion of older adults is even worse: less than 1% of 65-year-olds in Lithuania are studying<sup>1</sup>. According to the European Commission's report<sup>2</sup> on Lithuania, although the role of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports in coordinating adult learning has been strengthened, several ministries are still responsible for funding different means. “The

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<sup>1</sup> Network of educational NGOs, Non-formal adult education in Lithuania: situation analysis and recommendations, 2019. March 8, <<http://svietimotinklas.lt/tyrimas/nvss/>>.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission. Country report on Lithuania 2020

adult education system is not in a position to respond to the challenges posed by the ageing society and changes in skills related to innovation, job robotization and the potential demand for green jobs.”

According to research, Lithuanians lack learning awareness. 2016 Lithuanian Statistics Department data shows that 81% of respondents expressed that there is no need for further education<sup>3</sup>. People with a lower level of education, older people and the rural population are much less likely to participate in LL activities. The low interest of the population in learning and educational activities is confirmed by the fact that only 5.3% of people who didn't study wanted to study and 67 percent did not study and did not want to study; of the training participants, only 4.6 per cent wanted to participate further.

### **Inefficient lifelong learning system**

The conclusion of the evaluation report<sup>4</sup> on the quality and effectiveness of training funded by the European Social Fund states that vocational training for the unemployed, social skills training and public training on non-discrimination, social responsibility or social dialogue are inappropriate, inefficiently targeted, and ineffective for various reasons. The causes of problems experienced by the unemployed or other vulnerable groups are usually complex (e.g. lack of social and other skills is only one of many reasons for the exclusion of vulnerable groups) and training cannot be seen as a universal tool to address the complex problems of vulnerable people.

According to the report, training is not always the only appropriate way to address emerging challenges, it must be combined with other alternative or complementary activities. However, individual needs are usually not assessed and instead the person is directed to formal vocational training, which does not necessarily correspond to the person's real employability and ability to work in the field.

### **Implementation of non-formal adult education policy**

With the rapid development of technology, the constant rise of new qualification requirements in the labour market and the shift of public services and communication to virtual platforms, the importance of non-formal adult education is increasing, allowing for the rapid and flexible acquisition or development of skills.

Non-formal adult education (NAE) can be defined as an organized process involving people of all ages, responding to the various interests of society and the individual. During it, in accordance with

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<sup>3</sup> Reasons that hinder learning in formal or non-formal education. Data from the Official Statistics Portal of Statistics Lithuania <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?indicator=S3R404#/>

<sup>4</sup> Evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of training financed by the European Social Fund, final report. 2019 January 10 version Vilnius, UAB Visionary Analytics <https://www.visionary.lt/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/galutine-ataskaita0110.pdf>

various curricula, adults learn the basics of literacy, life, work skills, general culture, and develop personal skills according to their needs.

In Lithuania's political agenda, non-formal adult education receives little systematic attention, therefore the formation and implementation of this system is inconsistent, often done only as a formal response to the general principles of non-formal adult education development by European institutions or to “assimilate” European Union structural funds.

Access to non-formal adult education for different population groups in various regions is different and uneven, as no guarantees are defined for funding and coordination of program implementation. As a result, NAE is dependent on the political national, cities and regional municipalities decisions, that are related to the funding and implementation of NAE programs, the diversity of NAE service providers and offers that meet the different learning needs of adult groups.

In some municipalities, the financing of the planned NAE activities is not ensured, the implementation of the NAE is chaotic, fragmented and instantaneous, the research of adult learning needs is not carried out during the implementation of EU-funded NAE projects that are looked down by ministries. In individual city municipalities, the aim is to improve the accessibility of NAE services for population groups through various service providers in the region - third-age universities, public organizations and clubs, professional academies and associations, NAE, educational centers, libraries, etc.

*“Vocational training may be offered, but it is not necessarily possible to find a job after that.”*

*“Only technical training is usually offered: plasterers, plasterers, mason workers...”*

*“Employees of the Employment Service say they have nothing to offer and just leave it to fate.”*

People experiencing poverty



## PRINCIPLE 3 - EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

*Regardless of gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, everyone has the right to equal treatment and opportunities regarding employment, social protection, education, and access to goods and services available to the public. Equal opportunities of under-represented groups shall be fostered.*

### **Limited access to social services violates the principle of equal opportunities**

Social services - services that provide assistance to a person (family) who, due to age, disability, social problems partially or fully have lost the ability or opportunities to independently take care of personal (family) life and participate in public life.<sup>5</sup>

Social services are an extremely important part of reducing poverty and social exclusion. Their goal is to empower the person by helping him/her solve problems and challenges on his or her own, and to ensure human dignity. For example, by providing social care and other services for people with disabilities or seniors, other family members can work and thus not only ensure an adequate family income but also maintain social ties, have time to take a break from caring for loved ones. In this way, other rights of people with disabilities and their relatives are guaranteed: the right to education, work, leisure, etc. Another example is services for the long-term unemployed, who eventually lose not only professional skills, but also social skills, self-confidence and motivation. Therefore, they need individual social services, including vocational counselling, psychological support, general skills development, job retention assistance and a range of other services that meet individual needs.

Despite the growing importance of social services, there are many problems in the field of social services. In 2020 report to Lithuania, the European Commission notes that the risk of social exclusion is exacerbated by limited access to public services. There is an increasing focus on the poor quality of services and the limited availability of such services in the country. Due to the severe lack of services, individuals have to wait in long queues, sometimes for longer than half a year, to get access to the services they need.

There are many problems in the social services system: gaps in the regulation of social services, lack of specialists, underdeveloped network of institutions, especially in the regions, lack of information dissemination, fragmentation of municipal services planning and needs assessment, lack of inter-institutional cooperation. In this review, we will discuss the key regulatory gaps in social services.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/socialine-integracija/socialines-paslaugos-ir-socialinis-darbas/kas-yra-socialines-paslaugos>

## **Gaps in the regulation of social services in Lithuania**

In Lithuania, the main document ensuring the management, appointment and provision of social services is the Law on Social Services. Meanwhile, the content and types of social services and types of social service institutions are defined by the Directory of Social Services adopted in 2006. Municipalities and social service providers must follow this when planning their services. Although the current directory is constantly being supplemented with new services, it does not correspond to the realities of providing social services today, it becomes confusing and eclectic, and most importantly, it does not meet the needs of the population and restricts the accessibility of services.

First, the directory of social services provides a list of social services. Some of the provided are defined very narrowly. According to the directory, service providers - budgetary, municipal institutions or non-governmental organizations - cannot always meet the needs of the population, because **often the services they need are simply not in the directory**. In addition, it hinders the possibility of the emergence of innovation in the field of services, as those services that are not in the directory are usually simply not funded. As a result, organizations often do not provide new services, or they do so for free.

The accessibility of services is also severely limited by the exhaustive lists of target groups indicated for each service listed in the directory. Therefore, services can be provided only to those persons who, according to their social status, are among the specified target groups.

**In reality, however, this means discrimination and a breach of the principle of equal opportunities. Very often, individuals are unable to access services simply because they are not among the identified potential recipients of the service, despite having certain needs.** For example, the directory of social services includes the service “work with youth in the streets”, so the target group of the service would be young people who have fewer opportunities. In this case, the specified target group restricts the possibilities of providing services to people in the streets that belong to other age groups, for example, homeless adults, despite there being a high demand for this service.

The directory of social services also provides potential providers for each service, which again limits and prevents the emergence of new providers. This way, the conditions aren't being provided for the expansion of the network of service providers and for the increase of the availability of services throughout the country.

Thus, the existing practice of regulating social services in Lithuania is not aimed at the individual needs of the population, as required by international standards. Instead, the provision of services is extremely inflexible, limited to an exhaustive list of services, pre-defined groups of recipients in duration, providers. At the same time, the principle of equal opportunities is being violated - some people do not have access to the services they need. In the long run, this has severe consequences – human rights are being violated, we are falling behind in terms of international trends in services and the issues of poverty and social exclusion are essentially not being resolved.

*“The service of a personal assistant is provided from the age of 18 until the age of 65. After that you have to pay for it.”*

Personal assistant

*“My friend wanted to accommodate her mother in a retirement home. She learned about this possibility from her friend. When she went to the municipality to ask for more information, the employee asked “and how did you find out that this could be done?”*

*“People are active, they want to get services, but employees [municipalities] say there are too few people so the service cannot be provided.”*

People experiencing poverty

## PRINCIPLE 11 - CHILD CARE AND SUPPORT TO CHILDREN

*Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality.*

*Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.*

### **The lack of services for children and young people pushes them into a deeper exclusion**

Child poverty and social exclusion are one of the most painful phenomena. Research reveals that child poverty has a negative impact on a child's development, often being closely linked to malnutrition and poorer health. The achievements of children growing up in poor families are also significantly lower than those of children from more affluent families. The consequences of deprivation are also felt once they grow up, especially in terms of employment opportunities and income. Social disadvantage is often passed down from generation to generation. Thus, investing in prevention, which must begin in early childhood, is a key element of any poverty reduction strategy.

It is important to note that children of different ages face different challenges, so it makes sense to differentiate between age groups: children under 12 years old and older. In this section, we will focus on social services with a focus on helping children and young people experiencing poverty or social exclusion.

In order to find out what challenges organizations that provide services to children face, in 2020 July- August, LNAPN conducted a survey in **non-governmental children's day care centers (CDCC)**. 63 respondents took part in the survey. 62 percent of these operates in the urban area, 33 percent - rural, and 5 percent - in urban and rural areas. The survey consisted of three blocks of questions: what challenges children and low-income families face, what problems does the CDCC notice in the area of children and family policy, and how their work has been altered by the period of quarantine.

### **Challenges for children and families**

The main challenges for children and families identified by workers in children day care centers were: lack of parental skills, poverty and deprivation. The lack of parental and social skills was mentioned by as many as 94% of respondents. Unfortunately, social "elevators" do not work in Lithuania: the employees of the organizations notice that the parents often grew up in an unfavorable social environment and did not have a role model or appropriate help in the family. Parents are often unable to build a relationship with their children, communicate only minimally, and do not care about their emotional state, hygiene, occupation. CDCC staff notices that this is often related to unidentified mental disorders. Often there is physical or psychological violence.

Nearly half of the organizations singled out addiction problems that are noticed not only among adults but also among children.

Poverty and deprivation in families were mentioned by 65% organizations surveyed. Employees note that families are often unable to afford not just computers, phones, learning tools, but they sometimes run out of funds even for food. Nearly a third of organizations noted that children face bullying, especially if they are growing up in deprivation or belong to ethnic minority groups.

### **Gaps in children and family policy in Lithuania**

Families facing poverty and social exclusion are in affective critical need of a social security system. However, children's day care centers point out a number of problems in the area of children and family policy. **The main problems are related to adequate housing accessibility and the lack of social and transport services.** 56 percent of organizations noted that families often live in inadequate, overcrowded housing: they often share a room with several siblings, often with parents and grandparents.

51 percent of respondents noted that one of the main problems is the under-development of social services. The staff of the children's day care centers emphasize that the services that are lacking the most are the services of a psychologist, good-quality occupation and specialized assistance during and after school. More attention should be paid to children with special needs: there is a lack of speech therapists, special educators. Also, the limited funding of the CDCC does not provide opportunities to fund enough professionals who could provide more intensive and personalized services to children and families (e.g., a psychologist).

CDCC staff notes that there is a lack of interdepartmental cooperation in the provision of services (48%): both between educational and social service institutions, and between service organizers - municipalities - and service providers. Families experiencing difficulty also sometimes lack information on what services they are eligible for or where to request them, and the relevant authorities do not always point them in the right direction. Among other things, the lack of services for families is closely linked to the challenges of balancing family and work, with 48% respondents pointing this out as one of the main problems.

It is also a matter of concern that children who end up attending children's day care centers often do not have access to services appropriate to their age group, such as access to youth centers, open youth spaces, and so on. (incl. see "Youth facing the street situation"). This problem is especially relevant in the regions - almost half of the representatives of CDCC working in rural areas noted that there is a lack of services for young people and the end of CDCC for them is the end of occupation and other social services.

Organizations also cite a lack of transport services (49%), especially in rural areas. Lack of transport and unavailability of transport services are often associated with parental unemployment. It also limits the availability of social and educational services for children: for this reason, some children do not attend pre-school education institutions and do not have the opportunity to attend non-

formal education activities. Poor transport connections make families even more socially excluded and deprive children of their rights and access to services. Other problems identified by staff: lack of computers and / or internet connection, lack of access to housing, lack of after-school education, low quality of education, insufficient financial support.

### **The consequences of COVID-19 and challenges experienced by organizations during the quarantine**

The pandemic has undoubtedly had a negative impact on families. **57 percent of organizations have noted a decline in family incomes due to the Covid-19 pandemic.** 38 percent of organizations noted that a percentage of parents lost their jobs, and due to the reduced income in the families as well as the closure of schools and children's day care centers, the children lacked food (48%).

54 percent of organizations noted that children were not provided with access to distance learning, especially due to the lack of technical means (computers, internet). Families living in cramped housing also experienced difficulties when children did not have suitable spaces to participate in the teaching process. Often children were unable to connect to distance learning platforms on their own, and parents were unable to help them due to a lack of computer literacy. All of this made the learning process more difficult and children growing up in disadvantaged environments faced even greater barriers. Gaps formed during the quarantine may emerge in the future.

49 percent. half of the respondents also note that one of the main challenges was social isolation. Families lacked privacy, lacked personal space and time to take a break. There emerged some friction among family members, conflicts appeared as well as unconstructive solutions to them. **51 percent noted worsened emotional and psychological state in families.** Signs of depression, desire to withdraw from everything, apathy, increased risk of addictions have been observed more and more often.

The staff of children's day care centers note that the organizations themselves faced significant challenges in ensuring the continuity of services: methodological assistance and protection measures were lacking. It was extremely difficult to provide services remotely due to the lack of technical possibilities, uncertainty about the future, lack of knowledge and experience. Due to the increase in the abundance of problems, the changed nature of work, the workload of employees has significantly increased, and the need for the services of a psychologist has increased, what is still being felt today.

The work of most organizations during quarantine has changed significantly. In the event of food shortages, organizations began to deliver food rations, medications, and other support, remotely counselled children and even parents about homework, and prepared additional assignments. They provided psychological assistance, organized household, hygiene and safety product supplies and computer supplies.

In terms of co-operation with municipalities during quarantine, the experience of organizations differed, but most rated it positively: there was a more active focus on non-governmental organizations, municipalities were proactive in providing social services, and inter-agency co-operation was strengthened. Unfortunately, there were municipalities where cooperation was sluggish.

*“Children’s learning was very affected [during the pandemic]. I couldn’t buy a tablet for everyone, they had phones. It was said that they [schools] will give the tablets, but it did not happen. The school allocated them, but they had to be returned.”*

*“I would go to work, but we do not have a kindergarten in our area. We cannot enter the kindergarten in the city because our place of residence is not declared in the city. It also means that the transport service can’t be provided. So, there’s a kindergarten, but my children can’t really attend.”*

Woman experiencing poverty

## **Young people facing the street situation**

*Prepared in cooperation with Vilnius Social Club*

In Lithuania, young people remain one of the most vulnerable groups in society, to which insufficient attention is paid. Young people face serious challenges in the education system, in the labour market, and social services tailored to their needs do not exist or are not accessible. Some of these young people can be met on the streets or in public spaces.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child proposes to abandon the term “street children/youth” and replace it with the less stigmatizing term “children/young people facing the street situation”, which more accurately reflects this phenomenon of life. This term describes everyone, children and young people, who: periodically or always live and/or work on the street alone with peers or with their family. So is everyone who does not live or work on the street but has a strong connection to public spaces and for whom the street plays a vital role in their daily lives and identities. The “presence in public spaces” of children and young people is understood as spending time in streets, public parks, public community spaces, squares and bus and train stations.

One of the main factors why young people experience a street situation is poverty, but other factors are no less important:

- difficulties in the family: loss, addiction, various forms of violence, the experience of rejection for so-called “moral” reasons;
- pressure to engage in criminal activities;
- mental health problems;
- young people's addictions;
- urbanization processes.

There is a general agreement that young people in a street situation are not a homogeneous group. This means that they find themselves in a street situation for different reasons and have different needs. On the street we can meet groups of young people who spend time there because they have no other spaces to meet their peers, young people who have fled their homes, young people experiencing violence and violations of children's rights, young people in subcultures, young people that belong to national minorities, young single mothers, young survivors of homelessness, etc.

### **The lack of youth policy in Lithuania**

Youth policy in Lithuania is problematic in its horizontal nature; The challenges and problems of young people are addressed by many ministries - social, educational, cultural, health, national defense, but it remains unclear who takes full responsibility for the specific problems of young people's lives, such as the development and adaptation of services to young people's needs.



Another important problem is that after the centralization of the child rights system, interdepartmental and inter-institutional cooperation meetings on the basis of elderships have disappeared. Interdepartmental and inter-institutional cooperation must be implemented not only in the case management process when a particular child or young person is going through a period of crisis, but also regularly when different parties consult, coordinate and monitor the overall situation in a specific area.

In Lithuania, special attention should be paid to the following problems faced by young people in a street situation:

**Young people experiencing homelessness.** The usual services provided by hostels are not suitable for this age group, as the emotional and physical safety of a young person isn't ensured there. Young people avoid places with a bad reputation, do not identify themselves with people with long experience of homelessness, so they prefer to seek shelter with friends and acquaintances, thus often migrating from one place to another. In Lithuania, young people experiencing homelessness are mostly children raised in the care system. In Lithuania, it is necessary to follow the "housing first" approach when creating non-existent specialized services for young people in a homelessness situation.

A safe environment and the right to public space are natural human rights, therefore one of the main problems in Lithuania is the **lack of infrastructure** for youth. It is extremely important for young people living in poverty to have an environment where they could socialize with their peers and feel safe. Open sports courts and stadiums that are open to everyone 24 hours a day, 7 days a week are a good practice. It is obligatory to stop the tendency that is prevailing in Lithuania, when the spaces for sports, which are mostly located near schools, are renovated and illuminated, but the access is then restricted with fences and / or locks. The concentration of youth-friendly spaces (skateboard parks, open youth spaces and centers, etc.) in urban or district centers, bypassing neighborhoods and rural areas, is also worrying.

Another problem is the education system, which does not respond to the needs of young people who experience difficulties. The education system is still unable to build a strong relationship with a young person who is experiencing difficulties in his life – has behavioral, emotional or mental health difficulties, experiences social difficulties in the family or among peers. In vocational education institutions and public schools, work imitation when working with young people in difficulty remains a common phenomenon, as they remain solely for "pupil's basket". For young people in a street situation, quality vocational training is more of an exception rather than being real, affordable option.

**Identification and resolution of youth problems.** In Lithuania, the problems faced by young people remain underestimated or understood as insignificant. The state still does not have a well-developed service for young people (open youth centers, open youth spaces, work with street youth, mobile work with youth), municipal funding is insufficient to ensure quality services, and young people are not involved to participate in the addressal of specific issues in local communities.

## **Covid-19 quarantine and key challenges faced by organizations**

The main problem for young people was the distance learning system. Young people in a street situation who had a conflicting or fragmented relationship with their school even before the quarantine distanced themselves even further away from learning during the quarantine. Other young people lacked a suitable environment, means to qualitatively complete tasks (Internet, computer), and the help of a tutor.

Fines were imposed on young people for clustering in public places. Often young people who find themselves in a street situation see the street as a safe space and their survival strategy. Fining young people for flocking to public spaces poses further exclusion and financial problems. It is the duty of the state to try to protect and help such young people, not to punish them.

The availability of information about the threats of the pandemic was also problematic. Young people were often unaware of the new rules or the need to wear masks and use disinfectants. A large proportion of young people in the street situation have been and continue to be affected by conspiracy theories. The organizations sought to help and reach these groups of young people through direct communication and the provision of necessary information and measures.

Lack of food was another major problem that CDCC was trying to address - ensuring food rations for each family member as needed.

*"Maybe it's possible to open [the stadium] if we would ask nicely? It was great to spend the time in the stadium. Now we spend time by the swings. But sometimes parents come with little children and send us away"*

12-year-old

## PRINCIPLE 17 - INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

*People with disabilities have the right to income support that ensures living in dignity, services that enable them to participate in the labour market and in society, and a work environment adapted to their needs.*

*Prepared in cooperation with the Forum of Lithuanian Disability Organizations*

### **The challenges of the inclusion of people with disabilities**

People with disabilities are one of the most vulnerable groups in Lithuania. In 2019 The at-risk-of-poverty rate for people with disabilities was 31.3%. Meanwhile, people without disabilities - 15.2 percent.

In order to find out what challenges people with disabilities are facing in 2020, in July-August, LNAPN together with the Lithuanian Disability Organizations Forum (LDOF) conducted a survey of organizations providing services to people with disabilities. The survey involved 49 organizations that operate throughout Lithuania: 55 percent of them work in the urban area, 12 percent -rural, and 33 percent. - both urban and rural. The organizations participating in the survey work with various disability groups: physical, intellectual, psychosocial, visual, auditory and complex. Most, i.e. two-thirds of the organizations surveyed work with adults with disabilities. The survey consisted of three blocks of questions: what challenges do people with disabilities and their families face, what problems do people with disabilities organizations see in the field of disability policy, and how has their work been changed by the quarantine period.

### **Challenges faced by people with disabilities and their relatives**

Respondents identify the challenges faced by people with disabilities. A survey in organizations confirm statistics: **one of the most frequently mentioned problem is the financial deprivation of disabled people and their families.** Due to unsuited jobs, lack of services in helping find employment, discrimination at work and in the education system, people with disabilities face significant challenges in the labour market. Unemployment is high, and in many cases, it is only possible to find employment in unskilled, low-paid jobs. In addition, the lack of services often reduces the income of family members of people with disabilities, mostly mothers. When they take care of their loved ones, they often drop out of the labour market or choose more flexible but often less paid forms of work. It is important to mention that the financial costs for people with disabilities are often higher than usual due to their need for medicines, technical equipment, services, etc. These expenses sometimes exceed the real family income, and some families have debts.

**Social exclusion faced by both people with disabilities and their families.** Without an adapted environment and without access to the necessary services, people lack not just real opportunities to participate in the labour market or education, but also in social life: social ties are broken, people experience loneliness, mental health deteriorates. No social or other general skills are being developed. People with disabilities, especially children, face bullying. At the same time, self-confidence decreases, feelings of inferiority rise, and in the long run, the motivation to return to both the labour market and social life decreases.

### **The gaps in the policy of working with disabled people**

In terms of state aid, social services and adequate financial support are lacking the most: 57% of organizations mentioned that one of the biggest problems is underdeveloped social services, 53 per cent. organizations singled out inadequate financial support. There is a great lack of personal assistant services, which would help people with disabilities to become more independent in their daily lives and thus open the door to the labour market for some people with disabilities or their families, provide better social life opportunities.

Children with disabilities lack occupation during the day, while people with disabilities and their relatives lack the services of a psychologist and time to relax. Organizations also emphasize that services that develop occupational and employment skills aren't ensured for people with disabilities. Some of the currently organized services include only cultural and entertainment activities. While these services are also very important, **it is important to further develop services that promote integration into the labour market.** These services should include the development of specific work skills as well as general competencies, recruitment mediation, accompanying employment assistance, motivation support, etc. Among other things, there is a significant shortage of social workers and other professionals who speak sign language.

In the field of education, there is a concern about the lack of inclusive education: not all schools are ready to accept children with disabilities. There is a lack of specialists who are able to respond to special needs, there is a great shortage of teaching assistants, speech therapists and sign language teachers. Tasks at school are also not always adapted for children with disabilities. The adult education system for people with disabilities also highlights unattractive specialities or skill-building programs that are later difficult to put into practice.

53 percent of respondents noted that there is still a significant lack of adaptation of the physical environment. This limits employment opportunities, participation in education, cultural activities, complicates everyday life, and often limits access to social or even health services. The lack of transport services and the unsuitability of public transport were highlighted (51%).

Attention should be paid to the adaptation of the information environment (41%). These challenges are most often seen by organizations working with people with visual, hearing, or intellectual disabilities. With the increasing shift of information and services to the Internet, it is more difficult

for people with disabilities to find relevant information, get the help they need or even register with a doctor. There is a growing need for information and computer literacy services.

Inaccessible health care services were also highlighted (45% of respondents), for example, it is difficult to obtain the necessary rehabilitation procedures, some health care institutions are wheelchair inaccessible, there is a lack of specialists who know the specifics of disability and lack of adapted medical equipment. Lack of compensatory technical measures (41%), lack of adapted housing (35%), lack of computers and internet connection (22%) are also mentioned.

### **Consequences of COVID-19**

Covid-19 has significantly worsened the daily lives of people with disabilities and their relatives. Some organizations note that the pandemic has brought new challenges and heightened existing problems: often deteriorating psychological conditions are noticed, as well as worse access to health services (especially for people with disabilities), social isolation and the challenges of balancing family and work.

**82 percent of respondents noted that one of the main challenges during quarantine was social isolation, and 84 percent - worsened emotional and psychological condition of people with disabilities.** Very often, people with disabilities experience loneliness and social exclusion, and they become even more vulnerable during the quarantine. For many individuals, the usual social services have been interrupted. The challenges caused by service restriction were highlighted by 47% of organizations. Due to the high risk of developing Covid-19, people with disabilities could not go to work, had to limit contact with relatives. Restrictions on the provision of services have placed an additional burden, including psychological one, on the relatives of people with disabilities. People with mental or mental disabilities were even more emotionally and psychologically vulnerable during the quarantine.

Organizations also highlighted challenges related to the restriction of medical services, which had a significant impact on the health status of people with disabilities. People could not get the health services they needed, some suffered increased pain. Often, telephone consultations with physicians were not effective.

**Among other things, due to the lack of opportunities to participate in the labour market and, in the case of family members, caring for relatives with disabilities, the income of some families decreased** (53%). Food shortages were also felt (22%).

During the pandemic, services and information moved rapidly into the Internet, but several organizations mentioned lack of resources and poor IT literacy of some people with disabilities, which deprived the group of the opportunity to communicate or access services remotely during the pandemic.

The organizations themselves faced challenges during the quarantine. **The main emphasis is on the lack of measures for protection.** Some organizations point out that there was a lack of outlets to purchase them, others point out that there was a lack of funds. The lack of methodological

assistance is also highlighted. Many organizations have been forced to change the nature of their activities during the quarantine. Providing services remotely was challenging when customers did not have either a telephone or the Internet. Workloads increased significantly, employees worked overtime: the volume of psychological assistance, emotional support, information about the situation in the context of the pandemic, additional food and necessary medicines increased. Only a small number of organizations temporarily suspended their services.

A large part of the interviewed organizations assessed the cooperation with the municipality during the quarantine as negative: there was a lack of communication and cooperation. In most cases, assistance was limited, there was a lack of funding for the increased demand for services, and measures for protection were not provided. Another part of the organizations stated that the cooperation with the municipality had not changed or even strengthened, they planned and worked together.

*“The municipality receives the lift but their financing is very limited and they only offer the cheapest option.”*

*“I have a disability, everyone thinks that everyone is waiting for us with outstretched arms, but this is not the case.”*

People with disabilities

## PRINCIPLE 18 - LONG - TERM CARE

*Everyone has the right to affordable long-term care services of good quality, in particular home-care and community-based services*

*Prepared in the context of cooperation between the Home help service and the Order of Malta Relief Organization*

### **Growing demand for long - term care services**

Long-term care services could be described as a balance between nursing and social services as a whole. In providing these services, the person is given permanent comprehensive specialist assistance and care in the person's home or care institution. The goal of long-term care is to facilitate a person to live independently and wholesomely in the community and at home for as long as possible, to ensure the planning and provision of appropriate nursing and social services in order to prevent exacerbation of disease or progression of existing symptoms, taking into account family needs and opportunities.

The need for long-term care services is gradually growing. According to the data of the Lithuanian Department of Statistics, at the beginning of 2020, more than 500 thousand people who lived in Lithuania were 65 and older. That's almost 20 percent of the entire population of Lithuania. Seniors living in regions, especially small villages or single farms, face not only the lack of access to social services. It is difficult for them to ensure access to vital services. The income of such seniors is usually low, and the nearest store or medical facility can only be reached with the help of private carriers, which is also pretty expensive.

As society ages, the need for social and health services increases in a person's area of residence, which is still not being met in a way that allows a person to live in dignity until the last moment of life. The nature of the disability, the person's marital and financial situation, and the health situation are closely related to the needs of social services. Due to their limited independence, it is usually difficult for these people to deal with various household, health, education, employment issues and to participate in public life. Although the at-risk-of-poverty rate for retirees has decreased this year compared to last year, this age group is still at the highest risk of poverty. In 2018 the average old-age pension (EUR 311.5) was significantly below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold (EUR 379). This shows that pensions in Lithuania are far too low to allow living in dignity. Expenditures on medicine, utilities, heating, food and other goods often exceed monthly income.

## **A growing need for personal assistance in the immediate environment**

It is important to emphasize that the majority of seniors want to live in their home for as long as possible, regardless of their state of health, therefore they are often determined to be cared for by relatives and family members. Not surprisingly, as society ages, the need for personal assistance in the immediate environment increases. Integrated help services are one of the options that are available. These services consist of two parts: day care in the person's home and nursing in the person's home. It is important that the purpose of integrated assistance is to create conditions for a person to live at his home and stay in the community for as long as possible, to ensure proper planning and provision of social care and nursing services, to strengthen a person's abilities and independence, to maintain social relations with family members and community. Unfortunately, the needs of state-provided integrated assistance service, as well as other services for seniors, are not being met, so the families have to wait in line for services. The experience of LNAPN members shows that individuals have to wait for 6-8 months, and sometimes even more.

As the current network of services does not fully meet the needs of older people, relatives and family members are forced to find their own solutions. Often, one of the alternatives is to look for private social service organizations, that, unfortunately, are usually only located in big cities. Otherwise, the relatives themselves take care of the seniors and withdraw from the labour market. In this case, new problems develop: the total family income decreases, social ties are broken in the long run, long-term unemployment occurs, and with it a number of other social challenges.

## **Challenges faced in the context of long - term care services**

It is important to pay attention to the fact that the main goal of long-term care is to allow a person to live in his house as long as possible. However, in addition to the challenges already mentioned, the following issues remain:

**Inconsistency of services** - social services are congested in big cities or larger towns, and older people who live in remote areas are unable to access services due to distance. One of the most frequently mentioned problems faced by recipients of social services is the lack of transportation and integrated assistance.

**Inaccessibility of services** - the main (and often the only) providers of home services are municipalities, budgetary institutions, which are not always able to respond flexibly and promptly to the need for new services. Often individuals have to wait for services for several months before being able to choose another service provider. Due to gaps in the planning and financing of social services for the non-governmental sector it is difficult to get involved in the service delivery mechanism, so services are monopolized and concentrated in the hands of municipalities and budgetary institutions. As a result, the quality of services is affected, and the development of the service network is prevented.

**Lack of a holistic social and health system** - social and health care services are closely interrelated, however, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania and



the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania, which supervises them, often do not coordinate the regulation of services. This leads to non-coordinated legislations on the provision of services, that do not complement and sometimes contradict each other. For example, there is still no agreement on who should change diapers: either an individual care professional who is a social worker or a nurse's assistant who is a health worker.

**Difficulty in obtaining outpatient care license.** Home care services are licensed personal health care services provided in a person's home. The main goal is to meet the patient's nursing needs at home and to promote self-care. These services can only be provided by institutions that have a personal health care license for outpatient care services at home, unfortunately, the licensing procedure is unreasonably complicated. For example, an institution wishing to start providing care at a person's home must have facilities for staff in medical, residential (for various social groups) or hotel buildings, although care will only be provided in patients' homes. It is such requirements that make it extremely difficult to obtain an outpatient care license and limit the availability of services.

**Dependence of funding on structural projects.** A large part of long-term care services currently provided is currently funded by the EU Structural Funds, but such funding models are not sustainable and there is a risk that the cessation of these services will also lead to the cessation of these services.

*"I planned to go abroad, but I gave up and chose my mother. I have buried my mother now. My friends turned away. I am left alone with my troubles and problems."*

Woman experiencing poverty

*"Thank God you came. We thought we would not get any services. We filled in the documents 7 months ago."*

Person who received long-term services

*I don't understand anything. No one explains either where to turn or what to ask. How should I know it? But when you just explained it, I understand.*

Woman who's relative received long-term services

*People wait a long time for services if they are integrated services. We have cases when they pass away while waiting for these services.*

NGO employee

## PRINCIPLE 19 - HOUSING AND ASSISTANCE FOR THE HOMELESS

- a. Access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality shall be provided for those in need.*
- b. Vulnerable people have the right to appropriate assistance and protection against forced eviction.*
- c. Adequate shelter and services shall be provided to the homeless in order to promote their social inclusion.*

*Prepared in cooperation with the Caritas Temporary House of the Vilnius Archdiocese*

### **Homelessness is a growing problem in Lithuania and the European Union**

The problem of homelessness, despite the improving indicators of poverty in the European Union and Lithuania, is not decreasing but is growing. Homelessness has been rising steadily in the 24 Member States of the European Union over the last decade. According to research, it is estimated that at least 700,000 people in the EU experience homelessness every day, i.e. 70% more than a decade ago ([www.feantsa.org](http://www.feantsa.org)).

The definition of homelessness in the European Union can vary, making it difficult to compare homelessness statistics between countries. In Lithuania, homelessness is defined rather narrowly, i.e. associated only with living in temporary accommodation. The methodology<sup>6</sup> of the 2021 Population and Housing Census of the Republic of Lithuania defines a homeless person as a person who does not have a permanent place of residence and funds (does not work) to rent or buy at least minimal housing space and whose place of residence is a hostel or social service unit that provides temporary accommodation services. **Therefore, some people living outdoors, in non-residential buildings, etc., are not included in the homelessness data.**

In Lithuania, the number of homeless persons using the services of temporary residence institutions, **from 2010 to 2018 increased by about 40 percent.** The number of homeless persons who received accommodation services in a hostel in 2018 increased up to 3007 persons, compared to 2017 - 2494 persons. According to the data from 2010 of the Statistical Yearbook of Lithuania, 2142 people lived in the hostel during that year. The number of people receiving services in crisis centres for mothers with children is also growing - from 1,530 persons in 2017 to 1,799 individuals in 2018.

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<sup>6</sup> Methodology of the General Population and Housing Census of the Republic of Lithuania in 2021. [https://osp.stat.gov.lt/documents/10180/4432752/Gyv\\_surasyimo\\_metodika\\_2020.pdf](https://osp.stat.gov.lt/documents/10180/4432752/Gyv_surasyimo_metodika_2020.pdf)

The growing number of homeless people in the context of a booming economy shows that social exclusion remains a major challenge and that measures don't reach the most vulnerable and those living in extreme poverty, and that social protection rights are not being effectively enforced.

### **Housing and support in the event of homelessness is a human right**

The individual's right to housing is one of the fundamental social and economic rights of the individual. The European Pillar of Social Rights obliges EU member states, including Lithuania, to ensure the right to housing and support for the homeless. In accordance with United Nations 11.1 Goal of sustainable development, Lithuania is committed to ensuring that by 2030, everyone has access to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services.

Under the aforementioned European Pillar of Social Rights, those most in need are entitled to quality social housing or housing assistance, but the situation regarding access to housing for vulnerable groups is improving very slowly. According to the data, in 2015 the funding allocated by Lithuania for the provision of housing to the socially vulnerable population was one of the lowest in the European Union<sup>8</sup>, and the number of people in line has hardly decreased in the last 4 years. In 2019 in the queue for social housing, 10993 persons (families) were waiting. Comparing the situation with 2018, it even worsened slightly, with 10,486 households waiting for housing support that year.<sup>7</sup>

The aim is to improve the situation through alternative measures to social housing, such as compensation for part of the rent for housing, which has been in force since 2015, but they are not as effective as expected or originally planned. The situation seems particularly difficult in the case of a one-person household, as is often the case with homeless people living in temporary accommodation. In terms of household composition, the at-risk-of-poverty rate is highest among single-person households. Their at-risk-of-poverty rate is 46.3%, and the current support through social benefits has little significance for their situation - without social benefits, the at-risk-of-poverty rate for this group would increase by only 2.4 percentage points. Housing rent compensation is least effective in the case of one person (a person without a family). Due to relatively low rent compensation, their share of rent compensation was the lowest (19.4%), compared to 41% for three-person families and 66% for 8-person families. Also, social housing is more difficult for one-person households to access - single persons (general list) in 2019 accounted for about 50% of all those waiting for social housing. They may have to wait 20 years or more for social housing.

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<sup>7</sup> SADM, 2018 [https://socmin.lrv.lt/uploads/socmin/documents/files/veiklos-sritys/socialine-integracija/bustas/1\\_2018-07-01%20About%20laukian%C4%8Dius%20paramos%20b%C5%ABstui%20i%C5%A1sinuomoti.pdf](https://socmin.lrv.lt/uploads/socmin/documents/files/veiklos-sritys/socialine-integracija/bustas/1_2018-07-01%20About%20laukian%C4%8Dius%20paramos%20b%C5%ABstui%20i%C5%A1sinuomoti.pdf)

### **It is necessary to provide social services for the homeless**

Rental properties for people in poverty and homelessness are not easily accessible in the market. The European Pillar of Social Rights states that the promotion of social inclusion includes adequate shelter and services. Thus, adequate and dignified accommodation services must go hand in hand with other support that a person needs. This is a vital principle that seeks to enable people to reach their potential and to tackle homelessness in a real way.

In Lithuania, there is a lack of systematic, coordinated operation of the service system that aims to actually reduce the number of homeless people and thus solve the problem of homelessness. Currently, the homelessness situation is more manageable than resolved, i.e. the aim of the current system is to meet the basic needs of homeless people, to feed and give them a bed to sleep in, but there is no clear aim for these people to become 'not-homeless'. A social assistance system for a homeless person cannot rely solely on general social services if it aims to reduce the problem of homelessness in real terms and not just to manage it. And existing special services targeted at the homeless are ineffective to solve the problem or inaccessible to people with complex needs such as addictions, mental illness and so on. Social services that do not respond to existing needs, a lack of access to them, insufficient provision of affordable, high-quality housing and discrimination are all major obstacles to the social inclusion of the homeless.

### **Consequences of Covid-19**

Lack of access to services and systematic lack of concern for those in homelessness was also felt during the Covid-19 quarantine. In many countries of the European Union, additional temporary shelters have been created to take care of people in homelessness, bans on evictions have come into force, and so on. All this was done in order to ensure that no one was forced to live on the street, but also to prevent the spread of the virus in institutions where people were housed very densely, such as in temporary accommodation places.

In Lithuania, there was an impression that people living on the streets or newly homeless people were completely forgotten, and all responsibility was shifted to the institutions providing services. It was limited to recommendations to the institutions on how they should ensure that the people living there did not become infected and spread the virus, which resulted in institutions tightening up their internal rules. For example, if a person has left the institution without permission - he can no longer return. The fact that people could find themselves in a homeless situation even during quarantine was also ignored. The hostel was unable to admit new people during quarantine, and even a temporary accommodation service required a certificate confirming that the person doesn't have tuberculosis, while polyclinics refused to admit people due to quarantine. As a result, homeless people have not been able to access even temporary accommodation and became even more vulnerable during the crisis.

Despite the fact that the solution of the problem of homelessness is a direct concern of municipalities, it would still be appropriate to involve the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania more actively in order to take proper care of the homeless in the presence of Covid-19 virus. Clear guidelines, recommendations for municipalities that they could flexibly adapt to the current situation - how to (re) structure existing services, as well as what new temporary services to create - in order to create respectable conditions, so that people receiving hostel services would not get the virus, and that all people in a homeless situation could exercise their right to social security and housing.

The challenges of housing exclusion and growing homelessness need to be addressed through integrated and sustainable solutions that include prevention and support<sup>8</sup>. It is important not to confuse social policy in tackling homelessness with goals and measures to achieve them. Social housing, hostels or other social services for the homeless are not goals in themselves. It is only a means to reach the goal. The right to adequate housing, the prevention and reduction of homelessness could be the goal of existing social policies, addressing homelessness in a real way.

*“I am raising 6 children and cannot get a house because I am not working and I do not get sufficient income. When will I get that social housing? After 3 years? After 10 years? 20? When I needed to, I couldn’t get anything. I do not have access to social housing. I applied to the municipality, but it’s the same as nothing.”*

*“The same situation is in any municipality. No matter how many children you have. You are three hundred something in a que.”*

People experiencing poverty

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<sup>8</sup> European Commission Social Protection Committee 2019 in the annual report

## PRINCIPLE 20 - ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES

*Everyone has the right to access essential services of good quality, including water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications. Support for access to such services shall be available for those in need.*

### **Transportation, energy and digital communication - still just a goal?**

When it comes to basic services, the challenges of transportation, energy poverty and digitalisation are still a concern.

#### **Lack of transport services is limiting the opportunities of the population**

Transportation systems are still not well developed in the regions and are way behind the cities. This problem is often relevant to the most vulnerable, lowest-income people, those who cannot afford to buy a car on their own. Villagers point out that buses run only a few times a day and are at best compatible only with children returning from school. During the children's summer holidays, there are cases when buses reach the villages only a few times a week, so the lack of transportation prevents work.

The same applies to the education of pre-school children - it is often unavailable precisely because parents do not have the opportunity to take their children to pre-school institutions. Municipalities often do not provide such services for pre-school children. Thus, both children and parents are forced to stay at home. Old public transport vehicles are not adapted for the disabled and people with special needs, parents with children. According to the data of the State Audit Office, only 35% of public transport is adapted for people with disabilities.<sup>9</sup>

It is also important to mention that a single ticket system is still not widespread in Lithuania, which could help individuals to purchase regular tickets at a lower price, while at the same time purchasing and using tickets in towns or larger settlements.

#### **Energy poverty**

Many people still face energy poverty. This is the level of poverty at which individuals or households are unable to heat their homes or use other energy services: it is difficult or impossible to ensure adequate heating or other essential energy services, such as lighting, transport or electricity for the Internet or other devices. Unfortunately, in 2019 even 26.8 percent of households could not afford to heat their homes sufficiently, while 14 percent of individuals live in homes with dripping roofs, damp walls, rotten windows, or floors. It is important to understand that living in such housing

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.vkontrole.lt/failas.aspx?id=4114>

increases the risk of various diseases, and often, in order to save, individuals are forced to choose between good-quality food, heat or health. On the other hand, energy poverty is also linked to indebtedness, as low-income people face difficulties in paying their bills on time. With high indebtedness, individuals are at risk of power outages and, in the worst case, evictions.

### **Digitization bypasses the elderly, the rural and the poor**

The impact of technology on everyday life is evident: public services such as claiming various benefits, issuing certificates, registering for the provision of services, counselling, and so on are quickly moving into cyberspace.

However, technological progress doesn't just open up new opportunities but also poses new challenges. One of them - digital exclusion, which is mainly linked to the gap between individuals and groups in society in terms of access to the Internet and the latest information technologies. It is important to note that what is being evaluated is not only physical access to a computer, the Internet or other technologies but also the possibilities and abilities of a person to use them. These barriers are often inherent in lower-income earners, pushing them into even deeper exclusion.

Lithuania has long been proud to have the fastest internet both in Europe and around the world, and public internet access is available to most people<sup>10</sup>. According to the survey data on the use of information technologies in households, it can be observed that in 2019, 82% of households had internet access, while 77% of people had personal computers at home. It is great that these indicators are improving every year, but unfortunately, compared to the Baltic countries, Lithuania's indicators are still among the lowest<sup>13</sup>. Unfortunately, the indicators also show that obvious difference between cities and regions remains in the city, 79% and 83% of households had computers and Internet access at home, respectively, and in rural areas - 71 percent and 78 percent.

The digital divide is becoming a serious barrier to employment: the use of computers, the Internet and other technologies are now commonplace in many workplaces. Without the Internet and the computer, everyday tasks at work become hard to imagine. It is common for potential employees to use basic computer software as well. Internet accessibility indicators, as well as the experience of non-governmental organizations, reveal that there is a large digital divide between vulnerable groups and the rest of society.

### **Consequences of COVID-19**

During the quarantine, the digital divide really revealed itself. When the pandemic hit, it was estimated that as many as 30,000 children did not have computers. And even when families were provided with computers, some of them did not have Internet access. Often, children in large

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index>

families had to share a single computer or even a telephone, so the children did not have a real opportunity to get involved in the learning process. Children with fewer opportunities found themselves in even greater exclusion. The same is true not only when it comes to children - the poor, the elderly, rural residents who do not have the technical or digital skills, felt even more socially isolated during the quarantine, as they had far fewer opportunities to work and communicate remotely.

In the area of energy poverty, there is an increased risk of arrears of housing and utility bills, especially among the poor.

The pandemic has severely worsened the daily lives of people who do not have their own cars. As the flow of people heavily decreased during the quarantine, long-distance public transport schedules began to change: some companies chose to partially suspend work, while others chose not to provide services at all. Thus, people living in single-family homes or settlements without supermarkets, pharmacies, or other facilities that are necessary for basic needs have faced considerable challenges.

*Lack of transport is worrying, especially fit for people with disabilities. There is a "social taxi", but it is just one. I can't get it even once a month. The need is so big because people have to be taken to dialysis. So you can't just call it if you need some sort of entertainment.*

Person experiencing poverty



## KEY CHANGES IN ATTEMPTS TO REDUCE POVERTY IN 2020

In 2020 the main changes are related to universal child benefit, pensions, the growth of minimum wage and support for the most deprived.

Universal child benefit increased from 50 to 60 euros. The supplementary benefit for children from low-income, large families or children with disabilities has been increased from 20 to 40 euros. Free school meals have also been introduced for all (pre-schoolers) and first graders.

In, 2020 the minimum monthly gross wage increased from € 555 to € 607.

It is also planned that due to the indexation old-age and lost ability to work pensions will increase by more than 9 percent in 2020 and will exceed wage growth for the first time. This year, the social assistance pension base also increased from 132 to 140 euros.

The key changes in 2020 were made during the quarantine. Most of them focused on short-term assistance during the crisis, such as sickness benefit for parents caring for young children, subsidies during downtime, € 257 benefit for the self-employed.

Taking into consideration that only one-third of the unemployed registered with the Employment Service are entitled to unemployment social insurance benefit, a temporary job seeker's allowance was introduced during the quarantine. In order to protect those who have lost their jobs from a sudden drop or loss of income, a temporary job search allowance of € 200 has been introduced for a maximum of 6 months until the end of 2020.

Long-term changes have been introduced in the minimum income system. The amount of benefits has been increased: for a single person, the benefit has been increased by € 50 for the first half of the year, and for a family of three by € 45. Benefits after employment have also been increased: social benefits will continue to be paid at 100% for the first three months and 80 percent for the next three months, 50 percent for six months. Compensation for heating costs has also been increased. During the crisis, it was decided not to temporarily assess the assets when granting support.

In terms of social housing, waiting times for social housing are shortened initially to 5, then to 3 years. If at the end of the term the municipality will not be able to provide social housing for an individual or a family, then it will have to reimburse the actual rental price of suitable housing rented on the market.

An allowance of EUR 200 was granted to the elderly, people with disabilities, widows and orphans. One-off benefits were also provided for children: each child was paid 120 euros, and disadvantaged families with 3 or more children, children with disabilities 200 euros. Lump sums formed a significant part of the quarantine social impact reduction package, but LNAPN is determined that this amount should have been used for more sustainable solutions: increasing the smallest (benefit) pensions, ensuring continuity of services. Increasing social and monetary support for the disadvantaged is a commendable step, but it is not enough.

*“There was definitely help for the business. And retired people also had help. Even if it was a short measure it really helped someone.”*

*“Seniors, the people with disabilities got help. But it was just funny to me. I got it myself. But the quality of my life hasn’t really improved.”*

*“There was support, yes, but isn’t that support related to the upcoming elections here? We [the state] borrowed a lot of money, but won’t we have to pay higher taxes later to get the money back?”*

People experiencing poverty

# NETWORK PROPOSALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REDUCING POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

## **An action plan to reduce poverty, social exclusion and income inequality based on social rights**

The government's program must include an action plan to reduce poverty, social exclusion and income inequality based on human (social) rights. The plan must set out clear but comprehensive steps to strengthen the social protection of the citizens. The measures should respond to the recommendations of international organizations and the conditions of ratified documents: to ensure the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to follow the principles of the SDGs. To take into account EC, OECD recommendations.

Country strategy documents, such as the National Progress Plan, must reflect a balance between economic, social and environmental objectives and to ensure the sustainability of the achieved results. According to the SDGs, poverty reduction must be a top priority. Municipalities must also set the goal to themselves of reducing poverty and social exclusion by implementing social policy, providing social services, coordinating the provision of social financial support, and organizing employment increase programs.

We propose to improve the whole legislative process and to assess the social impact of the adopted legislation when initiating legislative changes or introducing new programs and measures. When making decisions, it is necessary to assess not only the need for finance but also the impact on the main social indicators of the country: the at-risk-of-poverty rate, the absolute poverty rate, the unemployment rate, etc. There is a need to strengthen the qualitative evaluation that needs to be carried out with the involvement of experts and civil society organizations working in the field. It is important to assess the compliance of legislation with national strategic and international documents, such as the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals. It is essential that these steps are taken not only at the earliest possible stage of the legislation but also throughout the decision-making process.

## **Collection of tax revenue and financing of social security**

At present, the financing of Lithuanian social security from GDP is approximately two times lower than the European Union average. The current system is unable to adequately fund social services, and inadequate levels of social benefits do not protect the population from poverty. This is also emphasized in the EC 2020 recommendations to Lithuania. It is argued that the country's ability to finance public goods and services and to reduce poverty and income inequality is limited by the low progressiveness and redistributive capacity of the tax and benefit system.

It is necessary to increase redistribution in the country and ensure the increase of funding in the social sphere, at the same time developing the financing of social services, the wages of employees providing decent social services and improving the benefits system, ensuring minimum

consumption needs. According to EC Commission and the OECD recommendations, it is essential to promote inclusive growth: improving the benefits and tax system review of the tax system of preferences, increasing tax progressivity in creating the design of the tax, which would not hurt economic growth. This would reduce income inequality and raise more funds for the state budget. These funds could be used for social purposes.

### **Reducing monetary poverty and strengthening the social protection of the citizens**

According to the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, more than a third of the registered unemployed people do not receive any income, including unemployment social insurance benefits or social benefits. For many years, this problem has been unresolved and has become particularly acute during the recent crisis. With rising unemployment, current social benefit systems fail to protect the population from unexpected loss of income. It is necessary to strengthen the protection of those who have lost their jobs by easing the conditions for receiving unemployment social insurance benefits, extending their duration, as well as creating an additional safety net. Following the end of the state-wide emergency, we propose the introduction of a permanent job search benefit, which would be an intermediate link between the unemployment social insurance benefit and the social benefit with a correspondingly determined amount of the benefit.

In order for one of the main measures to reduce poverty - social monetary support - to be a real investment in a person, the system of monetary social support for deprived people needs to be improved. The three main pillars of effective support need to be considered: adequacy, accessibility and empowerment. In Lithuania, the social cash benefits reach half of the absolute poverty line and one-third of the relative poverty line. It is necessary to ensure the adequacy of the amount of the benefit by bringing it closer to the minimum consumption basket, to promote the employment of beneficiaries by developing positive incentives, for example, not to reduce the support if the person's salary together with the support does not exceed the minimum consumption basket. It is necessary to reduce the barriers that do not allow people experiencing poverty to receive support: to reduce the rigour of receiving support, to earn for support. In order for the beneficiaries to be active in the society and return to the labour market, it is necessary to provide personalized and comprehensive services that cover the same person's general and professional skills and provide external barriers elimination (for example, the services being cared for families, child care, communication, deductions from work reduction of wages when a person is in arrears, etc.).

Ensure basic needs such as food and reduce scale wastage. At present, the law is the valid provision that charity delivery of goods exempts from VAT as VAT, which, according to Charity and Support Act can be compassionate provider, transmit or consume goods to charities and individual charitable beneficiaries receive the taxable amount per calendar month no more than EUR 75. This size has not changed for more than 10 years, despite changes in MMA, state-sponsored income, and other sizes. Therefore, we propose that this amount be indexed rather than presented in absolute terms. This change is very important when people's need for food per month is more than € 75 and the law limits the ability to help the poor on a larger scale. We also believe that

farmers' products donated to charity and support should not be subject to VAT, which would encourage farmers to share with the poor. Encourage companies that reduce food waste in the production process or make publicly available data on controlled and consistent reductions in the amount of food recovered and increases in the amount of food saved for human consumption.

Increase the income of the smallest pension recipients and raise the welfare pension base. In Lithuania, the social assistance pension base reaches EUR 140 and is received by about 60 thousand orphans, children and adults with disabilities, people of retirement age who have not acquired the necessary length of service to receive a social insurance pension. This amount is about half the size of the minimum consumption needs. It is necessary to gradually bring this base closer to the size of the minimum consumption needs. When increasing the social assistance pension base, it is necessary to ensure a balance between social assistance pensions and social insurance benefits, by raising the amounts of insurance benefits accordingly.

### **Reform of the social services system**

In order to develop an inclusive and sustainable society, it is necessary to ensure enabling, high-quality and accessible social services. There is a need to create a model for the provision of social services that eliminates the exclusion of target groups and takes into account the needs of each person when providing and financing services. Recipients of services and their relatives must be involved in service planning: deciding on the scope, type, duration and provider of services. It is mandatory to expand the network of social services and to increase the range and quality of the services. This would avoid the monopolisation of services and allow other providers, such as NGOs, to provide services.

It is also necessary to ensure proper communication between municipalities about the availability of provided social services. Municipalities should be more proactive in identifying needs and providing services. Encourage municipalities to organize public procurement and outsource part of the provision of social services to them or other non-governmental organizations, and to increase the involvement of local communities in the provision of social services, including home help services.

The goal of social services is to empower people by helping them to solve their own problems and challenges and to ensure human dignity but in reality, this goal has not been set, and the current system of social services is based on a model of care for people with disabilities. Services have become very limited in both scope and content: the aim is to provide assistance through social care. Such a model does not guarantee people's independence and runs counter to the very direction of social services. Therefore, when reforming the service system, we recommend individualizing services and directing them to ensure the independence of each individual, regardless of where he or she lives, whether in the family, individually or in a care institution. Only in this way is it possible to ensure equal opportunities.

It is necessary to ensure increased and more sustainable funding for children's day care centres, which would provide child day care centres, a psychologist, quality employment and specialized

support services. It is essential that children's day care centres have the opportunity to provide services not only to children but also to parents in order to develop their social competences. It is necessary to ensure the continuity of services for children leaving children's day care centres by developing the activities of youth centres. In the field of youth policy, it is necessary to ensure the development of housing by providing a wide range of services to young people. To develop infrastructure and spaces adapted for youth leisure time when developing city plans.

In the field of long-term care, the development of integrated care is essential. There is a need to create a unified and functioning system that defines integrated home care, covering both the provision of social and health services. Initiate a simplified procedure for obtaining a license for home care. This would make the process of organizing services accessible to a larger number of service providers. In order to ensure transparency, register for services should be made open to individuals and to their family members to monitor the number of services rendered.

In order to reduce social exclusion in a society, it is necessary to ensure that social services and social support measures reach the most vulnerable members of society more precisely. Tackling the homelessness as the deepest manifestation of poverty and social exclusion in society requires a coordinated and integrated approach to the problem and its solutions. Social services, such as job search assistance, counselling and other general social services, should not be seen as essential tools in tackling homelessness but as an essential and an integral part of the solution to adequate accommodation. To this end, it is necessary not only to expand the social housing fund, improve the conditions for single people to receive housing rent compensation, but also to find alternative accommodation that is suitable and accessible to homeless people with complex needs, such as long-term homeless people with mental disorders, strong addiction, etc. In order to ensure more efficient and more personalized services, it is appropriate to involve non-governmental organizations as partners.

### **Reducing educational inequalities**

In Lithuania, it is necessary to form an education system that would ensure quality, inclusive and accessible education for all children and reduce the educational gap between disadvantaged children and children growing up in more affluent families. To ensure that parents and children living in poverty have equal opportunities in society, early (pre-school) education and care services must be accessible to all. It is necessary to invest in the development of a network of such services, ensuring their geographical coverage, adequate provision of infrastructure and qualified staff resources and easy access to public transport. There is a need to establish financial mechanisms to ensure the participation of young people in non-formal education programs, by prioritizing or allocating separate funding to programs that directly develop key competencies and are run by non-state education providers. It is important to develop youth employment by encouraging participation in non-formal education programs. The working conditions of workers in the education sector must be improved.

To ensure the access to the education for people with disabilities (people with disabilities and their family members (guardians/parents)) by enabling parents/guardians to be relieved of their

nursing/care responsibilities during their education. To ensure the accessibility of studies (in the physical, informational sense) for people with disabilities, if necessary - to provide assistance.

In the field of adult education<sup>11</sup>, the government is planning adult learning measures for 2021-2030. In the National Progress Plan, development programs and the DNA plan for the future of the Lithuanian economy, the need for which was exacerbated by the consequences of the pandemic. However, it is doubtful that individual measures without a holistic approach and leadership will deliver the expected results, and a lifelong learning system needs to be developed and implemented in a coordinated way to increase people's motivation to continuously learn, improve and acquire new competencies. Ensure the dissemination of information on learning opportunities tailored to different groups in society (providing information and advice to the population, especially the lower-skilled and less motivated adults).

Create favourable learning conditions (according to the place, time, duration of learning) for all, especially vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups (e.g. unskilled unemployed, economically inactive population, people with low abilities). To update and individualize learning services (according to the competencies being developed, training content, adaptation of training forms and methods) according to the needs of employers and learners, to ensure the quality of these services and compliance with national and international goals (Social Rights Pillar, Sustainable Development and Green Deal goals).

Work closely with municipalities and the socio-economic partners to ensure that non-formal adult education and related decisions are taken and implemented through joint efforts. Involve municipalities and social partners in the planning and implementation of European Union-funded adult education projects in order to meet the adult learning needs of the regions and ensure the quality of NQF projects.

Carry out regular monitoring of LLPs, conduct regular studies on learning needs and impact, and conduct surveys at national and local levels, implementing targeted interventions where appropriate. The analysis of the research results would justify the targeted planning of NSD activities and resources in the regions.

### **Ensuring the network of available public services and their quality**

In the context of the European Union, Lithuania lags far behind in the availability of digital services, stands out with high energy poverty, and lacks transport services. The pandemic has exacerbated these problems, and not having enough resources and access to these services has pushed us further into exclusion. There is a need to expand the availability of digital tools and services, to develop digital skills, especially in rural areas and among the elderly. It is necessary to develop transport services in order to increase employment and educational opportunities, as lack of transport opportunities often becomes a cause of unemployment or exclusion from other services

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<sup>11</sup> Proposals were developed in collaboration with the Education NGO Network

(such as pre-school education). To reduce energy poverty, comprehensive state aid is needed, including education and counselling services for residents, renovation (modernization) of multi-apartment and one-apartment buildings, and other energy efficiency programs. Energy poverty is a complex problem; therefore, an inter-ministerial cooperation mechanism is needed to ensure the application of the energy poverty measures provided for in the National Energy and Climate Action Plan (NEEC) of the Republic of Lithuania.

### **Key recommendations during a pandemic**

The following are recommendations that may be relevant to the growing number of COVID-19 infections in Lithuania.

#### **Ensuring the income of the population**

It is important to assess the impact of the quarantine social effect package on the first and to ensure an adequate income for the population in the event of a second wave: to provide adequate social protection in the event of loss of employment, benefits and subsidies on time.

#### **Renewal of municipal social service plans**

It is necessary to update the municipal social service plans to take into account the significantly changed needs of the population during the quarantine. To date, there is no systematic information on updating service plans after the first wave of the pandemic. Given the ever-changing situation, it is necessary to update service plans, share good practices between municipalities, and the Ministry of Social Security and Labour to monitor the updating of plans.

#### **Continuity of social services**

There is a lot of talk in society about the need to ensure the continuity of health services. Social services, especially for the most vulnerable members of society, are equally important, therefore, it is necessary to ensure the provision of social services, of course, by ensuring adequate protection for workers and their clients and methodological assistance to social service staff.

#### **Ensuring protection (measures)**

Inform in good time about distance and safety recommendations. Ensure the availability of safeguards in the trade so that organizations have a real chance to ensure security in the provision of services.

#### **Interinstitutional, interdepartmental cooperation**

In view of the large flow of information and the frequent changes in the instructions and recommendations of the Operations Chief, it is necessary to ensure smooth interinstitutional



cooperation on the basis of methodological assistance rather than the principles of a directive. Changes need to be clearly articulated so that service providers and organizations can respond more quickly to new requirements and recommendations.

Taking this into account, some services in municipalities are provided by non-governmental organizations, and they can react more quickly to certain situations, we recommend municipalities to more proactively involve the NGO sector in pandemic management, exchange relevant information, organize joint meetings.

### **Provision of telephone assistance**

It was observed that the need for psychological and emotional assistance by telephone increased significantly during the quarantine. In some organizations - up to 4 times. Additional funding is needed for telephone helplines and services for people in difficulty. It is also necessary to ensure the smooth operation of information on Covid-19 lines, which were also unable to answer all calls during the quarantine.

### **Additional funding for the increased need for services in organizations**

Organizations that had established contact with vulnerable groups prior to quarantine also observed an increased need for customer service, particularly psychological assistance, during the quarantine. It is important to make use of existing service networks and contacts with vulnerable people and to provide additional funding for the services of organizations facing a significantly increased workload.

### **Food and catering**

Given that a large proportion of the population is experiencing poverty, as well as food insecurity, which has become particularly apparent during quarantine, it is essential to prevent the planned reduction in funding for the European Fund for the Most Deprived. On the contrary, increase the funding for the fund.

During the pandemic, children who received free school meals were provided with rations of dry food that did not replace the warm food they had received until then. It is necessary to ensure that warm food is provided to children from disadvantaged families in the event of a recurrence of a quarantine situation.

### **Expanding the circle of service recipients**

During the quarantine, food, medicines and other essentials were delivered to the elderly or people with disabilities, but in many cases, these people were already in the spotlight of the social services system before the quarantine. It is important that services also reach people who are self-employed

and have not received any social services so far, but additional precautions need to be taken as the incidence of infection increases due to the higher risk of morbidity.

### **Debt monitoring and development of debt management services**

The risk of arrears also increased during quarantine, especially with regard to arrears of housing and utility bills. It is important to monitor arrears and record the situation in all municipalities separately. Also, develop personalized services for indebted people.

### **Domestic violence**

Social isolation has significantly increased the risk of domestic violence. More attention needs to be paid to monitoring cases of domestic violence. Also, provide services to victims of violence and consider alternative ways to call for help.

### **Burnout of social workers**

During quarantine, significant overwork of social workers was observed due to increased demand for services, tensions in implementing recommendations, and rapidly changing working conditions. Social workers had to work overtime, and the workload of some workers had almost doubled. In view of this, it is necessary to provide psychological and emotional assistance to social workers, clear methodological support.