

Conference Report and Key Messages



INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPICS

[EAPN's 2020 Policy Conference](#) explored the impacts of the COVID-19 epidemic on people experiencing poverty and vulnerable groups and focused on the need for policies, budgets and legislation to ensure that the poor don't pay for this crisis and to ensure that short-term measures lead to effective long-term antipoverty strategies. The **COVID-19 pandemic** – with about 18.5 million people infected and 700,000 deaths [globally](#); having caused 3 million cases of infection and 205,000 deaths across [Europe](#) on 5 August 2020 – added a second “layer” and overarching theme. The event was well attended by over 150 participants, with 55 EAPN members from 26 National Networks, including people with direct experience of poverty, and 8 European organisations. Another 90 participants were representatives of the European Commission, the European Parliament, the German Presidency of EU Council, national governments (ministries; Permanent Representations), trade unions and civil society.

Conference Objectives

- To present the findings and recommendations of the EAPN study on the impact of COVID19 and the policy responses on people experiencing poverty, including voices from the ground.
- To discuss how to build on short-term measures addressing immediate impacts of COVID19, to embed an effective integrated strategy to fight poverty, based on strong welfare states (minimum income/social protection/ public and essential services) and quality jobs.
- To exchange with decision-makers and stakeholders on the way forward to achieve this goal.

There can be no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic will have long-reaching impact on Europe’s societies and economies, particularly on the poor and most vulnerable who are hardest hit. This includes those people who are in ‘poor’ precarious jobs, unemployed or laid off, on benefits and faced with higher costs, unable to pay higher energy bills, rent or mortgages, children without access to computers or free school meals, vulnerable older people and those with disabilities at risk from unequal access to adequate health care, women at risk of increased domestic violence, homeless and migrants facing increased risks in shelters or on the streets (see [EAPN COVID-19 Statement](#)).

The last weeks and months have clearly shown – with a lot of empirical evidence at hand – that the **COVID-19 epidemic has already led to a substantial increase in poverty and inequality which is unequally spread across different regions and countries.** This has exacerbated existing inequalities, widening the gap between richer and poorer people, countries and regions.

Most European countries have developed immediate aid packages which in many cases also directly benefit the poor and vulnerable. The bulk of these measures, however, are only temporary. Will they deliver concrete results for people experiencing poverty, i.e. address their main needs? Will these short-term measures feed into a progressive, rights-based strategy to fight poverty? What needs to be done to ensure this outcome? These were three of the **key questions for EAPN’s 2020 Policy Conference.**

In addition to the national, regional and local levels, the **EU, in particular the European Commission (EC),** since March 2020 has taken a number of **actions and initiatives to address and help overcome the various impacts created by the COVID-19 pandemic.** They focus on the **economic relaunch, measures in relation to securing employment, the improvement of the capacities and responsiveness of public health systems and on the availability of EU funding,** including money channelled via the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) or the [Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived \(FEAD\)](#). The EC has adopted a [comprehensive economic response](#) to the outbreak, applied a broad [flexibility of the EU fiscal rules](#) with the activation of the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact and has [revised its State Aid Rules](#) with the aim to save jobs and companies. It has also set up a €37 billion [Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative](#) through the European Investment Fund to provide liquidity to small businesses and the health care sector. On 15 May 2020 the [Eurogroup reached agreement on the financial allocations to three safety nets](#): 1) European Stability Mechanism (ESM) Pandemic Crisis Support to cover exceptional costs incurred with

direct and indirect health care, cure and prevention expenses, 2) [SURE Programme](#) (= Support mitigating Unemployment Risks in Emergency); 3) Pan-European Guarantee for businesses and set up by the European Investment Bank (EIB). On 21 July 2020, the governments of the 27 EU Member States agreed on a [Recovery Plan for Europe](#) “to help repair the economic and social damage brought by the coronavirus pandemic, kick-start European recovery, and protect and create jobs” and the **Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027**, again containing financial allocations to help overcome the economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. The EC also set up a [dedicated website](#).

EAPN responded quickly to the outbreak of the Coronavirus with a [statement](#) (17 March 2020) and [letter to the European Council](#) (24 March 2020) on key measures as well as with a [letter to Commissioner Schmit](#) (24 April 2020), signed by large number of MEPs and key stakeholders. Between May and July 2020, EAPN contracted a well-known social inclusion expert: Dr Graciela Malgesini working with EAPN at national and EU level, to carry out a **detailed study**, including webinar exchanges with our members in 32 countries. The study largely builds on substantial inputs by EAPN’s National Networks in 25 countries and from 3 European Organisation members, tracks the impact of the crisis on people experiencing poverty and social exclusion as well as the efficacy of the measures being taken so far. The Policy Conference presented the main findings and policy recommendations for national and EU level of the study: [EAPN Report “The impact of Covid-19 on people experiencing poverty and vulnerability. Rebuilding Europe with a Social Heart”](#) and discussed them with EAPN members, partners, governments and EU institutions.

The **Europe 2020 Strategy had set the target to reduce poverty by at least 20 million (AROPE)**. Although some progress has been made in the last years, in 2018, **109 million people were still at risk of poverty and social exclusion**, in other words nearly 1 in 4 of the whole EU population. This aggregate number disguises a growing gap between and within Member States – where poverty levels achieve over 35% in some countries (Bulgaria, Greece, Romania). It also does not reflect the higher risk levels for children, single parents, people with disabilities, (long-term) unemployed persons, migrants, Roma, and Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and other groups.

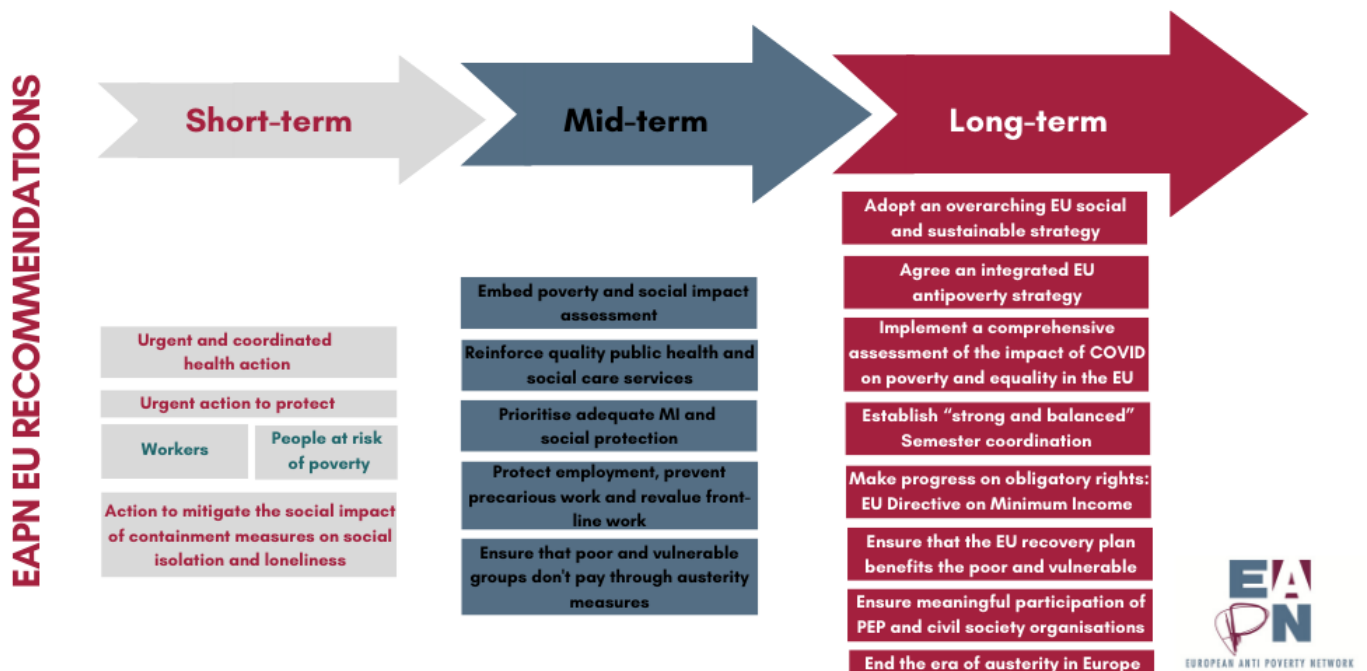
In 2017, the EU adopted the European Pillar of Social Rights as an interinstitutional proclamation. The **Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)** will be launched in early 2021. EAPN has already in July contributed to the consultation with an [input](#) developed with members containing EU-level proposals and recommendations on policy and legislative initiatives mainly built around five principles of the EPSR, urging that **these individual rights must be integrated into an overarching and integrated rights-based EU Antipoverty Strategy as the main ‘chapeau’**, if specific principles of the EPSR and individual rights of people are to achieve a real impact on poverty. **For EAPN this requires such a strategy with an ambitious EU poverty reduction target** of at least 50% (AROPE) and improved indicators, as part of an **ambitious EU social and sustainable post 2020 strategy**.

As part of the [EAPN proposals for a post Europe 2020 strategy: Delivering Agenda 2030 for people and planet including a right-based integrated antipoverty strategy](#), EAPN in 2019 and 2020 has already **set out its proposals for a rights-based overarching and integrated EU Antipoverty Strategy**. It builds on the 3-pillar Active Inclusion approach and is underpinned by the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It should focus on delivering in an integrated, person-centred approach guaranteeing universal access to quality public and essential services, adequate minimum income and social protection as well as support to enter and keep quality jobs.

In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, this approach becomes even more essential. For EAPN, the voice of people from the ground and of civil society organisations (CSO) have a key role to play in finding sustainable solutions. The EU must prioritise public social investment to strengthen welfare states (minimum income and social protection, public and essential services, eg health/care, affordable housing and education) as well as quality, sustainable jobs if a massive increase in poverty and inequality is to be avoided. In this context also an increased role for tax justice and a determined fight against tax avoidance and evasion is key. Commission President von der Leyen’s Political Guidelines “A Union that strives for more” (16 July 2019) already before the COVID-19 epidemic had stated “*we must do more to fight poverty*”. Commissioner Schmit, in the EP hearings, stressed that an **EU Antipoverty Strategy** was crucial. Now, **post COVID-19**, the EU must take the lead to effectively tackle poverty in the short and long-term, ensuring direct benefits to people facing poverty, as part of an integrated approach. **How can we now move forward together to achieve real results to prevent and reduce poverty and social exclusion?** This question was also addressed to the two EU and UN level representatives and to the panelists in session 2.

STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

Building on the “Introduction to the two key topics”, this report contains the conference programme. It summarises the interventions of the “Welcome and Introduction” session, of Session 1 “The impact of COVID-19 and policy responses on people experiencing poverty” and of Session 2 “What way forward? From short term measures to effective EU antipoverty strategy” including the Round Table Discussion and a “Wrapping Up” part. It also reports back on the key points from the question and answer parts of both sessions. It finally reproduces in chapter 5 the overall conference messages. In addition to the info graph below, shown at the end of Graciela Malgesini’s presentation and again referred to by Marija Babović in her concluding remarks you can read there the detailed list of short-term, mid-term and long-term recommendations to the EU level of the EAPN Report “*The impact of Covid-19 on people experiencing poverty and vulnerability. Rebuilding Europe with a Social Heart*”.



Conference Programme

14.00 Welcome: Leo Williams, EAPN Director

14.05 Introduction: Carlos Susias, EAPN President

SESSION 1: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND POLICY RESPONSES ON PEOPLE EXPERIENCING POVERTY

14.15 Presentation of main findings and recommendations from EAPN Study on the impact of COVID-19 and policy responses: Graciela Malgesini, Author, Co-Chair of EAPN Inclusion Strategies Group/EAPN Spain

14.30 Presentation from people with direct experience of poverty who participated in the study: Sonja Leemkuil, EAPN Inclusion Strategies Group/EAPN Netherlands and Vera Hinterdorfer, EAPN Vice President/EAPN Austria

EU AND UN RESPONSES FROM:

14.45 Nicolas Schmit, EU Commissioner for Jobs & Social Rights

14.55 Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

15.10 Q & A/Discussion

SESSION 2: WHAT WAY FORWARD? FROM SHORT TERM MEASURES TO EFFECTIVE EU ANTIPOVERTY STRATEGY

15.30 Round table discussion:
Jan Farzan, German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs/SPC
Esther Lynch, Deputy General Secretary, ETUC
Jana Hainsworth, General Secretary, Eurochild
Cindy Franssen, MEP/EPP and Co-chair of EP Poverty Intergroup

16.00 Discussion with panel and audience

16.15 Wrapping up:
Katarina Ivanković-Knežević, Director for Social Affairs, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
Marija Babović, Co-Chair of EAPN Inclusion Strategies Group/EAPN Serbia

Conference Report

Welcome and introduction

Leo Williams, EAPN Director, welcomed participants and speakers, amongst them Sonja Leemkuil to present views “from the ground” and Graciela Malgesini, the author of EAPN’s Study “The Impact of Covid-19 on people experiencing poverty and vulnerability. Rebuilding Europe with a Social Heart” launched today, both representing EAPN. He excused Vera Hinterdorfer, EAPN Vice-President, who regrets that she cannot participate in the event due to ill health. Leo introduced the agenda and mentioned the objectives EAPN pursues with the event (see 1. “Thematic Introduction”). An online poll ran by Leo showed that the majority of roughly 85 participants out of the 115 online at the very start of the Policy Conference represented civil society organisations (about 65%). Others polled were the European Commission (2%), the European Parliament (4%), the German Presidency of EU Council, representatives of several national governments (ministries; Permanent Representations) (7%), trade unions, academics (4%) and others from across Europe and Brussels. The UN Human Rights office was also present.

Carlos Susias, EAPN President, highlighted that the EU is again in the middle of a crisis, but compared to 2008, this time it is a health, social and economic crisis which impacts negatively on the poor and socially excluded, as EAPN members have raised alarm bells about. The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting specific groups much more than others, e.g. those who are unemployed, those in precarious employment, children which are digitally excluded or suffering as no school food can be provided, those experiencing domestic violence, etc. Carlos stated: *“The EU poverty reduction target of the Europe 2020 Strategy has not been met – we currently still have high levels of poverty across the EU and 109 million people at risk of poverty and social exclusion”*. EAPN members have highlighted the importance of effective short-term measures put in place at national and EU level as COVID exacerbates existing poverty and inequality, but as poverty is a structural and long-term problem it also needs structural and long-term solutions and an EU-wide approach towards an effective antipoverty strategy which leads to real improvements in quality jobs for all, adequate social protection systems and public services, fairer redistribution mechanisms which can impact on the structural causes of poverty and inequality. People facing poverty, flagging up the realities on the ground and solutions, have to be part of this conversation. Carlos concluded by underlining the need for an overarching commitment to effective minimum income schemes and living condition guarantees, also for those people who cannot work. The work should start from the EU commitments to social rights as contained in the principles of the EPSR. *“EAPN sees the EPSR as a landmark, but these principles need now to be put in place”*, he underlined.

Session 1: The impact of COVID-19 and policy responses on people experiencing poverty

This session focused on the main findings and key recommendations from the EAPN COVID-19 Study, including responses from people experiencing poverty, illustrated by an input from a person with direct experience of poverty, and EAPN activist, from the Netherlands following this presentation. It also looked into the related policy replies at EU and UN level.

Graciela Malgesini, Independent Social Exclusion Expert/working with EAPN Spain and Co-Chair of EAPN Inclusion Strategies Group, presented the main findings and policy recommendations or national and EU level of the [EAPN Report “The impact of Covid-19 on people experiencing poverty and vulnerability. Rebuilding Europe with a Social Heart”](#). In her [presentation](#) the author of the study focused on the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on health care (services), minimum income schemes and the levels of income support, housing and homelessness, inequalities and discrimination as well as on a range of vulnerable groups (such as atypical employed persons, children in poor households, older depending/socially isolated people, homeless persons, migrants and asylum seekers, Travellers and Roma). She highlighted: *“People experiencing poverty started in a situation of disadvantage in relation to other groups of the population: This happened due to over-indebtedness, lack of jobs or precarious jobs, low-amounts benefits as main household income, prevalent diseases or disabilities, mental health problems and low well-being level, insecure housing or homelessness or because they were victims of racial inequalities and poverty as Black, Asian and ethnic minority, Roma and migrants.”* Graciela presented a lot of data and insights from the research, e.g. in the field of health and social services: *“Low-income groups and migrants had more unmet medical care needs than the rest of the population”*. She insisted on the clear gender dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic which in various ways stronger affects women. Graciela highlighted supportive government measures to address new and/or increasing needs and risks – *“Many governments stepped up means-tested support to bolster the incomes of those with the least resources”* –, but also looked at gaps and deficits, as well as the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on civil society organisations (e.g. on their financial situation or on restricted possibilities for them to operate their support services) and authoritarian trends and restrictions of fundamental rights which could be observed in many European countries. Graciela finally highlighted the [short-term, mid-term and long-term recommendations to the EU level](#) from EAPN members which came out of the EAPN survey and other EAPN meetings, as contained in the EAPN Report.

The comprehensive [EAPN Report](#) (78 pages) analyses 1) the situation of health, social protection and minimum income systems before the pandemic, 2) the positive and negative changes in our systems produced as a result of the spread of the virus and 3) the measures adopted by governments to tackle the situation. The conditions of people suffering from poverty and vulnerability in countries participating in the research are described and analysed in detail, considering in particular the impact that this crisis has also had on gender as well as other forms of inequality. It contains a chapter with conclusions from the research and a broad range of recommendations addressed to policy makers across Europe and at the European institutions. [Annex 2](#) (90 pages) provides a **Country Annex summarising detailed input by EAPN members from the national level regarding all areas of the report including testimonials and examples from people experiencing poverty** whilst [Annex 1](#) captures some key EU trends and data to better contextualise the information contained in the report.

Sonja Leemkuil, EAPN Inclusion Strategies Group Member from the Netherlands and a person with direct experience of poverty, and activist in EAPN in the EU Inclusion Strategies Group, who had participated in the study, said in her intervention: *"Due to the Corona measures, we had to close 'Our DREAM' from March 15 to June 1. Around me I hear people say 'now others can feel what we feel, what it is and how it feels not to go out, not to be able to participate in anything and to have to stay at home all day long and live in uncertainty, day in, day out'. We are experiencing this feeling for years because we cannot participate in anything, because we have no money for it. You cannot change the COVID-19 virus, but the Poverty virus can be changed! By making different political choices and by different policies, based on trust in the people in poverty, by removing the fear and stress from people and by treating each other equally and with respect, which returns people's resilience, allows children to develop equally and improves people's well-being."* Sonja also was concrete on what poverty means: *"Poverty hinders active participation in society. Especially for children poverty is the reason that they cannot participating in school and with sports, music and dance. [This] has a negative effect on behavior, health and (school) performance and increases the risk of poverty in the future. Stress and anxiety have major negative consequences for the development of children and for the well-being of adults. Not being able to participate has also another consequence: you start to become invisible. For your environment, for your friends as well as for policy makers!"* Sonja concluded with a call to all policy makers: *"Europe needs a loving social heart for everybody!"* You can read her full speech covering a lot of other issues [here](#).

Nicolas Schmit, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, started off by thanking EAPN for the strong determination in the fight against poverty in the last 30 years: *"It takes heart and soul to dedicate your time and work to fight poverty"*. He showed his admiration for Sonja and her huge efforts and determination to get out of poverty. He kicked-off his contribution by stating that the poor are already paying for the COVID-19 epidemic as well illustrated by the EAPN Study, with the most vulnerable having the highest risks to be infected and also bearing the highest costs. The European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights underlined the need to learn the lessons from earlier crises, in a context where in 2018 110 million people in the EU still were living at the risk of poverty and social exclusion, lacking a decent income and/or not having the same access to health care as the majority of EU citizens. This number is on the rise since March 2020 as is inequalities. Talking about poverty, he stressed that the most visible and negative form is homelessness. Living on the street takes away many years from people. This makes an EU initiative to fight homelessness urgent.

The European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights thanked EAPN for their valuable [input into the EC consultation on the Action Plan for the Implementation of the EPSR](#). It highlights the need to reinforce income support to all and to ensure access to services for everybody in need. Policy reforms for him need to be designed in a way to put people at the heart of policies. The EU level could support this through the Cohesion Funds, in the field of fighting poverty and social exclusion in particular by using ESF+ money.

The European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights then elaborated on four of his key priorities:

1. Minimum wages: 1 in 4 workers remains poor, with numbers of working poor (now about 10%) on the rise. Many Europeans lack decent working conditions and an important share of young people are facing increasingly precarious employment conditions. This situation thus makes the need for more inclusive labour markets clear and urgent. Many front-line workers earn a low wage. *"We cannot turn our backs on them, in particular with the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now is the moment to re-value these professions, their work and wages. This also is a matter of social*

justice". He announced that the EC would present a proposal on minimum wages later in 2020.

2. Minimum income: Minimum income schemes exist in all EU MS, but their design and implementation can create challenges. Only in two EU MS are the amounts as a rule higher than the poverty threshold. He stated that *"All people have the right to a life in dignity at all stages, as stipulated in Principle 14 of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Schemes need to set the right amount of minimum income. They should be made accessible and enable active inclusion for those who can work. It is also important to reduce administrative hurdles"*.
3. Child poverty: If children have to live in poverty this has an impact on their opportunities and rights. The EC will put forward its proposal for a European Child Guarantee in early 2021. 5% of ESF+ resources should be dedicated to the Child Guarantee (which would mean 2.5 euro per month per child in Europe for the next 7 years). It is important that this share of earmarked money will be confirmed in the final negotiations round on the next Multiannual Financial Framework.
4. Energy poverty: In the EU there are around 40 million people facing energy poverty needing targeted income support. The EC will launch a massive renovation wave to help poorer households ensure a non-increase of their energy bill or even reduced energy costs. It will also create about 100.000 good jobs. He thanked EAPN for its involvement in the [ASSIST Project](#) and the [Right To Energy Coalition](#).

The European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights concluded by highlighting the current momentum for more effectively preventing and reducing poverty and social exclusion. The EC has mobilised billions of additional money and also enlarged possibilities to use the ESF+ and FEAD money to alleviate the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. He recalled that appropriate instruments (such as the ESF+ and COVID-19 recovery funds), other initiatives (e.g. the revamped Youth Guarantee launched in June 2020 to help boosting youth employment) and policy proposals (e.g. on minimum income by the German EU Council Presidency) are on the table or currently being developed (e.g. the Action Plan on the EPSR). 2006 Nobel Peace Prize Winner Muhammad Yunus has shown that poverty is not inevitable and that women are major actors in overcoming it. In 2015, the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences was awarded for an analysis of consumption, poverty, and welfare and in 2019 to three researchers for their approach to alleviate poverty based on a better understanding of causes of poverty and effective solutions. The European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights ended his speech by a call to work together *"to make poverty part of this history in our museums."*

Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, in his intervention referred to the key points of his paper ["Key challenges facing the fight against poverty and thematic priorities for the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights"](#).

He first underlined the need to build more resilient social protection systems as a reaction to the COVID-19 crisis. The right of everyone to social security, including social insurance, is guaranteed in art. 9 of the [International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#). He advocated that the EU should learn the lessons from the banking and financial (market) crisis of 2008/2009 and not fall back into erroneous and counter-productive austerity measures. For the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, progressive taxation schemes and increased taxes for corporations are a key part of the

answer to the question “Who should pay for the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in a sustainable and equitable way?” Now is the time for public investment to support a speedy economic recovery. *“There is a gap between rights proclaimed on paper and the ability for people to take up those rights and a high right of benefit non-take-up. People may have rights they never claim. They might be ashamed, they might be poorly informed, they might not have the documentation provided, they might fear conditionalities with social assistance or unemployment benefits.”*, said the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. He added: *“Hence the participation of people experiencing poverty in designing and monitoring policies is important, as otherwise there will be cracks in the system and people will fall between those cracks.”* In this context he applauded the work of ATD Quart Monde clearly showing that living in or at the risk of poverty and social exclusion brings about stress, shame, social as well as institutional neglect. We therefore need universal social protection systems in Europe and beyond which can protect people effectively. This policy objective also implies that social security systems have to be inclusive of all groups (i.e. covering those in the informal economy, in non-standard forms of employment, those facing in-work poverty, etc.).

As second main point, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights strongly welcomed the adoption – in November 2019 – of the [Council Recommendation on Access to Social Protection for workers and the self-employed](#) which helps to implement Principle 12 “Social Protection” of the EPSR. This recommendation now needs to be followed-up and monitored in relation to its full-fledged implementation in all EU MS. He recalled that the EC has not always sent correct signals to the EU MS by strongly emphasizing the need to reduce the financial and administrative burdens on employers and companies for them to be competitive in the internal market and globally. The fear of some national governments of attracting migrants because of the (relative) generosity of social protection benefits has induced a number of EU MS to adopt strict eligibility conditions and/or punitive conditionalities for jobseekers, also pushing them towards precarious employment conditions, and also not to set adequate minimum income benefits. We can conclude that activation and conditionalities have been the dominant trend in the nearly 20 years: *“What we see with the COVID-19 crisis is the shift of policies to strike again the balance of competitive economies which also protect and support the people”*.

In a third step, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights elaborated on three priorities:

1. Building up inclusive labour markets, providing support to everybody to have a job and qualifications which are also recognised, even when people do not have a formal diploma.
2. Ensuring that minimum wages are set to allow a decent living (and in this sense provide a “living wages”), also taking into account e.g. housing and transport costs, being regularly updated at least in line with the inflation rate and involving the social partners when setting them. This would also reflect the requirement of the [General comment No. 23 \(2016\) on the right to just and favourable conditions of work](#) (in relation to article 7 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.
3. Ensuring a consistent approach on minimum income and adopting an EU Framework Directive on Minimum Income. Such a directive would need to build on the 1992 [Council Recommendation on common criteria concerning sufficient resources and social assistance in social protection systems](#) and also refer to SDG 1 “End poverty in all its forms”. The European level is highly relevant, and

the EC has an important role to play to make this happen.

In a **first interactive round bringing in the participants**, Nicolas Schmit and Olivier De Schutter reacted to questions and comments by participants.

1. Minimum income (“Will the EC propose a Framework Directive on Minimum Income ‘anchored’ in the Action Plan for the Implementation of the EPSR?”, Caroline van der Hoeven, EAPN Belgium); Need to see effective social protection and minimum income schemes without punitive conditionalities as investment, Idès Nicaise, University of Leuven),
2. An EU Antipoverty Strategy (“Will the EC make a proposal for all EU MS to develop an integrated Antipoverty Strategy?”, Paula Cruz, EAPN Portugal),
3. The fight against homelessness (“How can we end homelessness as this is reflected in the SDGs and what will the EC do to achieve this objective?”, Freek Spinnewijn, FEANTSA) and
4. The risk of re-emergence of austerity policies and the lack of attention given so far in the COVID-19 crisis responses to the needs of vulnerable groups (Katherine Duffy, EAPN UK).

Taking up questions 1 and 3, **Nicolas Schmit** highlighted that all EU MS have committed themselves to implement the EPSR. For him this implies a commitment of all Member States and the European institutions to work towards fairer and more inclusive societies. He underlined that it is now time to underpin the EPSR principles – including on minimum income and the reduction of precarious work – with concrete proposals. They should feature in the Action Plan which will be presented at the next Social Summit in May 2021 in Portugal. For him, more political priority should be given to the reduction of homelessness – underlined by the currently dramatically high number of homeless people – and investments in social housing. The European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights continued by saying that a certain proportion of the money from the EU COVID-19 Recovery Plan needs to go into housing for low-income and homeless people and has to be spent on the renovation of (social) housing stock.

Reacting to questions 2 and 4, **Olivier De Schutter** strongly advocated for moving beyond the debates of 2008 and 2009 where the focus was first on the reduction of public deficits and then on austerity policies for many years afterwards. Now there is a strong consensus to support demand-driven and sustainable growth. In December 2019 the EC adopted the European Green Deal calling for a different understanding on what growth should look like. One of the key questions now is to develop solutions on how social protection can be part of the economic recovery in a context of “Just Transition”. The UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights also highlighted the vast body of evidence that in more equal societies less growth is needed to reduce poverty. The fight against inequalities needs to be at the heart of macro-economic policies. He identified two channels through which the ecological transition can benefit people in poverty: First by means of employment growth in the green and circular economy and second as an effect of public investments aiming at an improved access to services supporting economic and social rights, e.g. related to public transport or energy – this would reduce energy bills for lower income households and thus strengthen the social dimension of the “Just Transition”.

Session 2: What way forward? From short term measures to an effective EU Antipoverty Strategy

The second session allowed EU and national decision makers and key stakeholders to share their priorities and plans on the way forward and on linking short-term to long-term solutions. It also provided the space to hear their views on the need for an EU Antipoverty Strategy and on how to make progress on getting concrete results on social rights, adequate minimum income, decent wages and ensuring that the poor don't pay for the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to carbon-low economies.

Herbert Düll, Head of Division "Project Group on Economic Aspects of European Social Affairs", German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, updated the participants on the planned activities of the German EU Council Presidency of the EU in the first half of 2020 on minimum income. The Presidency intends to get ["Council Conclusions on Minimum Income Protection to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion in the COVID-19 and beyond"](#) – published on 2 July as draft conclusions currently being discussed – adopted in October and to be ambitious as to the contents. These draft conclusions lay the foundation for a proper debate with all EU MS (the first exchanges already took place or will be held still in July), the EC, but also civil society. They propose the definition of a number of EU-level minimum requirements in relation to the proper access to minimum income schemes, to the adequacy of benefits and their enabling character for inclusive labour markets. It builds on ongoing EU public services networks and benchmarking processes on minimum income anchored in the European Semester and supported by the Social Protection Committee (SPC). Herbert underlined that the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs currently sees a momentum to make progress towards achieving the goal of having in place effective protections for everybody against poverty and social exclusion. The dossier will then be handed over to the Portuguese EU Council Presidency and to the EC. He also referred to the [Thematic Reader](#) issued by the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS) containing several articles on minimum income including the article ["An EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Income. Enabling People to Thrive and not just Survive"](#) prepared by the Social Platform with EAPN input, together with an Annex – ["The European Minimum Income Network: Promising Examples of Minimum Income Protection"](#) – provided by EAPN. He put the initiative on minimum income in the context of a key priority for the German Federal Government, namely the support of economic and social upwards convergence. This is one key aspect in the conversation "Towards a Union of strong welfare states" on the main challenges for social upward convergence in Europe between [Frank Vandenbroucke, former Belgian Minister of Labour, and State Secretary Rolf Schmachtenberg](#) (BMAS). Herbert had started off by underlining the need to mitigate the employment and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and for common EU-wide and coordinated responses. The Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027 has to serve as foundation for the strengthening of the economic basis in all EU MS and the recovery.

Esther Lynch, Deputy General Secretary, European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), stated that *"The EU must guarantee a threshold below which no minimum income will go."* She underlined the need of a good cooperation between ETUC and EAPN and their respective members. Workers on minimum wages would often need minimum income support, not least to make ends meet with regard to housing costs, childcare costs and costs incurred due to disabilities. Employers should not expect that the state subsidises low wages by paying minimum income, letting the employers off the hook regarding decent pay and fair working conditions. She emphasized the strong need to tackle the increase of part-time and low-hours

employment contracts, zero-hour contracts and work practices as well as bogus self-employment. Esther called for *“hopeful, realistic and determined action”* to achieve progress both on the minimum wage and the minimum income initiatives. Referring to the ongoing second phase social partner consultation on fair minimum wages, she explained that the ETUC aims to make the EC take a responsible approach to minimum wages by setting an EU-wide binding minimum threshold to ensure decent minimum wages, amounting to at least 50% of the national average wage and 60% of the national median wage as a combined target, also to prevent countries (where statutory minimum wages exist) or employers (where they are determined in negotiations with the trade unions) from lowering current levels of minimum wages which are often not sufficient to provide a decent living for a family. Setting lower wage thresholds, however, is not sufficient. They would need to be framed and supported through proper, transparent and structured social dialogue in all EU MS regarding the adequacy of minimum wages. Esther said that *“employers find a lot of ways to make unfair deductions from minimum wages, e.g. for young workers, persons with disabilities or long-term unemployed and that therefore all vulnerable workers need to be covered by minimum wage regulations.”* Against the backdrop of increasing trade union scaremongering and busting practices witnessed by ETUC members, Esther recalled the right for everybody, including workers with low income and/or working hours, to join a trade union under conditions where this is possible without any fear. She reminded the participants that the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of front-line workers in a range of sectors (often on lower pay scales, with lower recognition, in atypical employment, etc.). This pressed the need for a sector-wide revaluation of these jobs (often occupied by women or migrants): jobs in care, household services, cleaning, retail, etc. Esther also made a strong plea to get the Pay Equality Directive adopted to provide trade unions with an EU-wide tool to make progress.

Jana Hainsworth, General Secretary, Eurochild, welcomed the EAPN work on addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. She highlighted that COVID-19 epidemic has *“created an openness amongst all key actors to invest in the essential and social services we all depend on”* and called on those EU-level and Member State actors *“to capitalise on the opportunities currently available and the momentum we are living in”*. She underlined that it has again become clear with the COVID-19 epidemic that European Social NGOs have quite a privileged space and role towards the EU institutions, but that this is not necessarily mirrored at national level and that it is often challenging for their national members to hold national governments to account. Jana said Eurochild is thrilled by the possibility to soon implement the Child Guarantee underpinned by a Council Recommendation reconfirming the Investing in Children 2013 Recommendation 3 pillar approach – with references to resources/income, services and participation. It is supported by the Investing in Children Alliance that EAPN is a part of. She underlined: *“Investing in children is not only for the children’s sake but for society as a whole”*. The Child Guarantee makes commitments regarding access to key services (including housing, health care, childcare, education, nutrition). She called on the EC to publish a proposal for a Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee [still in 2020](#) and expressed her hope that 5% of the ESF+ resources in every EU country would be ringfenced to be invested in tackling child poverty.

Cindy Franssen/EPP and Co-chair of EP Intergroup *“Fighting Against Poverty”* congratulated EAPN for having conducted the study and for the elaboration of political recommendations. She echoed the views and conclusions from the event held on 11 June 2020 by the EP Intergroup on the impact of COVID-19 which are very similar and reflected in the July 2020 [Call to Action](#) adopted by the EP Intergroup . Cindy welcomed the various initiatives quickly taken by the EU to alleviate the consequences of the COVID-19

pandemic but also underlined the need to address the mid-term and long-term challenges, in particular concerning young people at the end of their school career, trying to find a job or apprenticeship, children faced with more digital education and those working, but still poor (making up 10% of the working population in the EU - a much too high share) or having precarious employment conditions. The EP Intergroup is working on topics such as the fight against child poverty, the support of food banks and adequate income. Other priorities are the elaboration and implementation of policies to reduce homelessness, the securing of substantial allocations to the ESF+ and FEAD in the new Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027 and the strengthening of the social dimension of the European Green Deal, given the still high number of EU citizens facing energy poverty and indecent housing conditions. Cindy finally supported EAPN's demand to put in place a renewed overarching EU Antipoverty Strategy, with ambitious poverty reduction targets and explained that for her the EPSR is a *"compass and frame to achieve this"*.

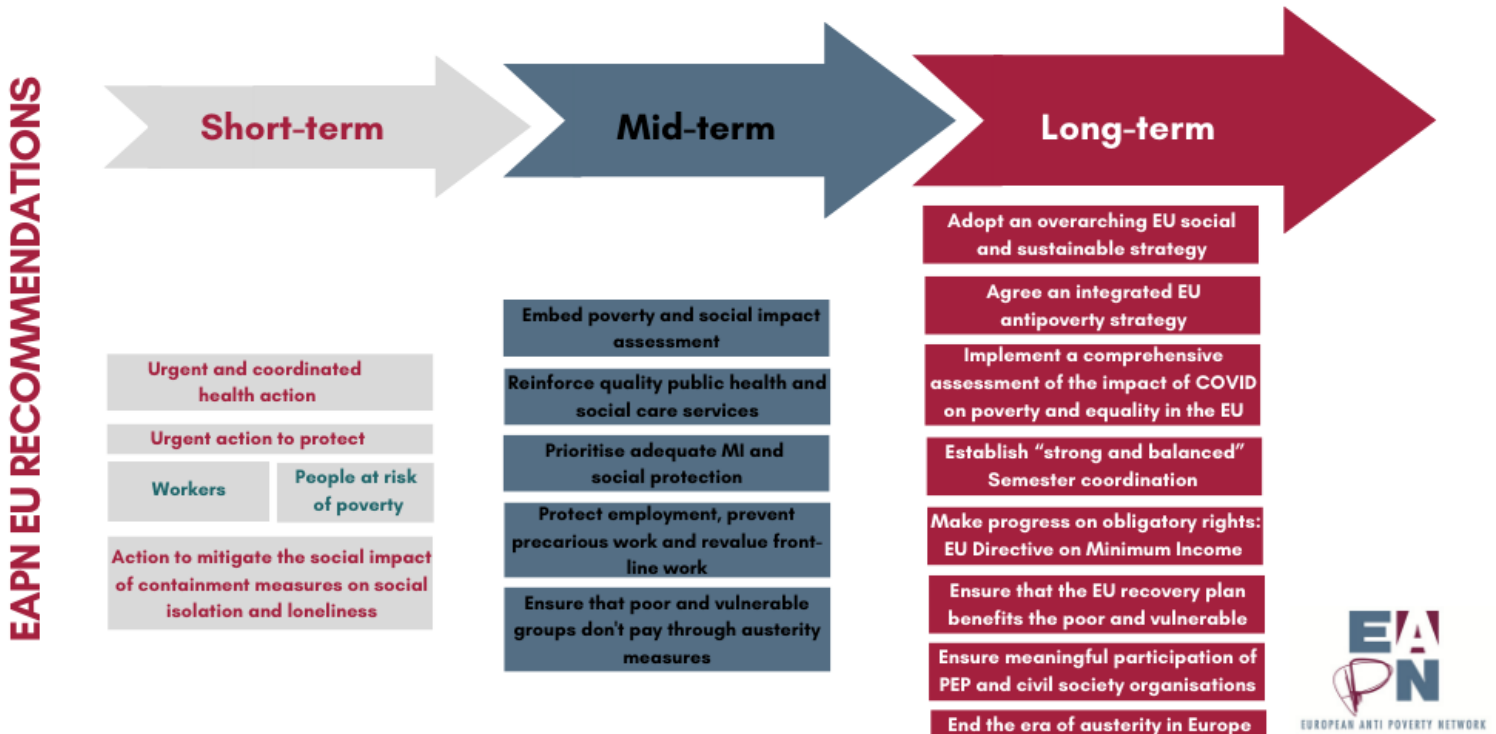
In a **second interactive round involving the participants**, comments were made on the coherence between economic and social policies and the need for sustainable funding of social protection schemes, especially minimum income benefits (Anne Van Lancker, Independent Expert) and on the need to underpin the access to essential services, principle 20 EPSR, with other support mechanisms, including by means of social services and social work (Fran McDonnell, IFSW Europe). It was also emphasised that social spending should be seen as investment, not as cost. Jana Hainsworth reacted by reiterating the call to invest in better support for children and families and to better monitor the use of EU money (e.g. from the ESF+) in line with the common objectives and EU-level initiatives without, nevertheless, being prescriptive to EU MS. Esther Lynch responded by suggesting the possibility of collective complaints by trade unions in case of breaches of labour rights, calling for adequate safety nets and social protection also for precariously employed workers and self-employed as well as a strong employer's responsibility for health and safety at the workplace. **Herbert Düll** agreed with the demand for strong EU welfare states and the need to have EU-level minimum requirements including in the fields of social protection, minimum income and minimum wages. He reassured the participants that the German EU Council Presidency will put all efforts and energy to get ambitious ["Council Conclusions on Minimum Income Protection to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion in the COVID-19 and beyond"](#), but reminded them also that the political support of MS governments for a broader scope of a possible EU-level binding instrument and procedural minimum requirements will depend on the type of legal act that is proposed.

Katarina Ivanković-Knežević, Director of Social Policy, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission, welcomed the EAPN study. She stated that the EC wants to put in place an EU-level anti-poverty strategic framework, linked to the Action Plan for the Implementation of the EPSR. The concrete and effective actions to prevent and reduce poverty would, however, need to be implemented within the EU MS when implementing their policies. Especially on this topic there is also a need to reach out to the regional and local levels. Katarina said: *"Member States have to go from seeing social actions as social spending to seeing them as social investment and investment in the future. We need coordinated efforts and actions! We have the instruments and should be ambitious!"* She emphasized that the new EU Disability Strategy would have poverty reduction as one focus. Katarina congratulated the German EU Council Presidency for having taken the initiative on minimum income. Katarina also mentioned the need to eradicate homelessness as another priority for the EC. It will come more to the forefront under the Portuguese EU Council Presidency in the first half of 2021.

Marija Babović, Co-Chair of EAPN Inclusion Strategies Group and representing EAPN Serbia, in her [concluding statement](#) reiterated the insight that the Coronavirus “has a gender face” and aggravates existing poverty and existing vulnerabilities and inequalities, with certain groups being particularly affected, exposed and/or prone to social exclusion and discriminations. The key question now is “Who will pay the price in the coming weeks and months, but also in the long-term?” She highlighted that austerity is no solution and strongly rejected by EAPN and its members. She also reminded the participants that the EU and EU MS should not forget the candidate and neighbouring countries and that the COVID-19 pandemic is already used by some governments as a pretext to attack social and to restrict civic rights, a tendency that needs to be fought with determination and reversed. She took up the report’s the [short-term, mid-term and long-term recommendations to the EU level](#). EAPN is convinced that we need a coherent post 2020 Agenda/Agenda 2030 and an integrated EU Antipoverty Strategy as frame to deliver social rights and to make progress on in particular on a sound minimum income protection based on a Framework Directive. The EU also needs to ensure a Social as well as a Green Deal. Tangible commitments to invest in health services and social protection for all, other essential services and quality jobs are indispensable. The EU Recovery Package and macroeconomic measures across the EU have to aim to protect people facing poverty and not to penalise them. Participation and the involvement of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and of the civil society organisations defending their rights must be at the heart of all policies. Marija finally thanked all the speakers, the organisers and formally closed the 2020 EAPN Policy Conference.

Overall conference key messages

We highlight here the **short-term, mid-term and long-term recommendations to the EU level** from the **EAPN Study: “The impact of Covid-19 on people experiencing poverty and vulnerability. Rebuilding Europe with a Social Heart”**. The info graph below was shown during the event at the end of Graciela Malgesini’s presentation and again referred to by Marija Babović in her concluding remarks.



Short-term recommendations to EU level

1. Urgent and coordinated health action, focusing on protecting the most vulnerable. National authorities must undertake immediate, extra targeted actions in the field of physical and mental health, food security, housing and accommodation and guarantee access to clean water and hygiene products, accessible information, free access to testing and treatment for patients affected by COVID-19 to ensure the protection of disadvantaged communities and vulnerable socio-economic groups during the pandemic.
2. Urgent action to protect workers and ensure adequate income for all, including financial support to keep people in their jobs, with guaranteed income, increased minimum income support to address additional costs, guaranteed income support to self-employed or those in atypical work who are losing income due to the crisis.
3. Urgent action to protect people at risk of poverty, including suspension of evictions due to non-payment of rent and mortgages, supporting payment of energy bills, and continued free provision of school meals for those who need it.
4. Action to mitigate the social impact of containment measures on social isolation and loneliness, including urgent support to social NGOs who provide care and support services, and setting up of

nationwide helplines for social and psychological support to address an increased risk of domestic violence and abuse, especially against women, under quarantine conditions. All EU MS should allocate and earmark specific funds at European and national level to target the needs of women and girls from vulnerable and excluded groups, to take account of their particular needs, especially to tackle gender-based violence and intersecting forms of inequality and discrimination faced in access to healthcare, employment, education and housing that may intensify during the pandemic.

Mid-term recommendations to EU level

1. Embed poverty and social impact assessment.
2. Reinforce quality public health and social care services.
3. Prioritise adequate minimum income and social protection.
4. Protect employment, prevent precarious work and revalue front-line work.
5. Ensure that poor and vulnerable groups do not pay through austerity measures.

Long-term recommendations to EU level

1. Adopt an overarching EU social and sustainable strategy, with ending poverty a pre-requisite
2. Agree an integrated EU antipoverty strategy, as goal and framework for the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan
3. Implement a comprehensive assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on poverty and equality in the EU, with guidance for MS
4. Establish “strong and balanced” coordination throughout the European Semester
5. Make progress on obligatory rights and the European commitment to guarantee adequate income
6. Ensure that the EU recovery plan benefits the poor and vulnerable, with 30% of ESF+
7. Ensure meaningful participation of people experiencing poverty and civil society organisations, implementing these changes in the Employment Guidelines
8. End the era of austerity in Europe, and use taxation to help pay the costs of rescue and recovery packages.

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Acknowledgements

This report was drafted by Mathias Maucher (Policy Officer) with Sian Jones (EAPN Policy Coordinator). Thanks are also given to the speakers, EAPN staff and all participants.

For more information about EAPN’s policy work, please contact Sian Jones, EAPN Europe Policy Coordinator – sian.jones@eapn.eu – or visit www.eapn.eu.



This conference was supported by the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014-2020). For further information please consult: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/easi>. The views contained in this document do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission

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