

## KEY MESSAGES ON ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL SERVICES

The key messages are the result of the EAPN Position Paper on Equal Access to Affordable, Quality Essential Services, finalised in May 2022.

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- Principle 20 of the **European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan** offers a limited understanding of what are to be considered the **essential services in the EU** and how to characterize the people in need of support in order to access them.
- Adequate income support, particularly access to **adequate minimum income** and **social protection** are necessary pre-conditions to unlock **access to essential services**.
- Most countries have resorted to proxies linked to income-related support measures, such as the **eligibility conditions** for accessing means-tested benefits, to identify people in need of support in accessing services. However, this approach is **socially exclusive** as it risks leaving behind those who are not eligible for minimum income schemes, cannot benefit from **quality services and/or positive activation measures and conditionality**, or live in situations of **stigmatization, discrimination, and marginalization**.
- **Access to quality services** is a crucial element of **active inclusion strategies** to achieve **socio-economic inclusion and a life in dignity**.
- **Quality** and **affordability** are essential components to improve **service accessibility and sustainability**.
- **Essential services**, as services of general interest including economic activities, are subject to both the European internal market rules and to the public service obligation: the market involvement in the provision of basic services through the private sector (privatisation and liberalisation), **needs to be regulated and controlled to ensure equal access to affordable quality basic services**.
- **Lack of integration and funding for social services**: currently, social services are not conceived of and delivered in an integrated manner which can reflect the **multiple needs, capacities, and preferences of the users** (person-centred service provision).

- **Digital communications** are both a service and an **enabling condition to accessibility** to other essential services and fundamental rights. The internet is also increasingly a tool for **ensuring access to information and evaluation of services**, which are amongst the identified principles guiding adequacy of essential services.
- **Electronic banking and digital public services** are a cause of **concern for many vulnerable households**. Evidence of digitalisation's impact on access to healthcare services is varied: digital healthcare could improve accessibility for people living in poverty or in marginalized areas/communities only if **adequate support** is put in place in terms of **infrastructures, skills, devices and the internet**.
- **Digital poverty** – mainly the lack of digital skills, and unequal access to the internet and devices - affects both particularly **low-income households and vulnerable groups** (e.g., Roma and undocumented migrants), and **professionals** who provide services and often do not receive appropriate trainings.
- **Barriers** impeding equal access to essential services, at national and local level, encompass the **digital divide; inadequate social protection and income; territorial inequalities and insufficient related infrastructures**; national and local governance models for service provision management that do not prioritize the public interest and the needs of vulnerable people; **insufficient public services, investments and support programmes; price; quality; availability; language** and other administrative barriers (e.g. eligibility requirements); **insufficient access to information; lack of relevant skills; shortage of qualified professionals; non-inclusive markets and poor inter-sectoral coordination**.
- Groups most affected by unequal access to essential services include **people at risk of poverty and social exclusion** - especially those who are exposed to **intersectional discrimination** due to intertwined **age, ethnic, gender, sexuality, class, geographical, health inequalities**, amongst others – particularly low-income people, lone parents, children and young people living in poverty and social exclusion, the elderly, people with mental or physical disabilities, women, Roma, travellers, migrants, ethnic minorities, homeless people, working poor, people living in remote areas or indecent housing.

## Recommendations to the EU

- **Derogations to the application of competition rules to the provision of essential services** – to protect citizens’ access to services and when there is a Public Service Obligation – should be refined and clearly stated in the First EU Report on Access to Essential Services and harmonised with the EU framework of services of general interest and the Directive 2014/24/EU on public procurement.
- **Digital poverty in the EU** – from the perspective of both service providers and users - **should be monitored and assessed** in relation to access to essential services and fundamental rights, **through a consistent integration in the EU Semester process and the implementation of the actions under the European Pillar of Social Rights.**
- Capitalize on the lessons learnt during the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis, which legitimized the application of softer fiscal policies through the general escape clause and envisage mechanisms to activate necessary national investments and reforms and avoid the tough return to austerity in the longer term. In this regard, **optimize the integration of the Recovery and Resilience Facility model into the Economic Governance Review and the EU Semester while promoting the distributional impact assessment tailored to different groups of users.**
- Develop a **strong Council Recommendation on Minimum Income** containing **binding elements** for Member States regarding the design and evaluation of minimum income schemes. Amongst these, **inclusive activation** and **positive conditionality** ensuring access to key social rights and quality essential services for minimum income beneficiaries; **a poverty-proof hierarchy** between minimum income, contributory and non-contributory social security, and minimum wages to socially integrate or re-integrate persons excluded from the labour market; **rights-based eligibility criteria** and **impact assessment** of minimum income schemes; strengthened **positive incentives** towards **quality work** and **active inclusion.**
- Establish a **rights-based and person-centred approach** to a **universal and non-discriminatory** access to **affordable quality essential services** – rather than a conflicting interaction between a market-driven approach and public interest, or restrictive legal entitlements.

*“I think that helping people in need should be a priority for the European institutions. We are all human beings, and we all need to be treated equally, whether we’re living on the streets or are employed in Parliament” - quote from a person experiencing poverty in Slovenia.*

## Recommendations to National Member States

- **Appropriate quality standards** should be established and reflected in public contracts, procurement procedures and financial compensation granted for the provision of services of general economic interest. **Quality indicators** should measure the **achievement of the required standards**, based on **social outcomes** rather than solely the price-quality ratio. Social outcomes must consider the **specific needs of the various categories of service users, including vulnerable target groups**.
- **Social considerations** in the procurement processes for the provision of essential services should be fully integrated into the criteria applied by public authorities for the award of a contract, particularly **minimum requirements for working conditions** of persons participating in the process of production or supply and **social integration** of disadvantaged people.
- Essential services must be **developed together with the people who use them**, in order to prepare the necessary support to overcome barriers to access.
- Essential services should be **available and accessible everywhere**. To this end, **one-stop-shop schemes** can play a crucial role in helping to **overcome territorial inequalities, the bureaucratic burden and the information gap**: engaging the final users in the design of these schemes should be strongly recommended to address the unmet needs and monitor quality.
- The **distributional impact of policy changes** on gender and youth and the related **use of disaggregated data** should be **embedded into all social policies**, particularly the European Semester and the Child Guarantee National Action Plans. In this respect, **clear quantitative and qualitative targets** must be included, such as targeted people in needs and beneficiaries of budget resources or measures, quality of services provided, qualitative data on gender and youth impacts.

- **Digitalization should be an option rather than an obligation**, especially in those contexts where adequate measures are not put in place to prevent and address the effects of fast-paced digitalization on social, cultural, economic and territorial inequalities, for both service users and providers. Furthermore, digital communications should not replace or hinder the relationship with service providers and the possibility of receiving **personalized and face-to-face support**.
- Member States should clearly specify the characteristics of those services with **public service obligation** and the **conditions for its provision** and the related **target group(s)**. In this framework, they should **broaden and adapt the EU definition of essential services** (Principle 20 of the EPRS Action Plan) to their national context, including the identification of vulnerable target groups.
- **Social services** should be recognized as essential services and an essential component of transformational social protection systems aiding the most vulnerable while ensuring **preventive services**. Subsequently, these must be **adequately funded**, and **decent working conditions for social workers** ensured: more quality jobs should be available where support services are needed.
- Extend the **quality criteria of social services** to the design of **quality standards and indicators** for all essential services, particularly:
  - **Respect for users' rights**, in terms of equal opportunities, equal treatment and freedom of choice, through clear, accurate and accessible information and active involvement of the users.
  - Ensure **proximity of needed service** to the users.
  - Organise service provision to achieve a **comprehensive and integrated delivery of social services**.
  - Guarantee **decent working conditions**, including non-discrimination, social protection, health and safety protection, re-skilling and up-skilling of workers, social dialogue and trade union representation, decent wages as well as gender equality and, in particular, equal pay for work of equal value.

## SECTOR-SPECIFIC MESSAGES and RECOMMENDATIONS

### Case studies on health and energy

- Member States should invest **adequate resources in improving the availability, accessibility and affordability of mental and dental health services** for people living in poverty or vulnerable situations, such as those with disabilities and those marginalized.
- Member States should **invest in increasing the number of affordable or free medicines, accessible public health centres and services, as well as health professionals** with good working conditions and adequate trainings, for people living in poverty and social exclusion.
- The price of energy must not be a factor for exclusion in access to energy services, regardless of the geographical location and living conditions:
  - **Access to clean affordable energy is a human right;**
  - **Ban all disconnections**, guaranteeing the supply of a minimum amount of energy for all.
- The extent to which higher carbon pricing is regressive is determined by the level of inequalities (income) in the country where it is implemented. Therefore, **a regulatory approach is needed to deliver on a socially-just green transition**, including:
  - A close end-date for fossil fuel subsidies and phase-out of fossil fuel boilers
  - Incentives for power supply from renewables, which are affordable and accessible for energy poor households
  - Fair green tax and social protection systems with adequate revenue recycling to support target vulnerable groups
  - Optimisation of the electricity market design in Europe while maintaining the regulated electricity prices to put the energy system under democratic governance and public control.
- The role of the State is of pivotal importance to **provide access to renovation and energy-efficiency programmes** and **ensure decent housing** for all while helping low-income, vulnerable and energy poor households to overcome upfront costs through ad hoc and adequate financial and technical assistance.

- The EU must **strengthen the Fit for 55 Package** through adequate social safeguards and set ambitious requirements for Member States to significantly **reduce energy poverty**, in line with their target for energy poverty mitigation, especially with regards to:
  1. Adequate and timely **Deep Renovation Standards** and **Minimum Energy Performance Standards** for public and residential buildings, as well as mechanisms to monitor housing affordability and the utilization of public real estate, in the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive.
  2. The right balance is needed between **immediate support and long-term structural investments** in the Social Climate Fund, particularly in the framework of the potential extension of the EU emissions trading system to road transport and buildings and its regressive effects on the energy expenditure of EU's poorest households.
  3. In the Energy Efficiency Directive, **the implementation of the energy efficiency obligation schemes should be prioritized** for people affected by energy poverty, vulnerable customers and people living in social housing. **Decarbonisation of heating and cooling systems** should be obligatory and publicly funded for lowest-income households in worst-performing buildings and should involve the participation of final users to empower them in the transition towards a more energy-efficient housing.
  4. The EU and Member States should collect **disaggregated data on accessibility, affordability and adaptability of low-carbon transports**, to avoid fossil fuel lock-ins, reduce the urban/rural divide and the forced car ownership, through a good range of public transport alternatives. Mobility challenges have a direct impact on the accessibility to other essential services and the job market, and therefore need to be prioritized.
  5. Member States should **address energy poverty together with transport poverty and indecent housing**, in the context of the transition towards climate neutrality, in their National Energy and Climate Plans and the Building Renovation Action Plans. At EU level, **better synergies** should be established between these and the Just Transition Fund, Recovery and Resilience Plans, the Energy Efficiency National Fund, the Social Climate Fund, REACT-EU and the Cohesion Fund.

*“Poverty is much more than what you have just read. You are poor not only materially, but also socially, and in all other ways. When you have no money there are no friends or they are rare. Before when I was employed and working, earning my living, I had friends. I took out a loan and then got fired because I was redundant and now that I’m bankrupt there are no friends of mine. I sit at home alone and that is the hardest thing for me. I have no one to talk to, no one to hang out with, no one wants to be with you like poverty is contagious.”*

*“It affects your health,.. in that misery a man goes crazy. You're crazy about it. Imagine going to 4 squares and looking at a black mould wall. How not to be crazy ” – quotes from people experiencing poverty in Croatia.*

**For more information on this publication, contact:**

Sabrina Iannazzone

Policy and Advocacy Officer, European Anti-Poverty Network

sabrina.iannazzone@eapn.eu

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

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