



People's Summit: No Social Europe without Social Rights

PUTTING PEOPLE AT THE HEART OF POLICIES

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The European Anti-Poverty Network Portugal (EAPN Portugal) and the European Anti-Poverty Network Europe (EAPN Europe) hosted the People's Summit in Porto on 17 March 2023, bringing together people experiencing poverty, associates, political stakeholders and grassroots organisations to assess the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan through various workshops and plenary sessions. *A living example of what active participation is*, as Portuguese Minister Ana Mendes Godinho said in the opening session. Quoting Juliana Wahlgren, EAPN Europe's Director: *we wanted to bring a new methodology to our Policy Conference: we wanted to try a more inclusive bottom-up approach, and advocate for real deliberative democracy in the monitoring and evaluation the EPSR and its action plan with people*. In the words of EAPN Portugal's President, Agostinho Jardim Moreira, *this is an opportunity to reduce the alienation and detachment felt by many people towards the European institutions, by seeking to mobilise them for causes that really matter to the people*.

The members present at the Summit would like to highlight the following key messages:

- It is necessary to define and implement a **European Strategy to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion** that addresses the structural causes of poverty, includes preventive measures and promotes the human rights of all people.
- It is necessary to invest in social support and monitoring, with preventive measures, and a **holistic vision of intervention** in the areas of well-being, with **less bureaucracy** and closer to the people, aiming at their **integral development**.
- The European Pillar of Social Rights should be reinforced by **binding documents**, such as a **Framework Directive on Minimum Income** and a **Directive on the Protection of Universal Public Services**.
- **Tax justice** is an essential tool for redistributing wealth, reducing inequalities and for financing sustainable welfare states.
- **Access to adequate income measures** (minimum income and minimum wages) are essential to guarantee access to a decent life and to essential goods and services.
- The fight against poverty will only be effective if governance mechanisms include **meaningful participation of people experiencing poverty**, in all its diversity, both at the policy design stage as well as in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation stages.
- The promotion of **digital access** must be accompanied by physical, accessible, affordable and quality essential services available to all.

¹ The [People's Summit](#) was attended by professionals from public and non-governmental entities, national and European bodies, social partners and groups in vulnerable situations. This document is the result of the reflections made at the meeting and the contributions presented by the participants. Throughout the document, several direct testimonies collected at the meeting are presented in italics.

1 - The Unquestionable Significance of the European Pillar of Social Rights

- The EPSR expresses the principles and rights essential for fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems in 21st century Europe. We have an instrument that can *facilitate the materialization of so many good intentions that, most of the time, risk stagnation in the chronic point of what is important and well done but remains in the drawer. Instruments such as the Pillar must be dynamic, flexible, practicable, operationalized and adaptable to all contexts and to all people in a sustainable way* (Edgar Campos, Local Council of Citizens, Viseu, Portugal). The EPSR arrived to respond to the economic and financial crisis that Europe was facing and contains a whole set of initiatives that aim to reinforce the social rights of Europeans.
- Carlos Súsias, President of EAPN Europe, brings us back to the core of the discussion: *we are talking about 95 million people in poverty, these are not numbers nor percentages, they are people*. Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, also left us a clear message that *we need a fair and stronger Social Europe, because with the current situation of rising prices, speculation, inflation, Europe faces greater difficulty in combating poverty*. Instruments such as the Directive on adequate minimum wages and the Council recommendation on adequate minimum income are central to a social Europe, although we will have to be attentive to their implementation.

2 - Make the European Pillar of Social Rights an effective instrument for social change and improvement of people's living conditions

- Participants at the People's Summit found that **the impact of the EPSR is limited, and that its Action Plan remains an insufficient roadmap for the eradication of poverty**. Despite outlining important principles and rights, the implementation of social rights and monitoring of the EPSR Action Plan's impact has been insufficient.
- **The Pillar should not be based on soft law mechanisms and does not comprehensively address the root causes of poverty**. *Europe is at a crucial moment, facing different political, economic, social, and human challenges, so we cannot repeat the mistakes of the past* (Agostinho J. Moreira, EAPN Portugal's President). **The Pillar needs to be able to respond effectively to the current challenges and effectively defend people's social rights and their access to them.**
- **The Social Scoreboard**, monitoring the implementation of the EPSR and its Action Plan, **does not reflect the multiple dimensions of poverty and social exclusion** in Europe, especially in the current context.
- *We must not only commit to equality, as it focuses on the right to access services and protections. We must also commit to equity: for equity is the certainty that everyone will have the same outcomes, ensuring a life of dignity and fairness, for everyone, and everyone without discrimination* (Jaime Filipe, Local Council of Citizens, Setúbal, Portugal).
- Once again, the EU has failed to offer a comprehensive strategy when it comes to social rights and when left to Member States, EAPN is observing an **unfair distribution of the EU poverty reduction target** and a lack of harmonisation of standards and efforts. Furthermore,

the premises under which the EPSR Action Plan was introduced aim to reach a poverty reduction, but not eradication, leaving poverty as a ‘fatality’.

3 - Recommendations to the European Commission: Europe *must be able to respond to emergencies/crises, but also to make structural investments*

- The EPSR must address, in an integrated manner, the structural and systemic deficiencies of our society and the multidimensionality of poverty, by effectively guaranteeing the right and access to adequate income (minimum income and minimum wages), social protection and accessible affordable and quality essential services.²
- To tackle the structural causes of poverty and overcome the shortcomings and gaps of the current EPSR Action Plan, **People experiencing Poverty demand a comprehensive rights-based, person-centred integrated EU anti-poverty strategy, supported by binding instruments.** The strategy must address the structural causes of poverty both in macroeconomic and microeconomic policies but also include preventive measures for proofing of social rights. It needs to be rooted in a rights-based approach where poverty is considered a violation of fundamental human rights. The strategy must also be accompanied by an **awareness raising campaign** to ensure that all are aware of it.
- An anti-poverty strategy will need to tackle the **trade-off between universal and targeted policies.** It is clear from people experiencing poverty, policy experts and other social actors at the People’s Summit that targeted measures are essential: lifting people out of poverty must be the main goal, supported by specific targets to reflect the specific challenges faced by different groups in poverty. Supporting **additional tailored strategies for key target groups**, tackling discrimination including socio-economic, within the overarching umbrella of an integrated EU anti-poverty strategy is key. Our reference to vulnerable/target groups includes migrants, women, Roma, racialised communities, LGBTI, elderly, persons with disabilities and youth.
- It is also important to reflect on the context in which the EPSR Action Plan was created and the need to update the **EU's approach in the midst of crises.** Indeed, since 2021 Europe has been facing multiple crises and challenges: the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the rising cost of living, climate and digital transitions, the effects of long-term austerity measures, and demographic ageing. Faced with this, the EPSR Action Plan has become obsolete and unable to respond to the current reality. It is essential to reflect on the political debates that are currently regressing on the standards of living, equal treatment and the reinforced restrictive migration policies.
- *The European Commission needs to make the European Pillar of Social Rights not a recommendation, but a binding document* (Cidália Barriga, Local Council of Citizens, Évora, Portugal). The reliance on soft law and therefore lack of binding legislation, such as a **Framework Directive on Minimum Income or an EU Directive on the Protection of Universal Public Services**, leads to an absence of minimum standards in terms of adequacy,

² To EAPN, essential services as services of general interest of an economic and social nature, which are essential to the lives of the population and where the public authorities. They cover a broad range of activities linked to private providers, such as energy, telecommunications and transport services, but they also include vital services which lie at the heart of EU social protection systems: e.g. education, health, housing, food, healthcare, water, sanitation, and social services.

accessibility, eligibility, and enabling characteristics of minimum income (due to bureaucracy, stigma, digitization of procedures, lack of information, strict eligibility criteria and conditionalities). Weak minimum income schemes lead to barriers in accessing basic essential goods and services such as housing, education, health care, transport, and other essential services: *a Framework Directive on Minimum Income is extremely important, a solid basis, that would require Member States to act. I believe minimum income is a basic standard, a social floor that no one should go below* (Paul Ginnell, EAPN Ireland).³

- To get to a social Europe, free from poverty, the EU must dedicate ambitious resources and targets. **Tax justice** is an essential tool for wealth redistribution, and for funding sustainable welfare states.⁴ As Lesley O'Reilly, EAPN Ireland, said, *policymakers blame poverty on the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, but this is not real: poverty is generational and greed is the main factor*. Or in the words of Juliana Wahlgren, EAPN Europe Director: *Social justice and economic justice can only succeed with the eradication of poverty in all its forms in all communities and with the redistribution of wealth and resources*. Convergence in the EPSR headline targets must be achieved through different Strategies linked to financial instruments, such as structural funds or windfall taxes.
- In order to effectively combat poverty, **governance mechanisms** must include **meaningful, safe participation of people experiencing poverty, in all their diversity**. Any process towards eradicating poverty that does not centre on people experiencing poverty remains deficient and risks being unsuccessful. *It is important to listen to people by creating a panel of citizens and policy experts to evaluate and monitor the implementation of the EPSR Action Plan. Participation requires commitment from the local to the EU level*. (Paula Cruz, EAPN Portugal)
- Fighting poverty includes understanding how it affects different people. **Establishing mechanisms to collect disaggregated data** by age, sex, disability, religion and belief, gender, sexual orientation, race, migration status, socio-economic status, citizenship and nationality based on self-identification and anonymity is crucial to account for the multiple systemic barriers faced by vulnerable groups and provide an intersectional approach to policy making.
- The **European Semester process** should include indicators of a quantitative and qualitative nature, capable of monitoring social rights more effectively at European and national levels.
- **The European Commission should continue to emphasise and support initiatives such as the People's Summit**. *The People's Summit reflects many voices and many concerns and has a unique added value: it reflects the voice of those experiencing poverty. People's participation is an urgent imperative and requires commitment and continuity* (Agostinho J. Moreira, EAPN Portugal President). We urgently need an approach focusing on **people's participation in their own inclusion processes**, where people move from a passive role to an active role, from policy design to implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

³ Read more in our [Access to Essential Services Report and position paper on the Minimum Income Council Recommendation](#).

⁴ *Open letter: The EU's economic rules must allow for the necessary spending on people and climate*. (2022, October 17). Retrieved December 21, 2022, from www.youthforum.org/files/Open-Letter-on-Fiscal-Reform-with-signatories.pdf

4 - Recommendations to Member States: *We need to reassess the system: it is not working. Policy makers must question why they are failing. We have to ask people: how can I help? How can you get out of poverty?* (Lesley O'Reilly, EAPN Ireland)

- Governments are failing to see that poverty is deeply rooted in our economy. Now, more than ever, **it is time to implement long-term structural changes and put people at the centre of policies**. Emergency measures do not prevent structural changes. To many EAPN members, emergency measures have become the new norm and the go-to response to deeply structural issues and the multiple crises are seen as an excuse for unchallenged paradigms.
- The existence of **National Anti-Poverty Strategies** is fundamental to guarantee the prevention of poverty and to outline structural measures with effect on the resolution of this multidimensional problem. *The State must fully assume and acknowledge the national reality, the problems and difficulties that exist in many areas such as housing, health, work/wages, education* (Higino Costa, Local Council of Citizens, Lisbon, Portugal).
- **Social protection schemes are key instruments for creating socially just societies** and therefore must be embedded in social justice, social protection and security, social cohesion, democracy, and well-being. In order to better support people experiencing hardship, social protection should also be based on current reality, avoiding a lag in response. **Adequate social protection for all, throughout the lifecycle, allows individuals, to live in dignity and is the cornerstone of an inclusive Europe, free of social inequality and poverty.**
- One of the major obstacles to social protection is the vicious cycle of exploitation in **undeclared work**. People are often pushed into informal work to balance their meagre income from inadequate social benefits or lack of eligibility. Thus, exploitation through undeclared work proliferates. Improvement of adequate incomes of social protection with better coverage is the only way out of exploitation.
- **Adequate income measures**, such as minimum income and minimum wage, must enable people to meet their human needs, including food, housing, water, energy, healthcare, transport, education, among others. It is essential that State-supports take into account people's needs and the current context in which they make use of those supports. *The real problem is not that minimum income schemes are too generous and thus may discourage people from searching work, but that low wages are tolerated despite the EU having already 20 million working poor. That should be the key concern to make work attractive by providing decent wages and adequate working conditions* (Olivier de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights).
- Vulnerable groups must have **personalised pathway support to quality employment**. Quality employment in an inclusive labour market must include, among other things, adequate wages, social security, lifelong vocational training, available childcare policies and strong collective bargaining across all sectors.
- *Rights exist, but people find it very difficult to access them, either because of the bureaucracy involved, or because of the condition of subordination and lack of freedom that they imply when people are enjoying them* (Ivone Florêncio, EAPN Portugal); *bureaucracy in accessing*

social support services is killing everyone. Sometimes it seems to me that the purpose of services is to get people to give up and be “one less” (Agustina Pérez Walton, EAPN Spain).

- *We talk about services like energy and housing as if they were luxury. This is wrong, we have to talk about them as basic rights. Energy is central to our lives: to warm ourselves, to cook, to take a shower...* (Paula Cruz, EAPN Portugal)
- **Family** is a central nucleus of intervention. The fight against child poverty requires an intervention in the families, by ensuring *access to their fundamental social rights and therefore guaranteeing a prosperous future for children* (Sérgio Costa Araújo, Eurochild).
- It is necessary to **combat the institutional racism** and to promote a greater **humanisation of services** (Bruno Prudêncio, Intercultural Mediator, Portugal). On the one hand, professionals are left to assume a role of controlling rather than emancipating people. On the other hand, people using services distrust social workers, leading to more isolation and exclusion.

The biggest challenge of the Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights is its implementation: *principles have been outlined, believing that access to the labour market, to fair working conditions and access to social protection, together with the principle of gender equality and equal opportunities are sufficient tools to fight poverty and promote social inclusion* (Juliana Wahlgren, EAPN Europe Director). We know today, in 2023, that these tools are not enough. We must call for social and economic justice and an equitable redistribution of wealth and available resources.

We know that this is not a utopia, that it is the only way to inaugurate a new paradigm - *Fighting poverty is fighting for the integral development of every human being, based on a strong commitment for an effective participation of all!* (Agostinho J. Moreira, EAPN Portugal President)

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