



CONFEDERATION OF FAMILY ORGANISATIONS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

FAMILIES EUROPE

Making the European Pillar of Social Rights a reality for Europe's families: mind the gap

SEMINAR REPORT

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Introduction

COFACE Families Europe, representing 25 million families across 23 countries, wishes to actively participate in shaping the future European Pillar of Social Rights (hereafter referred to as “Pillar”). We know from the experiences of our wide membership the concerning absence of a Social Europe which puts its citizens first. Unfortunately, in recent years, the European Union has failed to adequately take into account the increasing vulnerability of families across the EU, which has resulted in increasing levels of poverty and homelessness, falling short of the 2020 poverty target.¹

The Pillar could be a unique opportunity to improve the monitoring of the employment and social performance of EU countries, although the current Commission proposal is to apply the Pillar to Eurozone countries only. The Pillar must also allow social policy stakeholders to rebalance the political agenda of the EU Semester towards an equal focus on inclusion, employment and growth, driven by a strong rights-based social policy agenda for Europe to effectively prevent poverty and social exclusion.

COFACE Families Europe organised a reflection seminar that took place on 27 September 2016 in Brussels (see programme in Annex), hosted together with the European Economic and Social Committee. The seminar brought together key influencers to reflect openly on the strengths and challenges of the Pillar, and address any potential gaps this year, before the Pillar takes shape in 2017. As a key stakeholder in the EU political arena, COFACE Families Europe is interested in discussing both content and process, which are essential foundations of a strong and forward-looking Pillar.

This report provides a brief overview of the key messages that were raised during the seminar.

Annie Driessens, President of COFACE Families Europe welcomed the initiative launched by the European Commission in March 2016 and highlighted the role of civil society in shaping European policy to shift towards more Social Europe, as President Juncker said in his State of the Union speech. She highlighted the importance of RST- adequate Resources; accessible, quality and affordable care Services; and flexible working Time arrangements to successfully reconcile work and family life.

In her opening, **Kinga Joó**, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee emphasized that the Pillar is currently one of the main focuses in the EESC and they hope that social investment will go beyond job creation. Ms Joó also summarized the experiences of the Hungarian consultation on the Pillar, an important outcome was that until basic needs of people are met, including access to housing, heating, or to food, the most marginalized groups will not be included in society.

How to take the EU Pillar of Social Rights to the local level to both prevent and address the increasing vulnerability of families?

The first panel discussed openly and constructively how the proposed Pillar can have an impact at local level - what instruments exist already and what are the obstacles and the opportunities in using them.

Bart Vanhercke from the European Social Policy Network, evaluated if current EU social policy coordination and transnational exchanges (e.g. Social Open Method of Coordination, European Semester, peer review

¹ See recent Eurostat figures on the Europe2020 targets: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7566536/1-19072016-BP-EN.pdf/126e6fa2-7412-43af-b0a2-2e7bf8a0747a>

process) have been useful until now, or not. He confirmed that these frameworks had an impact, but more comparable data would be needed to develop benchmarks at regional level. In terms of policy innovation, the Social Policy Network's assessment shows that the European Social Fund (ESF) stands out and pushes regions and local authorities to come up with policy initiatives.

Tamás Meszerics, Member of European Parliament, emphasised that in order to make progress at the local level, it is not enough if the Pillar takes the same shape as the Social Open Method of Coordination, being a soft law process integrated in the economic policy coordination of the Semester to monitor social and employment performances of Member States. Mr Meszerics reminded us that social rights must be enforceable - the question is what to include in the Pillar (some issues are better dealt within the Eurozone, but others need a common European indicator). Due to the increasing differences at regional level, the task is urgent and the EU should introduce legislative initiatives to find solution to some of these problems. The European Parliament is currently working on its report on the Pillar that will hopefully include concrete recommendations.

Alfonso Montero, Policy Director at the European Social Network, was commenting on whether more binding social policy measures would be appealing to local authorities, or if the Pillar should in fact respect the different social protection systems in the EU Member States. Mr Montero explained that there is a general fear that the Pillar would remain another political exercise without direct impact at local level. Furthermore, despite the wide consultation launched by the European Commission, there is a lack of awareness about the Pillar among local ESN members who at the same time are actively working on the Semester. The Social Protection Committee has a particular role to play in ensuring that information is channeled to all levels.

Andor Ürmös, DG REGIO of the European Commission, highlighted the link between policy and EU funding and confirmed that the Cohesion funds which are managed jointly between the Commission and national/regional governments have already gone beyond subsidiarity in the social policy field. However, there is still a lack of coherence between EU policies and the use of EU funds, which is an issue to be tackled in the future. In Central-Eastern European countries, a variety of social protection matters (e.g. health care, child care etc.) are already financed by EU funding, while these services are covered rather from national funds in other Member States.

COFACE Families Europe's Vice-President, **Antonia Torrens** from KMOP Greece explained that both ERDF and ESF funds have been very useful for Greece in general and for KMOP. However, challenges in Greece are even greater, especially when it comes to the pension system, thus concrete measures are urgently need to be taken. Another concern is how to combine economic growth and social cohesion. Ms Torrens sees the Social Rights Pillar as an opportunity for organisations in the social sector at the national level to work together with the EU to find solutions to the pressing social challenges.

Mr Vanhercke was asked if the Pillar could potentially promote cross-country research to support and shape effective policies at national level, continuing EU social policy's role in promoting research and innovation. Interestingly, the proposed Pillar has already started to shape research – the areas that are listed as principles are becoming themes for research to address gaps in Europe. There is a need to continue coming up with evidence-based data and indicators.

In his second intervention, **Mr Meszerics** clarified that he would not argue that all elements of the Pillar should be extended to the whole EU (including his country, Hungary), but there are indeed some policy domains which should be applied to all countries. For instance, it would be difficult to make the future EU unemployment benefit scheme work out of the Eurozone, while many of the poverty-related issues do not make sense if they only apply to the Eurozone. Retaining the Pillar to the Eurozone would be a mistake, considering the growing regional differences. The Pillar should be an open process for anyone to join.

Similarly to the EU Social Acquis, the EU Cohesion Funds also apply to all 28 EU Member States. **Andor Ürmös** from the Commission was asked whether fragmentation could be a challenge if the Pillar only applies to Eurozone countries. Mr Ürmös highlighted, as a positive element that the Commission sees better how Member States want to organise their employment, or social policies, since countries have to provide data in order to access EU funds. EU funding is a good example of how the EU is reaching out to the local level, however tremendous challenges remain ahead, especially in rural areas when it comes to shifting towards and accessing community-based social and health services (deinstitutionalization is an important criterion for Member States).

Alfonso Montero held the view that the key challenge with the Pillar is how to make it relevant for local communities by working with vulnerable families, children, persons with disabilities and other groups along the life-cycle. The Pillar structure is not clear on how it would address the issues highlighted under the proposed Principles, given the fact that they are often dealt by different government departments at different levels.

In the Q&A section after the first panel, a number of important issues were touched upon. Ageing society presents a great challenge and it would be useful to exchange experiences among EU Member States on how to promote the independence of older people through providing them with in-home services, accessibility measures in the transport system and in the community. It was also emphasised that rights are not negotiable, and should be applicable everywhere. It was suggested that the Social Rights Pillar should be a way to reaffirm the European social model with a strong gender dimension.

Mainstreaming social rights in other areas: how to take the Pillar beyond the EU social policy realm?

The second panel discussion focused on ensuring horizontal coherence between the Pillar and relevant parallel EU initiatives, which are relevant to some of the principles put forward in the Pillar proposal. To mention a few, there is the European Accessibility Act which is a legislative initiative to improve access to goods and services, and directly concerns people with disabilities and elderly people with reduced mobility. Another initiative is the upcoming Reconciliation package to be published by the European Commission in late 2016, with a mix of legislative and non-legislative proposals such as directives on carers leave, paternity leave. Furthermore, economic and finance ministers are also discussing the feasibility of a European Unemployment Benefits Scheme. Last, but not least, there are initiatives taken in the field of consumer policy and access to financial services for vulnerable consumers.

Allan Larsson, Special Adviser of President Juncker on the European Pillar of Social Rights compared the proposed Pillar to a compass that can contribute to finding a balance between social and economic policies. The Pillar will not include all areas, but the purpose of the public consultation is to get new ideas to shape the Pillar and provide answers to some of the impact of the crisis, including unemployment, poverty, inequality etc. Despite the fact Europe has the most expensive social system, a lot of people stay out of the labour market for too long, so their activation would be very important according to Mr Larsson. He highlighted four main questions to be tackled in order to put the European economy back on the right track:

1. Find an answer to the question: how come the EU with the best social system and greatest common market suffered so badly from the 2009 crisis?
2. Challenges that arise as a result of the shift towards digital and flexible economy.
3. Ageing Europe and its impact on social systems and the need to promote reintegration into work, active ageing etc.
4. The unsustainability of 10 years divergence after 30 years convergence. The question is to find a new balance between social and financial Europe and how to bring back people to employment.

Frank Sioen from the European Network for Independent Living explained how he sees the link between the Pillar to the European Accessibility Act (EAA) that was proposed by the European Commission in late 2015 and is currently going through the European Parliament and the Council. According to Mr Sioen, the Pillar should have the potential to set the long-term objectives, general directions, while legislative and policy initiatives, like the EAA are for putting these principles into practice. The Pillar can set the objective for concrete legislation. For instance, the EAA does not cover the built environment, however if the Pillar includes a goal on access to services, there are ways to make the built environment accessible in order to live up to that principle.

Jean-Bernard Audureau, Vice-President of COFACE Families Europe and member of the European Consumer Consultative Group (ECCG), mentioned that in the ECCG they do not talk about the Pillar, but they are focusing on financial inclusion. Since there are about 25 Million European citizens who do not have a bank account and only 10% of them due to the lack of acceptance by the bank, it is important to recognise this problem in discussions on accessing services.

Miroslav Beblavý, Member of the Slovak Parliament and representative of the Centre for European Policy Studies, held the opinion that while social injustice is arguably a big problem, it is not sure that upward convergence is the answer for it. The Pillar should address issues like the brain drain and when discussing finding a new balance between economic and social policies consider the fact that the most vulnerable citizens were hit the worst by the crisis. He mentioned that legally speaking the European Unemployment Benefit Scheme could be done without a Treaty change, the question is how to set up the scheme and how to distribute it?

Answering a question on the potential opportunities and threats of the Pillar, **Frank Sioen** highlighted that the Pillar could potentially ensure consistency throughout policy measures taken, for instance it would be important to include deinstitutionalisation (DI) in the Pillar proposal, as ESIF investment in institutions is already banned, but it would be important to mainstream DI across all policies to move towards community-based services. Despite the fact the EU and 27 of its Member States ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, disability is unfortunately not mainstreamed in the proposed Pillar, and persons with disabilities only appear there as recipients of care and social benefits instead of being considered as active citizens. A potential threat with the Pillar is that it may serve as an excuse for policy-makers not to adopt new legislation, claiming that the Pillar already covers this or that areas.

Mr Audureau pointed out that while access to financial services is a pre-requisite to housing, many groups, including vulnerable families, or persons with disabilities, are facing great challenges in accessing housing. Without adequate housing opportunities, we cannot really talk about the social inclusion of the most marginalised groups. The European Commission is currently working on an insolvency directive, which could be potentially extended to consumers to avoid the exclusion of these families by the banking system.

Mr Beblavý raised as a concern that the proposed social Rights Pillar rules out basic income, however there should not be a European social agenda without leaving the door open for basic income. Furthermore, the strong focus on economic efficiency throughout the Pillar can be a threat.

In the Q&A sessions important topics were raised, such as the need to integrate long-term care and informal care and to provide family carers with social rights and benefits if they have to take time off from work in order to support or care for a family member. It was mentioned that the European Monetary Union needs to be made more crisis-resistant and in case the Pillar only applies to certain countries, it is questionable how could this be done. All children and young people should have access to quality education, as early school leaving and exclusion from the mainstream school system often leads to unemployment and the risk of falling into and stay in the poverty trap. There were also discussions on the potential of the Pillar to set minimum social standards for the EU.

In his closing speech, **Luca Jahier**, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee and Co-Rapporteur for the European Pillar of Social Rights underlined that the proposed Pillar is welcome, because there is a need to re-balance and make the social rights included in the EU Treaty and the Charter more of a driving force. Since the Pillar is the greatest EU social rights proposal so far, it raises expectations and there is a risk that the final Pillar will be disappointing. According to Mr Jahier, the real question is what should be the concrete relevance of the Pillar and whether it will be a manifesto, or an action plan? Growing differences between the East and West, North and South of Europe and the clashing conflict between Brussels and the Member States should be tackled, but without the European Commission putting forward some binding proposal, the Pillar will not contribute to re-inventing the European social model.

For more information about the reflection seminar on the European Pillar of Social Rights, or COFACE's work on social policy, please contact Magdi Birtha at mbirtha@coface-eu.org

Next page. Annex: Programme of the COFACE Families Europe reflection seminar on 27th September 2016

Annex

Programme of the Seminar “Making the European Pillar of Social Rights a reality for Europe’s families: mind the gap” - 27th September 2016, Brussels

9.45	Welcome Annemie Drieskens , President of COFACE Families Europe Kinga Joó , Member of the European Economic and Social Committee
10.00-11.00	Panel discussion 1: How to take the EU social rights pillar to the local level to both prevent and address the increasing vulnerability of families? Key instruments, challenges, opportunities Speakers : Tamás Meszerics , Member of European Parliament Alfonso Montero , European Social Network Antonia Torrens , COFACE Families Europe Greece Andor Urmos , DG REGIO, European Commission Bart Vanhercke , European Social Policy Network
11.00-12.00	Panel discussion 2: Mainstreaming social rights in other areas: how to take the Pillar beyond the EU social policy realm? Speakers : Jean-Bernard Audureau , European Consumer Consultative Group Miroslav Beblavý , Centre for European Policy Studies Allan Larsson , Special Adviser for the EU pillar of social rights Frank Sioen , European Network for Independent Living
12.00-12.30	Conclusions and next steps Liz Gosme , Director of COFACE Families Europe Luca Jahier , Member of the European Economic and Social Committee and Rapporteur for the EU social rights pillar

More information about the seminar: www.coface-eu.org/en/Events/European-Pillar-of-Social-Rights

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