

Briefing Paper: A European Pillar of Social Rights & Recommendations for Progressing Children’s Rights

26th July 2016

Overview

On 8th March 2016, the European Commission published a [preliminary outline](#) of a European Pillar of Social Rights.¹ The Commission has referred to the Pillar as a ‘**reference framework**’ which will “*identify a number of essential principles common to euro area Member States, focusing on their needs and challenges in the field of employment and social policies.*”²

The Pillar of Social Rights initiative follows President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker’s call for Europe to achieve a “**social triple-A rating**”, i.e., putting social issues further up on the agenda alongside financial and economic priorities. The European Commission has stated that a European Pillar of Social Rights should build on, and complement, our existing EU social “acquis” in order to guide policies in a number of fields essential for well-functioning and fair labour markets and welfare systems.³ It has also acknowledged that ‘*social and economic performance are two sides of the same coin*’.⁴

It seeks to address the crucial social challenges that have been exacerbated by the financial crisis (including poverty and income inequality) and which pose problems for future economic growth and development. To balance the social approach, the initiative intends for labour market adjustment mechanisms to be put in place so that societies become more resilient and perform better in economic terms.

The Pillar of Social Rights is intended to drive reform at the national level of EU Member States and support renewed convergence within the euro area. The initiative will apply to the **euro area** and other EU Member States will be able to participate if they wish to do so.

The proposals come at a time when approximately 27 million children in the EU are now at risk of poverty or social exclusion; that’s over one in four.⁵ Over one million children are estimated to be in institutionalised care in Europe.⁶ In 2015, 363,890 refugee children arrived in Europe, approximately

¹ European Commission press release [here](#).

² [Access the European Pillar of Social Rights website here](#).

³ European Commission (2016). Staff Working Document: [The social acquis](#)

⁴ European Political Strategy Centre (2015). [The Social Dimension of Economic and Monetary Union](#)

⁵ European Parliament (2015). One in four children at risk of poverty in Europe. See [here](#).

⁶ Information on Eurochild’s Opening Doors campaign [here](#).



one quarter of whom were unaccompanied.⁷ There appear to be **growing inequalities in and between EU countries** and some concerns that we are moving further away from a more social Europe.⁸ There is a significant lack of investment in the social agenda and current spending of EU funds is predominantly focused on boosting the economy and reducing deficits.⁹

As we reflect on the multiple barriers which growing numbers of children and young people are facing in accessing their rights, Eurochild welcomes this initiative as an opportunity to strengthen social protection systems and services in order to progress implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (**UNCRC**).

Briefing Paper

Eurochild has been engaging in dialogue at EU level with other social partners and decision-makers from the European Commission and the European Parliament, in order to gain a stronger understanding of the Pillar of Social Rights. What might it mean for children and young people in practice; what are the proposals intend to achieve and how they will be monitored?

This paper intends to provide **relevant background information** to the Pillar of Social Rights, a Eurochild **analysis** of the proposals and **recommendations** for the European Commission to take into account as part of its consultation. We encourage you to use this paper to support your submissions to the European Commission consultation to strengthen a coherent message from the children's rights sector.

So, what do the proposals include?

The preliminary outline and content of the Pillar is very comprehensive. There are three main themes:

1. [Equal opportunities and access to the labour market](#)
2. [Fair working conditions](#)
3. [Adequate and sustainable social protection](#)

The three themes cover 20 different policy domains covering a broad spectrum of issues, including childcare,¹⁰ integrated social benefits and services,¹¹ gender equality and work-life balance,¹² skills,

⁷ See current data from UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data [here](#).

⁸ European Commission (2016). Commission Staff Working Document: [Key economic, employment and social trends behind a European Pillar of Social Rights](#)

⁹ See Eurochild (2015) report on the European Semester, [here](#).

¹⁰ [European Commission childcare briefing here](#).

¹¹ [European Commission integrated social benefits and services briefing here](#).

¹² [European Commission gender equality and work-life balance briefing here](#).



education and lifelong learning¹³ and active support to employment.¹⁴ Other policy domains refer to health and housing and highlight the importance of having a minimum income¹⁵ to reduce poverty.

Eurochild's Assessment

Eurochild welcomes the European Pillar of Social Rights as it acknowledges the importance of sound social policies and social protection systems on protecting, promoting and fulfilling children's rights, and making our societies and economies more resilient. Indeed by providing the opportunity to facilitate a common approach at the EU level, the Pillar of Social Rights has the potential to advance our common goal to progress the rights of all children, all of the time, in Europe. We welcome renewed discussions on social rights across Europe: Why are we not meeting existing obligations and what can be done to resolve this?

- **ECONOMY TO SERVE SOCIETY, OR SOCIETY TO SERVE ECONOMY?**

From the outset, it is important to highlight that although the Pillar of Social Rights refers to addressing poverty and inequality, the initiative is overshadowed by a macro-economic perspective. The assessment of social policy is based on its ability to increase productivity and the current proposals are biased towards boosting employment to serve the economy, rather than achieving social progress. It is clear from the words of the European Commission that the Social Pillar is seen as an economic necessity rather than a social imperative.¹⁶

The Social Pillar is intended to serve as a compass for the renewed convergence within the euro area, leaving the initiative open to other countries to opt-in. In making the future economic success of the euro area the primary focus, the European Commission emits a strong signal that economic rationale prevails over social policy considerations.

The Commission has indicated that the consultation period for the proposals, which is open to all Member States, should help countries not in the euro area to decide whether to sign-up to the Pillar. It is unspecified if and how any efforts will be made to ensure that the initiative becomes EU-wide, which heightens the risk of a two-tiered Europe.

- **CALL FOR PREVENTATIVE APPROACHES TO ADDRESS CHILD POVERTY**

The three main themes which encompass 20 different policy domains can be seen as an effective way to create a new set of benchmarks and indicators for measuring progress within different areas of social policy. The Social Pillar proposals include a focus on childcare, highlighting that limited availability, access, affordability and quality remain major obstacles which hamper children's development.

¹³ [European Commission skills, education and lifelong learning briefing here.](#)

¹⁴ [European Commission active support to employment briefing here.](#)

¹⁵ [European Commission minimum income briefing here.](#)

¹⁶ European Trade Union Institute (2016). [The European pillar of social rights: critical legal analysis and proposals](#)



Eurochild is pleased to see that the proposals acknowledge the challenges of access to childcare services for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and call for preventative approaches to address child poverty.

The policy domains also focus on education and skills, work-life balance and minimum income. With EU level benchmarks and indicators in these areas, the Social Pillar has the potential to strengthen national efforts towards the Europe 2020 targets¹⁷ to reduce poverty and social exclusion and early school leaving. Yet children and preventative approaches are not mainstreamed across the other policy domains included in the proposals, which is absolutely crucial if we are to break the cycle of disadvantage. Whilst intervening to support social rights is important across the life cycle, Eurochild is clear that we must focus investment in the first years of life to meet our social and economic goals.¹⁸

- **20 POLICY DOMAINS DISREGARD CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE**

Eurochild welcomes that the 20 policy domains resonate with Pillar 1 (access to adequate resources) and Pillar 2 (access to affordable quality services) of the 2013 European Commission Recommendation on '[Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage](#)'. The Recommendation recognises the importance of integrated strategies to tackle child poverty and social exclusion and a focus on children who face an increased risk due to multiple disadvantage such as children within households at particular risk of poverty, Roma children, migrant or ethnic minority children, children with disabilities, children in alternative care and children of imprisoned parents.

Eurochild regrets that more emphasis is not given to Pillar 3 of the Recommendation on Investing in Children; children's right to participate. The policy domain of social dialogue does not mention the participation of children and young people and it is not extended to strengthening participatory democracy more generally. The current proposals lack ambition in progressing Article 12 of the UNCRC¹⁹ at national level and in promoting a children's rights approach which recognises children as equal rights holders.

- **POLICY DOMAIN 18 ON CHILDCARE**

The welcomed policy domain included on childcare includes two recommendations:

- a) Access to quality and affordable childcare services, provided by adequately qualified professionals, shall be ensured for all children.*

¹⁷ Find out more about the Europe 2020 targets [here](#).

¹⁸ Include reference.

¹⁹ See [Article 12](#) and General Comment 12 to the UNCRC (2012) on the right of the child to be heard [here](#).



- b) *Measures shall be taken at an early stage and preventive approaches should be adopted to address child poverty, including specific measures to encourage attendance of children with disadvantages backgrounds.*

The proposals make no reference to the Barcelona targets²⁰ which would help to strengthen the recommendations by grounding them in existing obligations. In many Member States, much of the childcare currently provided is on a part-time basis which does not allow for full-time working hours for parents. A lack of flexibility is a major barrier to full-time employment across Europe and particularly for women, which is not addressed in the Social Pillar.²¹ In addition, childcare entitlement in many countries begins after 3 years of age, and data suggests that demand in childcare for children under 3 continues to be largely unmet.²² Efforts need to be stepped up to promote access to childcare from birth to 3 years, which could be addressed using a Pillar of Social Rights.

RIGHTS ON PAPER ARE NOT ENOUGH

It remains unclear whether there will be any accountability mechanisms or sanctions implemented when Member States do not comply with the 20 policy domains of the Social Pillar. To ensure that the Social Pillar is taken seriously at national level, EU mechanisms will need to be developed to guarantee that investment is directed towards social rights. Commitments in words and on paper is the first step, yet what will make the difference is a clear and robust action plan which will translate policy into practice. Bridging this gap is absolutely essential if the Pillar is to affect social change.

- **HOW WILL IT INTEGRATE WITH EXISTING SOCIAL OBLIGATIONS AND THE SDGs?**

The European Social Charter has been ratified by 43 out of 47 Member States of the Council of Europe already provides a comprehensive framework for the protection of social rights in the EU. EU countries have ratified a number of UN human rights treaties including the UNCRC, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The principles enshrined in these treaties should not only be a source of ambition but the foundations on which the Social Pillar will stand.

The Pillar also seems to be disconnected from the universal Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 which offer a clear accountability framework for improving children's lives and addressing poverty, nutrition, health and education. As highlighted by the International Labour Organisation, the construction of a European Pillar of Social Rights could make a significant contribution and is highly relevant to EU Member State's achievement of Goal 1 (ending poverty) and Goal 8 (promotion of

²⁰ European Council (2002). [Presidency Conclusions: Barcelona](#)

²¹ European Commission (2013). [Barcelona objectives: The development of childcare facilities for young children in Europe with a view to sustainable and inclusive growth](#)

²² Ibid. and Eurostat data available [here](#).



inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all).²³ These goals and associated targets, which include the eradication of child poverty, must be embedded and mainstreamed within the social policy work of the EU.

- **MONITORING AS PART OF THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER PROCESS**

Although reference is made to the European Semester and the Europe 2020 Strategy, none of the documents establish the way in which the Social Pillar will work within the Semester framework. The Five Presidents' Report: Completing Europe's Economic and Monetary Union²⁴ states that in order for social welfare systems and labour markets to function well and in a fair manner across Member States, *“employment and social concerns must feature highly in the European Semester.”* Although the Social Pillar proposals are dominated by a macro-economic perspective, Eurochild welcomes the potential for a Social Pillar to help re-balance the social dimension of the European Semester.

Key messages & recommendations

- ***Put children first***

The Pillar should be underpinned by a child-rights approach. Investing in Europe needs to start by investing in children, families and communities. This is crucial to achieve social cohesion and inclusion, alongside economic growth and prosperity - now and in the longer term.

The European Commission must - as an absolute minimum – respect, protect, promote and seek to fulfil the UNCRC and other international human rights treaties to which their Member States have become a party. Such should be the foundations of a Social Pillar and not just a basis of inspiration.

The new initiative should build on and reinforce existing principles that have been established in the Recommendation ‘Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage.’ We hope that with this new initiative the Commission will not lose sight of prioritising the implementation of the Recommendation on Investing in Children and its holistic approach.

➤ Recommendation to the European Commission: Ensure that children are visible throughout the Social Pillar and that a preventative approach is mainstreamed across each policy domain.

²³ http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_490959.pdf

²⁴ European Commission (2015). [The Five President's Report: Completing Europe's Economic and Monetary Union](#)





- ***The Social Pillar must have ‘teeth’ to ensure all EU action contributes to social objectives and reinforces implementation of existing EU social policy instruments***

The Social Pillar should be a reference for all EU policy, legislative and funding activities. There should be concrete efforts and instruments to prevent trade, fiscal and finance policies from undermining social efforts and overshadow social goals and priorities.

It should strengthen the social dimension of the existing European Semester process and help achieve the EU 2020 targets on education, employment and poverty.

- Recommendation to the European Commission: Develop a benchmark on childcare in line with the Barcelona targets, ensuring a focus on flexibility of childcare and provision for under 3s.
- Recommendation to the European Commission: The scoreboard of social and employment indicators should become binding in order to deepen the social dimension of the Economic and Monetary Union.

- ***Foster civil dialogue and participatory democracy***

The Pillar should put a stronger emphasis on citizens and civil society engagement and empowerment. Eurochild invites the Commission to continue strengthening the role of civil dialogue and participatory democracy in policy processes and governance, and fostering a meaningful engagement of the civil society, especially children and young people themselves.

- Recommendation to the European Commission: Prioritise the meaningful and ongoing involvement of children and young people in decisions affecting their lives. Use the Social Pillar to encourage strategies and mechanisms at national level so that children can be involved in decisions affecting them.

European Commission consultation process

The European Commission launched a [public consultation](#) to gather views and feedback from a broad range of stakeholders, including civil society organisations and citizens. The consultation is hoped to steer thinking on existing social rights, on the particular needs of the euro area, on the changing realities of the world of work, as well as on the reforms needed at all levels.

The consultation aims at gathering feedback around three main themes:

- Stocktaking of the EU social “acquis”: is it still relevant and up to date?
- The future of work and welfare systems: what are future challenges and opportunities?



- Role of the European Pillar of Social Rights as part of a deeper and fairer Economic and Monetary Union: what are the key requirements for a functioning euro area?

Next Steps

The written consultation on the Social Pillar will be open until the end of 2016. Please use the recommendations above to guide your response.

The European Commission is organising a number of Member State consultation events and more information can be found on Eurochild's website. At the beginning of 2017, a 'White Paper' is expected to be released which will provide a summary of the responses obtained from all stakeholders through the consultation.

Eurochild will be providing further information on how members can engage and input into a Eurochild response.

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