



**Key steps to make the European
Pillar of Social Rights
A renewed social agenda
for all families in Europe**

RECOMMENDATIONS

December 2016

I. Building a strong policy architecture for the Pillar

1. Scope of the Pillar: gaps to be filled to ensure social inclusion of all families

The Pillar must ensure that the needs of all EU citizens are sufficiently covered and social rights are provided on an equal basis with others. COFACE recommends that the scope of the Pillar should be broadened to cover also non-euro zone countries, as the highest rates of poverty are observed in some of these countries. Furthermore, those groups who cannot immediately contribute to economic growth, should still be able to get out of the benefit trap and to participate in the labour market. This can of course only happen through respecting the rights and choices of these groups and by providing them with specific measures and support to improve their living standards and well-being. For this reason, we recommend that this Pillar should be set firmly in a social policy framework rather than being an instrument to achieve a stable Economic and Monetary Union (EMU).

The link between employment and social policy made in the European Commission's proposal is important for consistency and to create synergies wherever possible and it should be clear from the outset that employment is an essential means to ensure social inclusion of families, but only if coupled with strong social protection systems. We also hope that the Pillar will protect the social rights of refugees and undocumented immigrants as well, among others.

2. Bridging the gap between EU and local needs

The Pillar should be strong enough to address both emergency needs and build sound welfare systems to prevent poverty and exclusion, and hence ensure better monetary and economic stability in the future. Funding mechanisms like the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived (FEAD) should be mobilised to support families in distress, while the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) should be directed at programmes supporting labour market and social inclusion pathways (under the European Social Fund) and supporting community-based social, health and housing infrastructure in line with deinstitutionalisation principles (under the European Regional Development Fund). The sustainability of these European funds (coupled with sustainable national funding schemes in the field of social protection) will be instrumental to ensure the Pillar has an impact at local level. The Pillar objectives should not only ideally be aligned on these funds where appropriate, but could potentially drive the new generation of funds post-2020.

3. Ensuring horizontal coherence with relevant parallel EU initiatives

Under a number of the principles proposed by the Pillar there is either already EU legislation, or a proposal for EU legislation. For instance, the proposed European Accessibility Act; an upcoming package on gender equality and work-life balance; the revision of EU social security coordination legislation; or the idea of building a European Unemployment Benefits Scheme. The Pillar could serve as a general framework to monitor progress and implementation of these different EU laws and initiatives. Furthermore, the Pillar should become a true 2030 social agenda for Europe, with clear long-term goals and making the link with UN Treaty obligations as well as the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals where relevant.

4. Role of European NGOs to implement the Pillar

We would like to ensure that the future Pillar is directly relevant for the organisations we represent, who work daily on the ground to prevent and address the increasing vulnerability of families, working closely with parents, children, educators, and teachers. In the future, there should be formal consultation channels for civil society to ensure their voice is listened to in a systematic way and to recognise the value of their work for promoting access to basic social rights. EASI-funded European networks, like COFACE Families Europe, serve not only as important channels for transnational policy and service exchanges across countries, but also to ensure two-way watchdog functions building bridges daily between the EU and its local communities.

II. Social Pillar principles: building long-term goals for Europe

We believe each of the twenty proposed Pillar principles should be guided by inspirational long-term goals in order to act as a genuine compass for a renewed European social agenda, and mobilise Europe's communities to act. As professionals and family organisations, we have formulated recommendations to consolidate six of the twenty principles in this direction.

1. Skills, education and lifelong learning

The future Pillar should provide guidance to Member States on how to make their school system more inclusive to all children. There is an urgent need to tackle some of the main concerning trends, including early school leaving, the lack of accessible quality early childhood education and care services, and the systematic segregation of vulnerable children. This is a prerequisite to ensure skill development of children and adults, as well as the well-being and social inclusion of the whole family.

2. Gender equality and work-life balance

The recognition of work-life balance as one of the principles to be developed within the Pillar towards a Social Europe is a positive signal. COFACE Families Europe calls for work-life balance policies and legislation that support families along the life-cycle by guaranteeing a reconciliation policy mix of (1) sufficient leave schemes and flexible working arrangements for women and men to avoid unnecessary and unwanted drop out or reduction of working hours, (2) setting and monitoring the provision of quality affordable and accessible care services for children, elderly and family members with disabilities and (3) support the revision towards fiscal systems which promote more equality and non-discrimination of different family forms.

3. Disability

COFACE Families Europe takes a life-course approach towards disability and calls for the development of high-quality community-based support services for those needing care, or support. We also want family carers, who give their time and help free of charge, to be recognised through a certain number of rights, social and other benefits. The Pillar should support measures that contribute to developing an adequate social protection floor, fully inclusive education system, open labour market, accessible support services, or health system in order to tackle effectively the social exclusion of persons with disabilities and their families.

4. Long-term care

COFACE would like to highlight that long-term care should not take place in segregating institutional settings, but in the form of home-based care, or community-based care. People with care needs should be provided with a flexible system in which they can use a combination of informal and formal care, and have access among other measures to a personal budget and personal assistance system. The increasing involvement of family carers, as a response to the lack of formal care and the ageing population, undermines the social inclusion and gender equality of those families.

5. Childcare

It is very important to provide all children with access to a variety of available, affordable and high-quality childcare services in the communities, including early childhood care and education, emergency childcare, drop-in part-time babysitting services, care services for sick children, multi-purpose childcare facilities, out-of hour's and out-of school childcare, and employer supported childcare etc. Such services along with a higher level of social protection can reduce the risk of poverty of children and their families.

6. Access to essential services

Beyond social and health services of general interest which must be developed as part of rights-based social and employment policies, other consumer-related services are also essential to ensure social inclusion. Despite financial inclusion being a prerequisite for social inclusion, the proposed Pillar does not cover the issue adequately. We would like to see effective measures taken in to order substantially reduce the risk of falling further into poverty and tackle social exclusion, including interest rate caps, information transparency, insolvency, strengthen consumer protection in financial services, encourage “ethical” banking, access to independent financial guidance, among others.

Background information

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 organised a [reflection seminar](#) that took place on 27 September 2016 in Brussels, hosted together with the European Economic and Social Committee with participants from the European Commission, the European Parliament, COFACE member organisations and other key European non-governmental organisations. Prior to the seminar, we published our Discussion paper "[Laying the foundations for a European Pillar of Social Rights](#)". Our key recommendations focus on both the overall architecture of the proposed Pillar and the policy priorities of the Pillar.

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COFACE – Families Europe | Rue de Londres 17, 1050 Brussels
+32 2 511 41 79 secretariat@coface-eu.org www.coface-eu.org [@COFACE_EU](https://twitter.com/COFACE_EU)