

Response to the public consultation on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights

The European Public Health Alliance welcomes the European Commission's commitment to advance Europe's social and economic development by proposing an action plan aiming to strengthen the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The unprecedented crisis caused by the pandemic has had disproportionate effects on vulnerable population groups and marginalized communities, including Roma, homeless people, persons with disabilities, migrants and people with a migrant background; LGBTIQ who are already experiencing greater exposure to ill physical and mental health, but also poverty and exclusion. The pandemic worsened social and health inequalities which remain a severe barrier for the optimal economic and social participation of entire population groups¹ as well as Europe's sustainable development.

Therefore, we welcome the adoption of the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy 2021² putting the Social Pillar at the heart of Europe's recovery, digitalization and climate transition and call on the European Commission to implement a number of measures to strengthen the health, social and economic protection of vulnerable groups through the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Pillar's action plan must safeguard that disadvantaged individuals and communities are provided with equal opportunities to mitigate the social and economic impact of COVID-19. Furthermore, it must tackle the adverse effects of health, social and gender inequalities whilst promoting social and economic development across Europe.

Developing a comprehensive action plan to effectively close health and social gaps between vulnerable groups such as Roma, homeless people, persons with disabilities, migrants and people with a migrant background, LGBTIQ; and the general population

The Annual Strategy for Sustainable Growth 2021 identifies the green transition, digital transition and productivity, fairness and macroeconomic stability as key priorities for building resilience and boosting Europe's social and economic recovery. However, the systemic character social and health inequalities impacting disadvantaged communities, underlines the lower health, social, economic and environmental protection of the most vulnerable. Poverty and social exclusion rates remain excessively high among Roma³ and unemployment and employment precariousness is a constant challenge for vulnerable groups, such as migrants, persons with disabilities, homeless people.

Persistent inequalities in employment, income, but also in housing and living environment; education and health raise further the need for strengthening the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights through a comprehensive action plan, combining social policy with human rights protection. Reducing inequalities requires substantial changes in societies, economies and environment through stronger protection of social and economic rights promoted by the Pillar.

¹ <https://epha.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/epha-covid-statement-on-vulnerable-groups.pdf>

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?qid=1600708827568&uri=CELEX:52020DC0575>

³ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/roma-travellers-survey>

Strengthening the implementation of the action plan through monitoring mechanisms including measurable indicators and binding targets

Developing an action plan will advance the policy commitment to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and provide an integrated approach towards social and economic growth, digitalization and green transition. Moreover, reinforcing the social dimension of the Green Deal, Europe's Recovery and Resilience plan through the European Pillar of Social Rights will contribute to achieving sustainable results in health equity.

Nonetheless, this ambitious goal requires policy commitment and its adequacy and efficiency must be guaranteed by adopting measurable indicators and binding targets in each strategic priority of the European Pillar of Social Rights and its action plan. Indicators in gender equality, social and economic participation, child protection, access to healthcare and prevention and targeted measures for vulnerable groups must set up the basis for progress monitoring through European and national mechanisms aiming to increase the effectiveness of the Pillar's action plan and its implementation. Furthermore, the Pillar's action plan must include indicators making it possible to assess individuals and communities needs in health protection with a focus on accessibility, availability and affordability of healthcare and prevention services. Particular attention must be paid to progress in tackling inequalities in health which impact individuals' and communities' capacity to access social and economic rights.

Reinforcing health and social protection and prevention through the Pillar's action plan

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the lower preparedness of public health systems to address major public health and cross-border threats. It has increased the vulnerability of marginalized groups, who already face poor physical and mental health, especially those living in social care facilities, refugee camps, those in prison, or people living in poor housing conditions. Furthermore, COVID-19 has had a significant indirect health impact on patients suffering from chronic disease; women's sexual and reproductive health; elderly and disabled persons due to disruptions in health systems. This situation reduces further the accessibility and availability of health protection and prevention, and social services which are essential for protecting people in a disadvantaged situation. Most of the EU Member States have adopted Universal Health Coverage including primary care and prevention, nevertheless effective and timely access to healthcare is still limited because of lower capacity to afford healthcare, long distance between living areas and healthcare facilities; waiting time as well as health workforce deficit, especially in isolated zones.

Given the accumulation of multiple social and economic components impacting individuals' and communities' health, the Pillar's action plan must strengthen the European and national policy efforts to ensure effective health and social protection to combat existing inequalities.

Ensuring adequacy of allocated funding and public investment in vulnerable groups

We welcome the decision of the European Commission to promote policy synergies in order to maximize the positive impact of the European Pillar of Social Rights and its future action plan and put it at the heart of Europe's social and economic recovery. We urge EU policy makers and national governments to secure funding proportionate to the health, social and economic challenges faced by vulnerable groups through European funds and national budgets. Such funding must provide opportunities for implementing targeted measures for vulnerable groups based on art. 3 of the EU Pillar of Social Rights which stipulates that "[...] equal opportunities of under-represented groups shall be fostered".

Additional information:

Title of the initiative: Reinforcing Social Europe

Type of initiative: Public consultation

Date of submission: 30 November 2020

Key documents supporting the recommendations above:

The Marmot Review 10 Years On: New EPHA study on its lessons for the European Union

Health inequalities: a persistent obstacle for Roma equality and inclusion, EPHA November, 2020⁴

Health inequalities: a public health challenge for European policy makers, EPHA 2019

The **European Public Health Alliance** is the leading NGO alliance working to improve health and strengthen the voice of public health in Europe. It aims to deliver equitable solutions to public health challenges, build public health capacity and reduce health inequalities. EPHA represents over 90 members, comprising health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals and disease groups dedicated to improving public health through advocacy and policy development at European and national levels.

⁴ <https://epha.org/health-inequalities-a-persistent-obstacle-for-roma-equality-and-inclusion/>