



The European Pillar of Social Rights at the core of the EU Strategic Agenda 2024-2029

EuroHealthNet's input towards the Interinstitutional Declaration on the Future of Social Europe to be adopted in La Hulpe on 15-16 April 2024

11 March, 2024



EuroHealthNet, the European partnership for health, equity and wellbeing, appreciates the opportunity to provide input to the Interinstitutional Declaration on the future of Social Europe. This Declaration will be presented at the High-level conference on the European Pillar of Social Rights, under the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union on 15-16 April 2024 in La Hulpe.

General remarks on the Interinstitutional Declaration on the Future of a Social Europe

Europe is facing multiple, overlapping and escalating crises, including armed conflict, driven by social, political, ecological, and economic pressures. Over the past years, the implementation of various social and health EU initiatives has played a crucial role in mitigating the adverse effects of these crises, contributing to stabilising social progress, enhancing wellbeing, and supporting economies across the European Union.

The adoption of a specific Action Plan in 2021 to strengthen the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)¹ represented a significant commitment from the von der Leyen Commission to address this state of polycrisis with an integrated and comprehensive approach. However, responses across the EU have often been fragmented and characterised by reactive approaches, leading to adverse effects, including the exacerbation of inequalities that could have otherwise been prevented.

With the upcoming EU institutional renewal in mind, [EuroHealthNet developed its health priorities for the 2024-2029 EU policy landscape](#), where we outline our objective to improve health, equity and wellbeing in Europe by 2030.

It is crucial to **outline a vision for the future of our Social Europe** and how to prepare the EU for future challenges. This vision must be cross-cutting across all EU and European-level government actors as well as sectors, and must be grounded in engaging the entire society.

EuroHealthNet therefore firmly supports the Belgian Presidency's initiative to adopt an Interinstitutional Declaration as a means of establishing shared values and objectives towards a stronger Social Europe. Such a declaration would establish a cohesive framework for collaboration and decision-making, improve transparency and accountability, and provide a foundation for monitoring and evaluation to ensure actions align with shared objectives.

We recommend that health, equity and wellbeing are considered as an integral component of such declaration.

¹ [European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan](#), 4 March 2021

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EuroHealthNet has been a longstanding advocate for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) since its inception in 2017. Given our strong emphasis on addressing the social determinants of health, breaking the silos between social and health sectors and employing multisectoral approaches to improve health outcomes, we consider the EPSR as a crucial **'Pillar for achieving Health Equity'**.

We consider all 20 principles and rights outlined in the EPSR as essential conditions for ensuring that everyone can attain their full potential for health and wellbeing. Recognising the importance of disseminating the Social Pillar for effective implementation, we developed [EuroHealthNet's European Pillar of Social Rights Flashcard tool](#). This tool aims to assist public health professionals and decision-makers in understanding the relevance of the EPSR to the public health sector.

The EPSR is integrated into all aspects of EuroHealthNet's work and initiatives. Similarly, we have been advocating for the mainstreaming of the EPSR across EU policies and processes, including the European Semester² and funding mechanisms, and thereby achieving a Wellbeing Economy.

² EuroHealthNet Policy Paper "[How to Achieve an Economy of Wellbeing with the Support of the European Semester](#)", December 2023

1. EPSR Chapter 1: Equal opportunities and access to the labour market

Equal opportunities and access to the labour market are critical determinants of health.

By ensuring fair and inclusive employment practices, addressing barriers to workforce participation, and providing support for those facing challenges in accessing employment, societies can promote better health outcomes, reduce health inequalities, and foster overall wellbeing for all.

In addition, with being sensitive to and addressing the rising levels of chronic diseases as well as mental health issues among people of working age, the EU can increase labour participation and overcome shortages in the labour market. Cardiovascular diseases, cancers, chronic respiratory disease and diabetes are responsible for 77% of the disease burden³ and increasingly affect younger ages. People with lower levels of educational attainment have the poorest self-perception of their health situation. In 2021, 18% of employees in the EU stated to have an illness or health problems which lasted, or is expected to last, for more than 6 months.⁴

EuroHealthNet recommends:

- Strong cross-disciplinary vision and a broad complementary approach to improving health, and socioemotional resilience of people across the working population is key. **Support workers affected by chronic diseases, address discrimination and prejudices at work and provide equal access to training opportunities and skills development.** This should include issues of digital competences and green transition skills. To meet the EU's target that at least 60% of all adults participate in training every year⁵, more should be done to increase the adults' education, training and life-long learning engagement (cf. principle 1⁶).
- Provide specific focus to the skills and shortages of the **health and care workforce**. They should be enabled continuous professional development, including developing intersectoral skills in addressing and acting on health inequalities. Design a **new EU strategy on health workforce shortages**, based on **health and social care labour and skills forecasting**, as proposed in the context of the European Year of Skills.
- Strong commitment to a new and ambitious **Gender Equality Strategy post-2025** that takes into account, challenges of the green and digital transitions, gender mainstreaming

³ European Commission [State of Health in the EU – Synthesis Report 2023](#), December 2023

⁴ Eurofound, [Health problems: prolonged illness or health problems - EWCTSR1](#), 17 November 2023

⁵ [EU headline targets](#) for employment, skills and poverty reduction adopted in June 2022

⁶ EuroHealthNet, [EPSR Flashcard Tool, Principle 1](#)

and integration of the gender perspective into all EU policies. Propose policy measures, targets, indicators for monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

From a **health, equity and wellbeing perspective**, the Strategy should:

- Reduce the gender gap in access to health and social care by progressively removing gender-specific barriers and ensuring equitable services;
- Address gender-based inequalities in physical and mental health, and psychosocial wellbeing across health domains through interventions that recognise and act on gendered disparities in health and social outcomes;
- Address gender-based violence and its long-term societal and intergenerational repercussions, and mitigate gender-based stressors linked to inequalities in work-life balance, caregiving responsibilities and workplace discrimination.

2. EPSR Chapter 2: Fair working conditions

Fair working conditions are critical determinants of health, equity, and wellbeing, shaping individuals' lives and the broader societal wellbeing.

By promoting fair working practices, advocating for workers' rights, societies can create environments where all individuals have the opportunity to thrive, contribute meaningfully, and lead fulfilling lives.

EuroHealthNet recommends:

- Establishing adequate minimum wages is key for reducing poverty and inequalities, fostering social upward mobility and enhancing health outcomes. The EU has already established benchmarks through the **Minimum Wage Directive**⁷, marking a significant milestone. The Directive is due to be fully implemented in all EU member states by October 2024. The Commission should properly evaluate the implementation. In addition, it is crucial to incorporate this into a more comprehensive strategy aimed at addressing diverse social determinants of health.
- Stronger commitment to protecting workers **physical and mental health in a context of platform work and telework** will still be much needed, considering an unequal uptake of national protection arrangements and lack of progress on an EU approach.
- A new **European Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work post-2027**⁸ is essential to ensure optimal working conditions in the EU and reduce the burden to work related illnesses. This updated framework must address both longstanding and emerging challenges in our modern world of work, adopting a global approach to tackle psychosocial risks, musculoskeletal disorders, and other health issues, including chronic and non-communicable diseases (NCDs).
- Focusing on mental health and psychosocial wellbeing at work, with a new **EU Directive specifically focused on Psychosocial Risks in Workplaces**. These legislative frameworks need to be adaptable to the rapid pace of technological advancements and the ongoing climate change and green transition. Moreover, they should acknowledge and build upon the existing EU framework agreements on work-related stress⁹ and harassment and violence at work¹⁰.

⁷ [Directive \(EU\) 2022/2041](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on adequate minimum wages in the European Union

⁸ European Commission's [Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027](#)

⁹ [Framework agreement on work-related stress](#) (2004)

¹⁰ [Framework agreement on harassment and violence at work](#) (2007)

3. EPSR Chapter 3: Social protection and inclusion

Social protection and inclusion are critical determinants of health, equity and wellbeing, addressing the multifaceted needs of individuals and promoting inclusive societies where everyone has the opportunity to lead healthy, fulfilling lives. By investing in comprehensive social protection systems and fostering social inclusion initiatives, societies can create enabling environments that prioritise the wellbeing and social fairness.

EuroHealthNet recommends:

- Stronger commitment to upholding **robust social security systems**, providing a decent standard of living for people encountering social risks and situations of vulnerability (old age, sickness, disability, unemployment) should be placed at heart of a future of Social Europe and the European social welfare state.
- A **new EU-wide poverty reduction and social inclusion strategy**, similar to the Europe2020 strategy, in order to achieve agreed goals and reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030 compared to 2019, of which at least 5 million should be children¹¹. The strategy should notably address income inequalities, access to education and training, and include affordable housing and health care as pathways for building societal resilience.
- Initiatives to support people's right to **timely and quality health promotion and preventive measures, in the context of primary health care and community-based care**. The pandemic and ongoing crises of rising NCDs and climate change emergency have demonstrated how essential access to affordable quality health and social care is to ensure social resilience and wellbeing economy. Critical labour and skills shortages and condition of workforce in this field, as well as people's ability to afford care should urgently be taken up.
- A **European Year for Mental Health** to keep the awareness high and constant. In addition, we recommend periodic reviews of the implementation of the EU's comprehensive approach to Mental Health, ideally supported by an EU Mental Health strategy and budget for action.
- Strong commitment to taking forward the **European Care Strategy, notably its Long-Term Care (LTC) initiative**, with new proposals focused on access to affordable adequate quality care, policies on healthy and active ageing through the life course, and embedded in health-promoting community-based approaches. These should form an integral part of

¹¹ [EU headline targets](#) for employment, skills and poverty reduction adopted in June 2022

National Action Plans on LTC, supported with dedicated funding, targets and measuring frameworks.

- Encouraging and supporting Member States to further implement and evaluate the **EU Child Guarantee Council Recommendation**¹² to make further progress in the fight against child poverty and social exclusion. Depending on progress, a need for an EU Directive for a Child Guarantee could be explored, as a legally binding directive could ensure a more effective and consistent implementation of child welfare and protection policies across the European Union.
 - Moreover, children's **right to clean, safe and health-promoting environments and green spaces** must be included in the scope of the Child Guarantee, in line with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No.26 on children's rights and the environment¹³, which focuses particularly on climate change.
- Taking forward the **Council Recommendation on adequate minimum income**¹⁴, to address gaps and ensure an adequate level of income support for a healthy living, and responsive to changing economic outlooks likely to affect the cost of living.
- Taking forward the **Council Recommendation on a ensuring a fair transition towards climate neutrality**¹⁵, to mitigate for the social impacts of climate change, applying a proportionate universalisms approach, in order to develop further policy recommendations. It could be considered to add the objective of a **socially-just, green and sustainable transition** to be part of the European Pillar of Social Rights.
 - Both the Social Climate Fund and the Just Transition Fund, which aim to facilitate a just transition and address social and distributional challenges of it, should get boosted in terms of budgets, as well as shared, proactive and participatory governance, while accounting for populations both in- and out-of-work.

¹² [Council Recommendation \(EU\) 2021/1004](#) of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee

¹³ Right to education, [New UN CRC General Comment on children's rights and the environment](#), 19 September 2023

¹⁴ [Council Recommendation \(EU\) 2023/C41/01](#) of 30 January 2023 on adequate minimum income ensuring active inclusion

¹⁵ [Council Recommendation \(EU\) 2022/C243/04](#) of 16 June 2022 on ensuring a fair transition towards climate neutrality

Final remarks

The **review of the European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan, scheduled for 2025**, will offer an important opportunity to reflect on adequacy and sufficiency of each of its chapters. For instance, Principle 16, which states that everyone has the right to timely access affordable preventive and curative health care of good quality, should be taken up more ambitiously.

The EPSR cannot be a stand-alone tool, but should be firmly embedded in the institutional and strategic framework of the EU, notably in the European Economic Governance through an efficient health equity, wellbeing and social progress-oriented European Semester.

The legislative and non-legislative implementation of the EPSR is and should be enabled through specific funding mechanisms, such as EU cohesion funds for closing social and territorial disparities, notably the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), including beyond the current Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027. The recent 20% cut of the overall EU4Health budget under the current EU Multiannual Financial Framework shows that the importance of the EU maintaining a public health capacity for implementing a Social Europe might not yet be fully understood.¹⁶

Through this input towards the Interinstitutional Declaration on the Future of Social Europe, EuroHealthNet aims to further strengthen the European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan beyond 2024.

Considering the EPSR as a crucial ‘Pillar for achieving Health Equity’, EuroHealthNet stands ready to support its further implementation, overcome the silos between health and social sector, and achieve a Wellbeing Economy in the EU, which benefits people and planet, and ensures peace, human dignity, equal opportunities, and fairness.

¹⁶ EuroHealthNet, [Joint Statement “Concerns Over EU4Health Cuts”](#), 29 January 2024

EuroHealthNet

European partnership for **health, equity & wellbeing**



Our mission is to help build healthier communities and tackle health inequalities within and between European States.

EuroHealthNet is a not-for-profit partnership of organisations, agencies and statutory bodies working on public health, promoting health, preventing disease, and reducing inequalities.

EuroHealthNet supports members' work through policy and project development, knowledge and expertise exchange, research, networking, and communications.

EuroHealthNet's work is spread across three collaborating platforms that focus on practice, policy, and research. Core and cross-cutting activities unite and amplify the partnership's activities.

The partnership is made up of members, associate members, and observers. It is governed by a General Council and Executive Board.

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