



European Commission releases Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights – What’s in it for Europe’s Roma¹?

On 17 November 2017, the European Union broke new ground by adopting the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) (*Social Pillar*), the first set of social rights proclaimed by EU institutions since the Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000). The European Commission has pledged to make the Social Pillar “**the compass of Europe’s recovery and our best tool to ensuring no one is left behind**”², so that Europe’s future is socially fair and just.

On 4 March 2021, the European Commission proposed an [Action Plan](#) for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, aiming to turn its 20 policy principles into concrete policy actions. The Action Plan draws on a wide-scale public consultation, which received over 1000 responses. Read ERGO Network’s comprehensive position paper submitted to this consultation, [How to ensure that the European Pillar of Social Rights delivers on Roma equality, inclusion, and participation?](#), where each of the 20 principles is explained in terms of its implications for Roma rights, including relevant thematic statistics and concrete policy recommendations.

¹ The umbrella term “Roma” encompasses diverse groups, including Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Boyash/Rudari, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom and Abdal, as well as Traveller populations (gens du voyage, Gypsies, Camminanti, etc.), in accordance with terminology used by the [European Commission](#).

² European Commission, *Communication Commission Work Programme 2021 A Union of vitality in a world of fragility*.

ERGO Network warmly welcomes the inclusion of the EU Strategic Framework and Council Recommendation on Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation as an integrant policy action of the Social Pillar Action Plan (pages 25, 26, 42) as part of Building a Union of Equality, as well as the encouragement addressed to Member States to adopt and implement the latter (page 26). This provides much-needed impetus to firmly anchor the delivery on the EU Roma Framework under the umbrella of the Social Pillar and throughout the European Semester. It is a very positive step in the direction of mainstreaming Roma rights and inclusion in the EU's overarching social and economic policy initiatives and coordination framework.

Unfortunately, the **European Roma are only mentioned once in the rest of the document, exclusively in relation to employment** (page 10): *“Making sure other under-represented groups – e.g. older people, low skilled people, persons with disabilities, those living in rural and remote areas, LGBTIQ people, Roma people and other ethnic or racial minorities particularly at risk of exclusion or discrimination as well as those with a migrant background – participate in the labour market to the maximum of their capacity will also contribute to a more inclusive employment growth”*. This effort is seen explicitly as a measure to help labour markets rebound, while people's wellbeing and dignified lives are not mentioned as an objective in the paragraph.

It is a **missed opportunity not to have a specific focus on the Roma also in other areas**, such as skills, equality, and poverty, given the disproportionate negative indicators they register, a situation much worsened by the current pandemic and associated measures. Including the Roma as key group also under other areas would have further strengthened the links to the delivery on the EU Roma Strategic Framework and its objectives. There are also no references to Travellers.

More encouragingly, **ethnic minorities or ethnic background are referred to several times**, in the context of bringing equal opportunities for all (page 5), inclusive employment growth (page 10), equal treatment in employment (page 18), fostering diversity in our society and economy (page 25), and encouraging Member States to collect disaggregated data (page 37). While wording could have been stronger, the mentions are very welcome, as they uphold and mainstream Principle 3, *Equal Opportunities*, throughout the implementation of the Pillar.

Additionally, **the plight of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups is highlighted a few times** throughout the text (pages 11, 23, 24, 27, 29, 38), which is another positive step in the direction of ensuring that those facing multiple and complex obstacles to leading good lives are not left behind in the Action Plan. Once again, these mentions could have been stronger.

Finally, the Action Plan includes **several welcome references to combatting discrimination**, particularly in employment (page 10), digitalisation (page 19), and Building a Union of Equality (page 25). While this is undoubtedly positive, unfortunately the document falls short of mainstreaming a true anti-discrimination approach in all its areas, as guiding red thread for policy intervention. In a positive move, **the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan is included as one of the policy actions of the Social Pillar Action Plan**, however racism as such is not referred to anywhere else in the document. Antigypsyism is equally not mentioned at all.

ERGO Network further welcomes the fact that the Action Plan includes concrete, quantifiable targets, on employment, education, and poverty reduction. All three mirror objectives also included in the EU Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Participation, and Inclusion – though the links are, sadly, not made explicit in the Action Plan.

Regarding **employment, the target of 78% is purely numerical, and it does not include additional quality indicators in its definition.** However, we appreciate that the *Implementation* section under the employment target deals with several aspects of decent work and employment, including **working conditions, combatting discrimination, and adequate wages and in-work poverty**, among others, including the recently adopted Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages. This is particularly welcome, as the Roma are much more likely to find themselves in low-paid, poor quality employment. However, rather strikingly, while the document acknowledges digitalisation as the main game-changer for the world of work, it **does not mention increased precarious and exploitative forms of work**, and nothing is said about security of contracts, flexibility and segmentation of the labour market, and erosion of employment rights, particularly for the most vulnerable workers such as the Roma.

We further appreciate that **the Action Plan supports strengthening social dialogue and collective bargaining, as well as the capacity of Public Employment Services**, including staffing, resources, and training. We regret, nonetheless, the lack of references to civil dialogue on equal footing, in order to reach those furthest from the labour market. For example, only 43% of Roma are currently in employment. **The Action Plan fails to make any references to personalised, pathway approaches to inclusive labour markets**, in line with comprehensive Active Inclusion, which raises concerns about the prevalence of negative activation, punitive conditionality and sanctions, which disproportionately hit those already experiencing poverty and discrimination. Anti-bias training for Public Employment Services is also not mentioned. The **key role of social economy is referenced**, as well as the upcoming EU Social Economy Action Plan, which is very welcome, however the paragraph is brief, and the potential of social enterprises insufficiently explored.

Regarding **education**, the target narrowly focuses on **60% of adults attending professional training** on a yearly basis, with a strong emphasis on the green and digital transition. While it is an important dimension, there are no objectives on inclusiveness and quality of education in a broader sense, throughout the life cycle, with the aim of supporting personal development, building people, societies, and democracies. **The early school leaving sub-target reads like an afterthought and it is not quantified**, while barely anything is said about its implementation.

There is a reference encouraging Member States to provide **quality education for all, including disadvantaged learners**, but it is not substantiated. We equally regret the complete absence of initiatives to tackle school segregation, discrimination and bullying, which are very powerful deterrents to Roma children accessing education. The renewed **focus on early childhood education and care (ECEC) and the Barcelona targets** is very much appreciated, as this is essential to provide Roma children with a good start in life, on equal footing with their peers. However, the rhetoric is slanted towards boosting female employment, rather than from the perspective of the rights of the child, with an aim to provide them with quality and inclusive care and educational opportunities.

ERGO Network response to the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan

While **equality is combined with the target on skills, there is no corresponding measurable objective**. It is not clear what led to this association, since ensuring equal opportunities should be a cross-cutting dimension of the Action Plan, and would have merited its own, separate target. **ERGO Network welcomes the proposed Union of Equality**, as well as the explicit inclusion of the EU Roma Strategic Framework and the support for the Employment Equality, Racial Equality, and Equal Treatment Directives. Furthermore, the Action Plan **encourages companies to combat discriminatory practices in recruitment, selection and promotion**, as well as to foster diversity in the workplace, which is very positive. It is a pity that the same encouragement is not addressed also to other employers, such as those in the public and third sectors.

However, the Equality section of the Action Plan begins by mentioning a wide range of groups facing discrimination and exclusion, yet it then chooses to **focus exclusively on gender equality and the inclusion of people with disabilities**. While we very much support this, it is unfortunate that other groups did not receive the same attention, particularly as their thematic EU strategies are clearly mentioned as falling under the scope of the Social Pillar. Additionally, once again, gender equality seems to be viewed primarily from the perspective of getting more women into employment, while comprehensive interventions regarding access to services, social protection, housing, healthcare are not as developed, if at all. Throughout the document, **migration is mainly viewed as source of labour**, to respond to demographic challenges, while broader considerations about ensuring the full inclusion of migrants in society, and ensuring their wellbeing, are absent.

Regarding **poverty**, the proposed target of lifting 15 million people is very unambitious, lower than the Europe 2020 target of 20 million, at a time where poverty and social exclusion increased across the board, on the backdrop of the pandemic and associated economic and social crisis. The Action Plan sadly **fails to highlight groups hit worse than others**, for example Roma poverty standing at over 80%. Overall, the poverty reduction section is rather weak, with very few new policy initiatives, and unclear correlation between the proposed measures and the desired result. Equally disappointingly, **racism and ethnic discrimination are not mentioned among barriers** to accessing essential services, alongside income, age, territorial inequalities and infrastructure.

ERGO Network response to the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan

The **sub-target of reducing child poverty by 5 million is very welcome**, however it does not include comprehensive, wrap-around support for parents, as there are **no poor children in rich families**. We are looking forward to the proposal on an EU Child Guarantee, a key element of the Social Pillar Action Plan. Unfortunately, thus far, the Roadmap proposed by the European Commission **does not include Roma children as a key group**, despite the fact that roughly one in three Roma children experiences material deprivation, hunger, poverty, and discrimination.

ERGO Network very much appreciates the **reference to a Council Recommendation on Minimum Income in 2022**, however the wording on minimum income in the Action Plan itself is rather ambiguous, referring to eligibility criteria and modernising levels, but **not mentioning improving adequacy and take-up**. This is a key issue, as the Roma face multiple barriers in accessing their social protection rights and entitlements, yet there are no considerations about curbing negative conditionality and sanctions, nor is a rights-based approach highlighted. It is very positive that the Action Plan **encourages Member States to ensure the effectiveness and coverage of social safety nets** and access to enabling services, but once again the adequacy and role of social protection to effectively reduce poverty is not mentioned, nor the quality or affordability of services. Adequacy is again missing in the section dedicated to social security (unemployment and other work-related benefits), as is its impact on poverty, and the focus is on sustainable financing and portability.

We are very **pleased to see the announcement of an Affordable Housing Initiative and a European Platform on Combatting Homelessness**, as well as references to curbing energy poverty and tackling spatial segregation. Access to decent housing remains a key issue for most Roma, but little detail is included in the Action Plan on how affordable housing will be provided. There is **good wording on reducing health inequalities and improving access to healthcare for all**, particularly the most vulnerable, but affordability and structural discrimination, key barriers for Roma, are not included. While **seasonal workers and intra-EU mobility are mentioned** – and many are Roma workers – the digital solution proposed (the *European Social Security Pass*) for the cross-border portability of social security right is not accessible to a large part of seasonal workers in the EU, and the digital divide is not mentioned anywhere in the document.

ERGO Network response to the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan

In the proposed Action Plan, **the targets do not seem to correspond to the three chapters of the Social Pillar**, nor is it clear how the policy principles have been aggregated under their umbrella. In fact, **the Action Plan does not refer to the 20 policy principles at all**, apart listing them in the Annex. As a result, some of the principles do not seem to be tackled at all, such as, for example, principle 20 on *Access to essential services*. Sadly, this is a missed opportunity, as it appears that **the European Commission did not use the 20 policy principles as a starting point**, but rather its own planned policy agenda for the next years, which was then fitted more or less under the structure of the Social Pillar. This, sadly, is an unambitious, narrow approach.

While these targets set minimum standards, **it is hoped that Member States will raise the level of ambition** in defining their own national targets, ideally complemented by relevant sub-targets that the European Commission didn't include. In this context, we very much welcome the **European Commission's encouragement to Member States to collect data disaggregated by racial or ethnic origin in line with the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan**. Unfortunately, the Social Scoreboard complementing the Social Pillar only refers to breakdowns of the indicators by age group, gender, country of birth, and disability status. ERGO Network looks forward to the announced process of further refining the Social Scoreboard to make it fit for purpose.

We further appreciate that **the implementation of the Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights will be explicitly monitored through the European Semester and the National Recovery and Resilience Plans**, for which the Action Plan has a guiding role, in line also with the Country Specific Recommendation. This is essential to ensure joint monitoring of the implementation within the EU's most important policy coordination framework. Unfortunately, links to other frameworks and policy initiatives are not as strong, and the European Green Deal is only mentioned once. The **Sustainable Development Goals are mentioned a few times**, and mirrored in the Social Scoreboard, but the alignment is not adequately reinforced. While many thematic strategies are listed in the Annex, they are not sufficiently mainstreamed and integrated in the text itself, under the corresponding targets. Coherence with other EU and national efforts remains crucial to achieve the planned objectives.

ERGO Network response to the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan

ERGO Network very much welcomes that **the revised Social Scoreboard will also apply in enlargement countries**, as part of the Economic Reform Programme (ERP) process, to monitor progress on the implementation of the Action Plan. As part of strengthening the dialogue with the **Western Balkans**, candidate countries and potential candidates will be included in relevant actions, platforms, working groups and meetings, which is a very positive step. We are also pleased that the **Instrument of Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) III** will provide increased funding for a flagship initiative to implement Youth Guarantee schemes.

While **Member States are encouraged to make use of the full range of EU funds** available to implement the Action Plan, **no specific earmarking of funds** is connected to the targets of the Pillar, and there is no minimum social expenditure foreseen in the Guidance for accessing the Recovery and Resilience Facility. Essential in this regard remains the **ringfencing included in the ESF Plus**. For measures and funding to reach left behind categories such as the Roma, the European Commission must issue clear guidelines to Governments and Managing Authorities for allocations to be made for the vulnerable and Roma especially – including through a **corresponding enabling condition and Roma-specific indicator**, aligned with the National Roma Strategic Frameworks. The Partnership Principle must also be reinforced and duly applied.

Finally, it is very positive that **civil society is mentioned explicitly and repeatedly as a partner** for the implementation of the Action Plan, Member States are encouraged to ensure engagement of all relevant stakeholders. However, **no specific actions are foreseen to foster this**, while social dialogue has a dedicated, separate section, and an EU initiative to reinforce in 2022. It remains to be seen how the **proposed coordination mechanism for stakeholder engagement** will work in practice. The Action Plan will only be effective if it achieves wide ownership by beneficiaries, and if it is rooted in direct evidence from the ground. **Roma communities and their NGO representatives must be involved at all stages of policy design, delivery, and monitoring.**

ERGO Network hopes that the implementation of the Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights will be used as a true opportunity to **ensure that Europe's Roma are not left behind**, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and recovery.