

Briefing paper**Analysis of the European Pillar of
Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan****Introduction**

Caritas Europa¹ welcomes the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan, launched by the European Commission on 4 March 2021.² The Action Plan proposes ways to turn the 20 Principles and rights, identified in the EPSR, into concrete actions for the EU to reach specific headline targets by 2030.

The Action Plan is very timely, especially considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of the people, especially those in the most precarious and vulnerable situations who have generally been hit the hardest. Caritas Europa thinks the Action Plan provides a window of opportunity for EU Member States to make real progress in the areas of equal opportunities, fair working conditions and inclusive social protection systems, and toward achieving Agenda 2030 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In this regard, we repeat our call for a comprehensive 2030 strategy based on the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, to provide a guiding framework with overarching goals and incorporate the targets and objectives of the Action Plan for the implementation of the EPSR, the European Green Deal and the European Digital Strategy. The social agenda must be put on an equal footing with the green and digital agendas to ensure a coherent set of policies for the wellbeing of people and the planet. The new 2030 strategy must reflect the overlapping nature and interdependence of these agendas, ensuring that their respective targets and objectives be monitored and analysed together for a fuller understanding of how social, environmental and economic wellbeing are interlinked and mutually fulfilling. We expect a strong focus by the European Commission and the Member States on the contribution of initiatives, planned in the implementation of the Action Plan, to achieve in particular the targets set in SDGs 1, 8 and 10 in order to see a considerable reduction in poverty and social inequalities and increased social convergence across the EU. Linked to SDG 1, we call on the Member States to further define their own national targets and we encourage them to go beyond - in number and ambition - the poverty target set by the European Commission. We also encourage Member States to develop their operational programmes to receive and spend EU funding (including in national recovery and resilience plans - NRRPs) in close consultation with civil society, without forgetting the important role of social services in turning the Principles into reality.

¹ Caritas Europa is the network of 49 Caritas organisations in 46 European countries. Though a Catholic network, Caritas Europa works with people of all faiths to end poverty and to promote the dignity of all people. We are part of the global Caritas Internationalis network that has over 160 members around the world. We believe that people and the environment, not profits, should be at the heart of all policies. We oppose all kinds of exclusion and support all initiatives that promote sustainable development that benefit everyone and enable all people to find a meaningful role to play in society.

<https://future.europa.eu/>

² See https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en

This briefing paper thus provides Caritas Europa's perspective on the EPSR Action Plan, based on the experiences of our members across Europe, who provide services to people experiencing poverty, exclusion and marginalisation. The paper speaks to some immediate concerns, such as the need to reinforce a more social Europe, go beyond just meeting the 2030 headline targets, revise the social scoreboard by including more indicators in the category of social protection and inclusion and ensure adequate funding for EPSR implementation, including allocation of funds to recognise the importance of social services in turning the Action Plan into reality. At the same time, ensuring coherency with the revised European Social Charter is also essential, as is the need to ensure collaboration with and participation of the people experiencing poverty themselves (in line with one of the transformational principles of Agenda 2030 on empowerment and representation) in decisions that affect them. Following a brief description on these general issues of concern, the paper then narrows in on the Principles reflected in Caritas Europa's [Strategic Framework](#), meaning that we do not speak to each of the 20 Principles.³

Reinforcing Social Europe

Considering the current environmental, digital and demographic changes, it is more urgent than ever to pursue a strong social Europe that enables just transitions for society and the future. From the perspective of Caritas Europa, a social Europe is not only characterised by EU level initiatives that set powerful impulses for upward social convergence among the Member States' social protection systems at a high level. Rather, this must also be flanked by adequate structural assistance to strengthen social cohesion with clear social goals in an overall strategy for policy coordination in the EU, with national, regional and local interests, together with the interests of civil society being broadly incorporated in the European process of shaping policy. Also, EU Member States and other regional and local bodies have to step up and introduce policies within their legislative competencies that aim at or at least support social upward convergence. The implementation of the EPSR is a task that concerns not only legislators at EU level. Deepening the EU's social dimension also requires social shaping of the digital transformation.

We are pleased to see initiatives in the Action Plan that endeavour toward achieving a more social Europe. The outbreak of COVID-19 has shown the crucial importance of inclusive labour markets, equal opportunities and a well-functioning and adequate social protection system with guaranteed, easy and immediate access to social rights. Caritas Europa believes the protection and application of these rights by the EU and its Member States are vital for achieving a more social Europe. If designed the right way, we also believe the following initiatives will contribute toward achieving a more social Europe and more effective implementation of the EPSR. For instance, we are pleased to see the newly launched Roma Strategic Framework, Gender Equality Strategy, Disability Strategy, Action Plan on Racial Discrimination, Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, a proposal for a Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages, upcoming initiatives on public procurement and the Reinforced Youth Guarantee. We are also pleased to see initiatives on promoting the rights and fair working conditions of platform and EU mobile workers, whose lack of access to social protection has been particularly exposed during the pandemic. Revisiting long-term care, home-care and community-based service options will likewise be essential for repairing a broken care system that fails to ensure the dignity of the residents or the staff providing care. We likewise want to applaud and re-emphasise the European Commission's call to companies to have them put in place mechanisms to combat discriminatory practices in the

³ This should not be understood to mean, however, that the Principles not covered in this analysis are unimportant to Caritas Europa member organisations. As an example, many Caritas members work extensively to support and empower people experiencing physical and mental ill health. Nevertheless, this paper does not include an analysis on Principle 17, on the inclusion of people with disabilities, as this is not part of Caritas Europa's Strategic Framework.

recruitment, selection and promotion processes, and to promote diversity in the workplace, as well as to promote the participation of workers at company level to foster workplace innovation.

In Caritas Europa's view, however, there is a lack of focus in the Action Plan on social services, or on their contribution to turning the 20 Principles into reality. Social service providers not only have a crucial role as strategic partners in the implementation of the EPSR, but social services also have a crucial role to play in the EU's socio-economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, in providing and delivering essential social services for communities across Europe - especially for those most at risk of poverty and social exclusion - and of contributing to a more social Europe.⁴ Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the systemic challenges social services face, such as [chronic under-funding](#). Other examples about the challenges to accessing services can be found in the [Caritas Cares Poverty report](#). The harsh reality is that social service providers need special attention and specific funding to ensure that they will be able to continue to play their essential role, supporting millions of people in Europe to live better, healthier, longer and more active lives, including the most vulnerable and furthest behind. (More on this issue below under funding).

In addition, the social agenda is not as present as it should be in the European Green Deal - the new EU growth strategy - nor is policy coherence between the Green Deal and the EPSR Action Plan ensured. The risk is that Member States will not or will only insufficiently include the social dimension in their recovery and resilience plans.

2030 headline targets

Caritas Europa welcomes that the Action Plan is setting three main targets to be achieved by 2030. We appreciate the target of at least 78% of people aged 20-64 in employment but this could have been complemented with a sub target concerning the quality of jobs. We also appreciate the sub targets aimed at gender equality and support to youth, and at least 60% of all adults participating in training every year (and the sub target on digital skills). It is good that there is a poverty reduction target of reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million (of which 5 million are children) by 2030, but we do not think this target is ambitious enough. While we are pleased to see a specific sub target on child poverty, the headline target is less ambitious than the 20 million target in the 2020 strategy, and is much less than the SDG target 1.2 of reducing by half the proportion of men, women and children living in poverty in all its dimensions. We merely need to consider the population and poverty figures to know that we would need a target of 45 million for the EU, which includes about 10 million children, to make a dent in poverty reduction.

Revised Social Scoreboard

Caritas Europa is pleased to see a revision of the social scoreboard indicators, aiming at improving the timely availability of social indicators, but stresses that the scoreboard still focuses too much on employment and training-related indicators. We, therefore, call on the European Commission to develop and include more indicators in the category of social protection and inclusion, such as indicators on: the number of people on waiting lists to access social housing, care services and

⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how essential social services are to the quality of life of millions. For more info, see: <https://www.caritas.eu/stronger-commitment-to-social-services-needed> and https://80cf426a-4e57-48e6-a333-91f4b1dbdd1a.filesusr.com/ugd/9f45fc_e6882511f8af41f98ee8ef87b2007e7c.pdf

youth support services, the coverage of minimum income provisions and the time that people stay dependent on minimum income.

EU funding to support the implementation of the EPSR Action Plan including the recognition of social services

Funding is one of the most powerful instruments of the EU, apart from legal initiatives, to support and shape policy initiatives and reforms in the Member States. As a reaction to the COVID-19 crisis, the new EU Multiannual Financial Framework includes an unprecedented amount of funding to support Member States' actions to achieve the 2030 targets on the basis of NRRPs submitted by the Member States. Yet, the extent by which this funding is adequately being used to address social concerns remains dubious. For instance, in some countries funding is not sufficiently being allocated to social services, as was initially the case in the Czech Republic.

Instead, funding is sometimes used to construct new green buildings, rather than to fund solutions to accommodate the increasing number of people losing their housing. Some Member States are only including (access to) labour market-related measures in their NRRPs as measures to reduce poverty and social exclusion, rather than investing in social protection. We also know that the co-financing obligation for NGOs and social service providers to access funding has increased at a time when overall costs have also increased due to a greater need.

In this regard, it is vital to highlight the positive social impact of social services and its interdependency on a supportive social services ecosystem in order to be able to provide essential care and support to millions of people in Europe. It is thus essential for the successful implementation of the EPSR Action Plan that the EU and its Member States support and strengthen social objectives and social services as well. With the right legal, political and financial support, social service providers can likewise play a crucial role in Europe's recovery and the EU's social and green agendas.

Ratify and implement the Revised European Social Charter

Due to the limited EU legal competence in social policy, most of the Principles of the EPSR cannot be translated into guaranteed social rights through EU legislation. Caritas Europa, therefore, continues to advocate for the accession of the EU to the Revised European Social Charter (RESC) and for the European Commission to encourage Member States to ratify the Charter and to support Member States in the process of accepting and respecting all its provisions. EU accession to the RESC would make it valid for all relevant areas of EU competence. The EU Court of Justice should align the status of the European Social Charter with that of other international human rights instruments ratified by all EU Member States.

Participation and consultation

Caritas Europa believes it is essential to promote and advocate for the participation and empowerment of people experiencing poverty, and for the organisations representing them to be involved in the development, monitoring and evaluation of country strategies and policies to implement the Principles of the EPSR. In line with one of the transformational principles of Agenda 2030, ensuring the participation and empowerment of those in decisions that affect them, this should be achieved through meaningful dialogue processes with civil society and people experiencing poverty and marginalisation at EU and national levels. While the Conference on the Future of Europe aims to provide one such platform for engaging citizens, there is a need for

further exchanges and opportunities to contribute, specifically to the implementation of the EPSR and adherence to the 20 Principles.

Analysis of the initiatives to implement the EPSR Principles

Caritas Europa provides a brief analysis of the EPSR Action Plan delineated according to following Principles, which we have selected based on the concerns of our members and the people they serve.

- **Principle 1 - Education, training and life-long learning**

Caritas Europa is pleased to see the variety of upcoming initiatives related to Principle 1 in the EPSR Action Plan. We are, however, disappointed in the lack of further detail contained in the few lines describing the Action Plan on Social Economy and hope that this plan will emphasise the importance of social economy in the creation of sustainable and inclusive jobs and the development of workers through training and skilling opportunities. On the other hand, we appreciate the proposed initiatives to enhance life-long learning and access to training, which are essential in helping workers access and progress on the labour market. We urge the European Commission to ensure that these measures provide tailored accessible support for specific groups, such as older workers, migrant workers, etc. Regarding the Digital Education Action Plan and the forthcoming European Digital Education Hub, we are pleased of the mention on the needs of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and call on the Commission to ensure that the high-performing digital education ecosystem is socially inclusive and available to all, especially regarding the accessibility and affordability of digital software.

- **Principle 2 – Gender Equality**

Caritas Europa welcomes the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and its actions to ensure equality of treatment and opportunities between women and men, in all areas, including participation in the labour market, terms and conditions of employment and career progression. The COVID-19 crisis has affected women disproportionately, for example, due to the burden of family care work and because they are overrepresented in sectors affected by lockdown and other COVID-19 related measures. Caritas Europa also welcomes the fact that the strategy focuses not only on the principle of wage transparency, but also on good working conditions. ‘Equal pay for equal work’ is a key aspect to lower the higher risk of poverty for women. But it likewise relates to the need to break down the persistence of stereotypes and biases about women, and to measures for the effective prevention of violence against women, a phenomenon which has come under more public scrutiny during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pursuit of a broad-based approach to reducing discrimination against women at EU level and in Member States is needed. In doing so, the experiences and suggestions coming from equality work by civil society organisations and by local authorities and regional administrations should be used when implementing the new strategy.

Caritas Europa welcomes the Action Plan targets to at least halve the gender employment gap and to increase the provision of formal early childhood education and care (ECEC). We support the initiative to include more women in decision making bodies, especially relating to policies that concern them, as well as the initiative to close gender gaps in the labour market, pay and pensions, as announced in the Action Plan.

- **Principle 3 - Equal opportunities**

Caritas Europa would like to see a stronger commitment and push by the European Commission for the conclusion of Council negotiations on the Equal Treatment Directive, which would ensure non-discrimination in areas of social protection as well as in employment and training. Further to this, we are pleased to see a call to companies to put in place mechanisms to combat discriminatory practices in the workplace but consider that this measure should have been made legally binding. Caritas Europa would welcome a new proposal for a Directive from the Commission to better implement the ban on discrimination in all areas. Alongside the right to equality between men and women, the EPSR also gives expression to the right of all persons to equal treatment with regard to social protection, education and access to publicly available goods and services. Entry points where people in a condition of extreme vulnerability can easily access needed services is extremely important for safeguarding their access to social rights. This can include measures such as lowering the access threshold, cutting red tape and setting up outreach teams designed to connect persons in vulnerable situations with social services.

- **Principle 4 - Active support to employment**

Caritas Europa is happy with the Commission Recommendation for Effective Active Support to Employment (EASE), especially in its focus on and tailored support for groups furthest from the labour market and at risk of social exclusion (including young people, older workers, women, workers in rural or remote areas and those with an ethnic or migrant background). EASE specifies different types of training for different age groups, with vocational education and training for young workers and short training courses aligned with the needs of working professionals for those already in a career and for older workers, who are expected to benefit from this support. We support the emphasis placed on quality jobs, mentioned seven times in the recommendation and on the mention of finding such jobs in social economy enterprises and in the health and care sectors, both of which are still to be developed to their full potential and will need financial and other assistance to do so. We also support the ‘individualised approach’ to upskilling, reskilling and training courses and would urge the Commission and Member States to ensure that all trainings are inclusive and accessible to all workers, also in terms of digital equipment and technical assistance. Caritas Europa is also pleased to see the mention of improved access to social protection for the self-employed and the promotion of entrepreneurship, which should first and foremost focus on social entrepreneurship. Related to public employment services, we re-emphasise that specific attention should be devoted to young people, to countering gender bias and other forms of discrimination, but also recommend that the employment services have especially targeted policies for the different groups furthest from the labour market. Similarly, outreach activities by the public employment services should focus on reaching all groups at risk of social exclusion, in cooperation with social services and with civil society organisations.

Caritas Europa encourages Member States to design and implement measures promoting EASE to foster job creation and job-to-job transitions in the social and care sector as well in the expanding digital and green sectors. Caritas Europa further echoes the Commission’s call to Member States to implement the Reinforced Youth Guarantee and would strongly encourage the EU and Member States to replicate this guarantee for older workers, providing tailored training for them and helping them to get back on/stay in the labour market.

- **Principle 5 - Secure and adaptable employment**

Caritas Europa is pleased with the variety of initiatives presented under Principle 5 on secure and adaptable employment, but are disappointed to note that there is no specific initiative dedicated to fighting precarious work. Of particular importance is the commitment to improve the rights and working conditions of platform workers in the new legislative proposal and the commitment to work with the European Labour Authority to protect the rights of mobile workers, including care and seasonal workers. The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on the poor working conditions and lack of access to rights of both platform and mobile workers. However, it is a shame that this legislative initiative does not also cover other categories of non-standard workers. We welcome the guidance notices on socially responsible public procurement (SRPP), which has a huge potential for positive social impact. We encourage the European Commission and Member States to collect and exchange promising practices on socially responsible public procurement.

- **Principle 6 - Wages**

Caritas Europa welcomes the proposal of the Commission for a Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages. This should help guarantee decent working and living conditions, prevent in-work poverty, reduce precarious employment, strengthen incentives to work and contribute to the reduction of over indebtedness, a key step forward in building an inclusive labour market. Adequate minimum wages also support gender equality, since more women than men are earning wages at or around the minimum wage. Yet for many people, work no longer pays enough to provide viable protection against poverty. In 2019, 9% of all workers in the EU were living at risk of poverty despite being in employment (17.5 million people⁵), with higher shares of younger workers, migrant workers, workers from ethnic minorities or with disabilities and women in low-paid jobs or sectors. Moreover, in-work poverty is expected to have increased significantly due to the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to have a devastating impact on people's lives and incomes, especially for groups in vulnerable situations. The current crisis has therefore highlighted the importance of fair minimum wages for ensuring social stability across Europe.

However, any increase in wages for staff in social services should come with respective increases in public funding to ensure financial sustainability and quality provision. Furthermore, setting an 'adequate' minimum wage must not reduce minimum income provisions for those without employment nor prevent them from being adapted to an adequate, poverty-proof level. Caritas Europa requests that policy makers are aware of the direct impact such a Directive will have on proposing a framework directive for poverty-proof minimum income schemes in the Member States (see also Principle 14).

Bearing in mind these considerations, Caritas Europa hopes that this Directive will significantly improve the quality of life of millions of workers across the EU and be a crucial component of a comprehensive strategy to overcome the consequences of the pandemic and to build back better.

- **Principle 9 - Work-life balance**

Caritas Europa calls on the Commission to ensure that the Member States transpose and effectively implement the Work-Life Balance Directive and urges to include standards of paid

⁵ Eurostat (2019): In-work at-risk-of-poverty-rate

leave at the same level of compensation as for sick leave. This will not only allow families to achieve a better work-life balance, but it will also contribute to achieving Principle 2. We call on the Commission to carefully monitor this transposition and implementation of the Directive.⁶

- **Principle 11 - Childcare and support to children**

The European Child Guarantee under the form of a Council Recommendation was recently presented by the EC.⁷ This instrument should guarantee access to education, healthcare, adequate housing, early childhood education and care and nutritious food for the most deprived children. This, in combination with the target to reduce child poverty by five million by 2030, is a step in a good direction, but will require a commitment by and coordination with the Member States and local and regional authorities and in particular those who haven't reached the Barcelona targets yet.

- **Principle 12 - Social protection**

The initiative to set up a European Social Security Pass could be a success if special attention is given to coverage and adequacy of social protection benefits, irrespective of the form of employment. Access to social protection for mobile EU workers, including care workers (see also Principle 18), seasonal workers and atypical workers (platform workers, etc.) is a prerequisite for the European Social Security Pass to have an effective impact on access to social protection for all workers.

The EU should set minimum standards regarding the coverage and adequacy of minimum income systems, the last safety net of social protection systems, but the Action Plan does not include an initiative to present a framework directive on minimum income systems (see also Principle 14).

- **Principle 13 - Unemployment benefits**

Caritas Europa is pleased that the European instrument for temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency (SURE), set up as a response to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on employment, is already in place.

It is also important that the coverage of unemployment benefits will be included in the updated social scoreboard. This is a useful addition to the scoreboard. The EPSR Action Plan contains several initiatives focusing on training and employability of workers, but no other initiatives regarding Principle 13 are foreseen. We recommend that coverage and adequacy of unemployment benefits will be the subject of Country Specific Recommendations in the frame of the European Semester process, as this is greatly needed.

- **Principle 14 - Minimum income**

Caritas Europa is disappointed to note that the Action Plan includes very few concrete actions on minimum income. The Action Plan acknowledges that *'the eligibility criteria and the levels of benefits would deserve to be modernised'*, but its action is limited to proposing a Council Recommendation on

⁶ For more information about Caritas Europa's stance on this, see our joint position <https://www.caritas.eu/time-to-adopt-the-work-life-balance-directive/>

⁷ For more information about our stance on the Child Guarantee, see our joint positions here: <https://www.caritas.eu/caritas-europa-child-guarantee-2021/> and <https://www.caritas.eu/child-poverty-and-social-exclusion-in-the-eu/>

minimum income in 2022. This is much less ambitious than our call for an [EU framework directive on minimum income](#). We insist on the need for an EU framework directive to guarantee both coverage of minimum income provisions as well as adequacy of minimum income benefits.

A framework directive on minimum wages (see Principle 6) should be complemented by a framework directive on adequate, poverty-proof minimum income schemes in the Member States. If an ‘adequate’ minimum wage is set at a certain level, minimum income benefits (for those without employment) will most likely be below this threshold and possibly far away from providing for dignified living. This connection is often not present when social partners talk about the minimum wage proposal.

A related challenge regarding the goal to ensure a dignified life is to ensure access to social benefits for all persons in need throughout the EU. Moreover, it is necessary to monitor and adjust the rules for calculating the maximum level of debt reimbursements in the case of someone who is in debt relief (insolvency proceeding). These people neither receive a minimum wage nor a minimum income, and the financial support they do receive is insufficient for a decent standard of living. This must be kept in mind when setting the income of indebted parents in relation to the nutrition of children, who often live in poverty precisely because the indebted parent does not receive a minimum income. The level of minimum income, which often does not allow for the provision of basic needs, leads people, individuals and families into debt traps from which there is often no way out, as the conditions for solutions are too strict and these people cannot always meet them.

- **Principle 15 - Old age income and pensions**

Caritas Europa calls on Member States to consider the time spent on unpaid care work as eligible for the calculation of pension rights (time credits), as a way to enable, support and recognise the value of family care work and to reduce the gender pension gap and encourage the take up of care leave or not to sanction the take up of unpaid care leave. In this context, the Commission’s intention to map best practices in providing pension rights for care-related career breaks in pension schemes is a good start but needs to be followed by pension-related country-specific recommendations (CSRs) with a focus on adequacy, and an analysis in the Pension Adequacy Reports of how pensions help prevent old-age poverty.

- **Principle 18 - Long-term care**

Securing the delivery of quality long term care will also require a better protection of care workers, in particular mobile EU or migrant care workers. Their access to adequate wages, working conditions and social protection should be guaranteed (see also Principle 12).

The Action Plan lacks the issue of informal care although in many countries the largest percentages of older persons needing long-term care rely on informal home care, care provided by unpaid caregivers. This unpaid family caregiving is more often provided by women and leads to career breaks and gender pay and pension gaps. Promoting informal care, for example, by a generous transposition of the work-life balance directive (see Principle 9) and by allowing time credits for pension rights (see Principle 15) can help address the challenges of ageing population, access to services, etc.

Health and social systems of care are often not effectively linked. The reforms of long-term care policies must coordinate healthcare services, formal social services and informal care to achieve

their efficient use that improves the wellbeing of people who need care as well as that of caregivers. This involves, but is not limited to, financial support and the provision of training, respite services and other support services for caregivers.

- **Principle 19 - Housing and assistance for the homeless**

The lack of access to affordable housing is one of the main factors for exclusion. The problem of availability of affordable housing continues to increase, affecting more population groups as well. Housing costs take up a significant part of a workers' income, which can cause further falling into poverty and a dangerous spiral of indebtedness.

Caritas Europa encourages exploring the feasibility of a European directive to set principles for building affordable housing capacity across the Member States. Current efforts are failing, and the private housing sector is invading the housing market, leaving less space for affordable housing initiatives. More concerted effort to rectify this situation now is vital, especially considering the long-term societal costs of failing to do so.

- **Principle 20 – Access to essential services**

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the critical importance of digital inclusion and overcoming the digital gap of elderly people, Roma, migrants and other groups who are increasingly being left behind, particularly in the banking sector. The elderly face challenges due to the conversion of banking via digital means (smart phones, Internet), as do migrants, Roma or other people in vulnerable situations. These groups of people often lack the technical devices with which to contact services or access benefits that are no longer accessible via physical offices, because of measures taken to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

The European Commission will present in 2022 an EU report on access to essential services. Caritas Europa acknowledges the advantages of digital access to services, but that requires digital skills that not all people currently possess. The lack of physical support offices leads to situations of non-access to rights, so-called non-take-up situations. Many administrative procedures are only accessible via the Internet. This results in the exclusion of people who do not have access to a computer and who are victims of the 'digital divide'. It is therefore essential to recognise and support the role of social services in assisting people to access essential services.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the crucial importance of inclusive labour markets, equal opportunities and a well-functioning and adequate social protection system with guaranteed, easy and immediate access to social rights. Caritas Europa therefore welcomes the publication of the Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights and the reemphasis on the importance of these rights.

Caritas Europa urges a focus on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion and on giving priority in policies to people in vulnerable situations. The Commission and the Member States should focus on the contribution of initiatives, planned in the implementation of the Action Plan, to achieving the poverty target as set in SDG 1. Caritas Europa calls on the Member States to define their own national targets and encourages them to go beyond - in number and ambition - the poverty target set by the European Commission. We also continue to call for a comprehensive

2030 strategy based on the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs.⁸ Such a strategy should provide a guiding framework with overarching goals and incorporate the targets and objectives of the Action Plan for the implementation of the EPSR, the European Green Deal and the European Digital Strategy. Caritas Europa stresses that the social agenda must be put on an equal footing with the green and digital agendas to ensure a coherent set of policies for the wellbeing of people and the planet. The new 2030 strategy must reflect the overlapping nature and interdependence of these agendas and ensure that their respective targets and objectives be monitored and analysed together for a fuller understanding of how social, environmental and economic wellbeing are interlinked and mutually fulfilling. Caritas Europa encourages Member States to develop their operational programmes to receive and spend EU funding (including in NRRPs) in close consultation with civil society. Finally, we reiterate the call for the EU to ratify the RESC and for the Commission to encourage its ratification by all Member States.⁹

⁸ More information can be found here: <https://www.caritas.eu/call-for-eu-action-to-make-sdgs-a-reality/>

⁹ More information can be found here: <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/VisitEU/CaritasEuropa.pdf>