



EUROPEAN ANTI POVERTY NETWORK

EU 2024 POVERTY WATCH

Towards a systemic approach to social protection



EAPN REPORT



EUROPEAN ANTI POVERTY NETWORK

The European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) is an independent network of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and groups involved in the fight against poverty and social exclusion in the Member States of the European Union, established in 1990.



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Acronyms & Glossary

AROP

At risk of poverty

AROPE

At risk of poverty or social exclusion

DG

Directorate-General

EAPN

European Anti-Poverty Network

EC

European Commission

EEA

European Environmental Agency

EPSR

European Pillar of Social Rights

EP

European Parliament

ETUI

European Trade Union Institute

EU

European Union

EUROFOUND

EU Agency for the improvement of living and working conditions

GDP

Gross Domestic Product

JER

Joint Employment Report

NEETs

Not in Education, Employment, or Training

OECD

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

SILC

Statistics on Income and Living Conditions

SPC

Social Protection Committee

SURE

Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency

Foreword

It is commonly agreed across the political spectrum that social protection systems in the EU are under great pressure, leading to the weakening of their protective functions, especially for the most vulnerable. Whether these challenges relate to demographic change, climate change, the covid pandemic or growing poverty and inequalities, addressing them and securing strong, resilient social protection systems is a matter of political choice.

The normalisation of austerity policies, encouraged by the EU and enshrined in EU member states, inevitably leads to the weakening of social protection systems. This occurs in a context where, in 2023, 94.6 million people were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, which is equivalent to 21.4% of the EU population.

Social protection systems are crucial components of any public policy strategy aiming to eradicate poverty. By treating them as investments rather than costs, as is currently the case in the EU, they can provide safety nets for those living in poverty, support active inclusion policies, and contribute to access to fundamental rights such as education and healthcare.

This year, EAPN Poverty Watch is focusing on a systemic approach to social protection. It is a continuation of the 2023 Poverty Watch report, “Towards a sustainable social welfare for the people”, which explored funding avenues for the resilience and strengthening of social protection systems. In 2024, EAPN and its members’

reflections focus on how to boost the impact of social protection policies—and, more broadly, the fight against poverty—through a coherent, integrated, and systems-based approach, as opposed to public policies that treat social protection systems primarily as a cost and burden.

This Poverty Watch is based on the findings of 19 national reports drafted by our national members. We hope it will help inform upcoming key initiatives at the EU level, such as the first-ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy and the renewal of the EU Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. Because eradicating poverty requires much more than isolated policy measures. It is a global fight that demands a structural shift in the way we approach social rights and human dignity.

Carlos Susías

EAPN President

Juliana Wahlgren

EAPN Director

Executive Summary

Poverty has remained at considerable levels in Europe in recent years (Theodoropoulou, Grossi, Rayner et al., 2024). Progress towards meeting the EU's 2030 poverty reduction targets is limited (JER, 2025), highlighting the need for significantly improved efforts. In addition, as widely underlined by EAPN, the effective impact of such efforts may be overestimated due to the limited availability of data on poverty (including reductive estimations, outdated statistics, and limited survey samples). In our daily work, we observe persistent poverty rates, in its various dimensions. Therefore, it is essential to explore why the policies in place are not addressing it effectively and what can be done about it. This year's report is built around these questions.

We believe that a coherent, integrated, systems-based approach can significantly enhance the impact of social protection policies and the fight against poverty (OECD, 2019). Better policy coordination and greater policy coherence are key characteristics of a systemic approach to social protection and fundamental principles of a sound public governance (OECD, 2021). Following this approach, we analysed the experience of social protection policies through the lens of EAPN national members and people affected by poverty.

Our conclusion is that the absence of a systems approach is evident throughout the various stages of the policy cycle. Among the most salient issues, we observed the limited involvement of those living in poverty and social exclusion—both during the formulation of social protection policies and when assessing their impact. Other key findings

raise concerns about: the coherence of social protection policies with the basic principles governing our democracies, as well as with other policies; the coverage and financing of social protection schemes; and the growing number of challenges that hinder their protective function, such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution, climate change, ageing societies, war, and the shrinking of democracies worldwide.

Based on our findings, we propose concrete measures to improve the effectiveness of social protection systems and the strengthen their protective function. These recommendations are organised into key proposals at the EU level concerning policy-making and implementation. They will also serve as a contribution to the renewal of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan and the development of the first-ever EU anti-poverty and affordable housing strategies.

Introduction

Following last year's analysis of the sustainability of the welfare state, the 2024 EU Poverty Watch focuses on the protective function of the welfare state against shocks and its effectiveness in supporting citizens through critical life-course transitions. We therefore examine social protection as a "system of formal and informal interventions that aim to reduce social and economic risks, vulnerabilities, and deprivations for all people and facilitate inclusive social development and equitable economic growth" (UNICEF, 2012). Social protection is also essential for eradicating poverty, reducing inequalities, and successfully pursuing a strategy of inclusive social development (CEPAL, 2023).

A system can be defined as a set of elements in dynamic interaction, organised according to a purpose (de Rosnay J., 1975). Based on this definition, the report analyses the ability of social protection systems to shield citizens from the wide and varied range of natural, health, social, economic, political, and environmental risks they face throughout their life. "However, some individuals and groups are more vulnerable to life contingencies than others" (ILO, 2003). In particular, "people with low incomes are more exposed to shocks and have fewer market and state instruments to be able to prevent and mitigate risks" (Haddad, 2007). This vulnerability is often associated with disadvantage, which "occurs when structural barriers created by society inhibit access to resources, benefits, and opportunities. The structural causes of disadvantage include gender, race, ethnicity, indigenous or national origin, and socio-economic status" (ILO, 2003). Moreover, the nature and scale of these risks are increasingly variable, evolving over time and

placing social protection systems under constant pressure.

Our analysis is based on 19 country reports produced by EAPN members in 2024, alongside insights from people experiencing poverty. In this context, EAPN's primary objective is to strengthen the role of social protection systems as a key tool in preventing and fighting poverty, removing barriers to social equality, inclusion, and social mobility (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). The core of the report is structured into two main chapters: Chapter One explores data from EAPN's national members on poverty from an EU-wide perspective; Chapter Two focuses on a systemic approach to social protection, from the design to the implementation of public policies in EAPN members' countries. It also includes an overview of current and future challenges for social protection systems. Finally, the report provides a set of recommendations addressing the key issues identified throughout the chapters.

1. Poverty dimensions: the perspective of EAPN's national members

For EAPN, poverty is a multidimensional experience that shapes and impacts people's paths through life. People experience poverty as multiple forms of deprivation—not only a lack of income or other material goods but also restricted access to experiences, opportunities, services and environments that others take for granted. These deprivations may include unemployment and precarious work, financial insecurity, limited access to quality education and healthcare, social exclusion, lack of family support, inadequate housing, and uncertain residence status (EAPN, 2020). This chapter, therefore, explores EAPN's perspectives on the multidimensional nature of poverty, as reported by EAPN national members.

“Poverty stems from systemic and structural injustice. It results from the uneven distribution of wealth and resources. It cuts across power relations and historical inequalities based on gender and gender expression, race, ethnic origin, religion, immigration status, age, sexual orientation, and disability.”

- EAPN Finland
National 2024 Poverty Watch

1.1. Poverty and social exclusion: systemic and structural barriers

According to EU data, the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion—AROPE—(in 2023, 94.6 million people, or 21.4% of the EU population) has remained high in recent years (ESDE 2024). It goes without saying that EU Member States have made little progress towards the EU's target of reducing the number of people living in poverty by at least 15 million by 2030, as described by most EAPN members. As detailed in the second chapter of the 2024 report, these targets are often based on underestimated and outdated data on poverty. As a result, large numbers of people living in poverty remain invisible. “This invisibility not only perpetuates the suffering of millions of people but also hinders the development of effective policies to structurally address these issues” (EAPN Spain).

Inflation continues to rise in all European countries, maintaining the upward trend of 2022, with the biggest increases observed in food and non-alcoholic beverages (up 12.6 % on average—Eurostat, July 2024). The repercussions are manifold: “the cost-of-living crisis currently gripping Europe not only negatively affects people's economic well-being, but it also chips

away at their broader belief that governing bodies have the ability—or even the intention—to act in the best interests of their citizens. Escalating issues such as rising inflation, stagnant wages, and increased financial strain all serve to gradually unravel the very fabric of trust in institutions.” (EUROFOUND blog, 2024).

The erosion of social support benefits due to inflation could be prevented by **automatic indexation** (EUROFOUND, Social Protection 2.0, 2024). However, various members report that national institutions’ decisions on indexation have been inconsistent or even erratic path. For example, in Finland, “index increases for basic social security benefits have again been frozen for the years 2024-2027, despite rising inflation and sharply increasing food prices” (**EAPN Finland**). Similarly, in Norway, adjustments made to welfare schemes did not compensate for the overall price increases (**EAPN Norway**).

Moreover, Eurostat’s 2024 Key figures on European Living Conditions show that 45.4% of the population had at least some difficulty in making ends meet in 2023, ranging from around a quarter in countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden, and Finland to 78.2% in Bulgaria and 87.6% in Greece (Eurostat, Key figures on European Living Conditions, 2024). The cost-of-living crisis “affects some more than others. Low-income families, rural communities, unemployed people, and low-wage earners feel the burden more acutely and perceive a lack of targeted support from institutions, leading to a sense of unfairness and neglect. This can result in feelings of alienation and a decline in trust towards institutions seen as unresponsive to the plight of vulnerable groups” (EUROFOUND Blog, Trust in crisis, 2024). In this regard, it is worth noting that “over recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of people experiencing severe material and social deprivation who are not poor” (**EAPN Greece**).

Data on **inequality** is also a vital factor when considering poverty, as the overall distribution of resources within a country affects both the extent and depth of poverty (EAPN, 2014). Data from 2022 and 2023 show that income inequality worsened in a third of Member States (SPC 2024 report). According to research analysed by **EAPN Ireland**, “while income inequality has fallen over the long-run, inequality increased recently by most measures.” It should be noted that the “social protection and taxation systems significantly mitigate Ireland’s high levels of market inequality. However, the State has consistently failed to address the underlying problem and causes of these high levels of market inequality. As a result, while the at-risk-of-poverty rate has declined, the deprivation rate has increased, and many people continue to experience inadequate living standards and high levels of precarity” (**EAPN Ireland**).

Clearly, “**progressive taxation** and redistribution, through social transfers and the provision of public goods, is a central policy approach to ensure fairer societies” (DG TAXUD 2024 Report). In this context, a number of EAPN members describe national tax policies as failing to target or combat inequalities. For instance, Bulgaria’s national policy framework does not include measures to reduce inequality through distributive and redistributive policies (**EAPN Bulgaria**). In Serbia, the regressive tax system “puts a greater burden on the lower-income strata of the population. So, for example, income tax and social contributions (which are also a type of tax) burden people who work for the minimum wage more than a person who earns several times more” (**EAPN Serbia**).

EAPN refers to the missing poor as those who are ignored in traditional ways of collecting statistics on poverty, for instance racialized people, Roma communities, people in informal or undeclared work, homeless people, undocumented migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, children and youth, people in institutions, and those deprived of liberty.

The disproportionate impact of these challenges on specific population groups is analysed in the following sections.

1.2. Child poverty and youth

The AROPE rate for children, which was alarmingly high in 2022 (24%), worsened further, reaching 24.8% (ESDE 2024). In this regard, it is also important to underline that “child poverty is impacted to a great extent by family demography, with large families and single parents having a greater risk of being poor” (Ilmakunnas, Mäkinen, and Hiilamo, 2024). This trend is reflected in most EAPN national reports. For instance, “around 37% of Czech children live in households that suffer from some kind of housing problem (inadequate heating, damp and leakage, lack of space, noise, dirt and vandalism in the neighbourhood” (**EAPN Czech Republic**).

EAPN Spain reports that more than half of **single-parent families** are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Similarly, in Sweden, “children from immigrant families and single-parent households are particularly vulnerable to poverty.” Additionally, “one of the main problems for children in poverty remains the inequality in access to quality education” (**EAPN Sweden**). The report of the High-Level Group on the Future of Social Protection and of the Welfare State in the EU further notes that “since the 1990s, social risks have shifted to younger generations. Megatrends, such as population ageing, digitalisation, and changing family structures, have also altered the pattern of social risks (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002). In a number of Member States, child poverty is now prevalent” (EC, The future of social protection and of the welfare state in the EU, 2023).

This trend is further confirmed by **EAPN Cyprus**, which underlines that **young people** seeking their first job are among the population groups at higher

risk of poverty, and by **EAPN Sweden**, which reports a “particular increase in homelessness among young people, with many young people facing financial uncertainty and difficulties in finding stable housing.”

1.3. Women

In the EU, women face a higher risk of poverty or social exclusion than men (22.3 % compared with 20.3 % in 2023—Eurostat, Living Conditions in Europe, June 2024). Women remain overrepresented in low-paying jobs (EUROFOUND Blog, Inequalities unmasked, 2024) and continue to bear the primary responsibility for childcare in the EU (OXFAM France, 2024). In this context, **EAPN Serbia** reports a widening gender gap: “the feminisation of poverty is contributed to by the increase in the proportion of households headed by women, which are on average poorer than households headed by men, due to the less favourable position of women in the labour market.” Similarly, **EAPN Ireland** underlines that the heavy reliance on private or familial care rather than a public care system “has led to primarily female lone parents being disproportionately at risk of poverty” (**EAPN Ireland**). They also observe a “distinctly ‘gendered’ dimension to how Ireland’s social protection system operates. Ireland’s social protection system is rooted in a ‘male breadwinner’ approach which continues to inform a number of schemes.” Moreover, the country has one of the highest rates of female homelessness in the EU.

1.4. Disability

In all EU countries, the share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2023 was higher among those with a disability than among those without one. In relative terms, the gap was widest in Croatia, where the proportion of people with a disability at risk was 2.5 times higher than that of people without a disability (Eurostat, Living

Conditions in Europe, June 2024). Regarding social and professional inclusion, **EAPN Finland** reports that the employment rate for people with disabilities is only around 20%, compared to a national average of 70%.

The number of adults with disabilities and older people living in residential institutions increased across the EU in the 10 years leading up to 2022–2023, despite most Member States having de-institutionalisation strategies (EUROFOUND, Path towards independent living, 2024). Among them is Serbia, where national institutions have adopted ad hoc strategies, investing in the availability of community-based services to prevent institutionalisation (**EAPN Serbia**).

1.5. Migration and residence status

Eurostat data confirm that having a migration background significantly increases the risk of poverty and social exclusion, with the rate for this population group reaching 45.5 % in 2023 (Eurostat, Migrant integration and inclusion dashboard). Where information is available, estimates indicate that migrants also tend to be significantly overrepresented among individuals experiencing homelessness (OECD, International Migration Outlook 2024). In this regard, **EAPN Greece** highlights, in a recent survey migrant inclusion in the country (2020), that “housing is mentioned as one of the most critical poverty issues for certain individuals with a migration profile, primarily from Syria, and stigma is identified as one of the main factors leading to poverty and the inability to integrate.” While securing housing is vital for migrants—often a prerequisite for obtaining employment and accessing essential services such as education, healthcare and social support—newcomers often encounter additional barriers in doing so, including information gaps, bureaucratic hurdles, missing documentation (such as proof of previous rent payments and

references), limited access to financial and housing aid, and discrimination (OECD, International Migration Outlook 2024).

Furthermore, “whereas in-migration is too low to balance these demographic trends, migration has become a politicised topic itself, and ethnic heterogeneity has consequences for solidarity and welfare state support” (Naumann and Hess, 2021). Different groups of migrants such as “(skilled or ‘unskilled’ workers, asylum seekers, refugees, migrant spouses, etc.) access distinct sets of rights and varied degrees of social coverage, mirroring hierarchies of values attached to conditional social citizenship rights that also affect national citizens.” (Ratzmann and Sahraoui, 2021). Such hierarchies will be further analysed in the next chapter.

1.6. In-work poverty and unemployment

In-work poverty declined only slightly to 8.3% in 2023 (by 0.2 percentage points), showing that many workers remain at risk of poverty. “Part-time employment—predominantly carried out by women—and temporary employment are associated with increased income poverty risks” (Wolf, 2024). The perception is that “income from work is no longer able to protect people and their families from serious economic and social hardship” (**EAPN Italy**). **EAPN Bulgaria** confirms the trend, noting that “the share of workers with incomes below the poverty line is growing.”

When it comes to the response of public institutions, generally “the minimum wage has been the most important policy for tackling in-work poverty in most EU member states, followed by taxation policies and reductions in social contributions by individuals at the lowest income levels and in-work benefits” (Barbieri, P., Cutuli, G., and Scherer S., 2024). However, as observed by **EAPN Lithuania**, “most of the measures aimed at reducing in-work poverty have focused on raising the wages of low-

income earners, yet despite significant increases in the Minimum Monthly Wage, in-work poverty has been increasing. Therefore, it is important to note that reducing in-work poverty cannot be limited to raising the Minimal Monthly Wage.” In addition, **EAPN Lithuania** reports a significant increase in the risk of poverty among the unemployed, which rose by 8.5 percentage points. Across the EU, in 2023, **unemployed people** (66.3%) experienced particularly high risks of poverty or social exclusion. (ESDE 2024).

The shift from **protection to activation** in the European social policy agenda—aimed at empowering people to participate in the labour market in the long term and remain employable in a more flexible and deregulated working environment—has led, on the one hand, to increased female employment rates and lower unemployment rates but, on the other, to an increase in in-work poverty alongside the development of a stable low-wage sector (Wolf, 2024). While active labour market policies (ALMPs) (including activation and training schemes) and policies to address labour market segmentation have been promoted by EU and national institutions as necessary and effective measures against in-work poverty, their effectiveness has been questioned by various EAPN members. **EAPN Poland** stresses that often “the vocational activation programmes aimed at beneficiaries of social assistance are fragmented, inaccessible, and based on instruments that have been shown to have negative impacts on participants’ employment prospects. The socially useful work (PSU) programme, in particular, potentially stigmatises participants and reduces their chances of finding regular employment. This points to structural issues in the design and implementation of labour market integration measures for minimum income recipients.” **EAPN Lithuania** echoes these concerns, reporting that “the skills of recipients of cash social assistance are developed through so-called socially useful

activities. In practice, however, this is usually limited to a range of regular environmental maintenance tasks that are not commensurate with people’s educational qualifications. For some people, these activities are not only physically demanding but also stigmatising.” In addition, professional inclusion support is sometimes provided through precarious or temporary contracts, which do not always result in an effective inclusion in the labour market (**EAPN Portugal**).

“I do the same job as my colleagues [...] I don’t have access to holiday pay, insurance, etc. and I do the same thing. It’s all very precarious.”

- Person with mental illness
experiencing poverty - EAPN Portugal
National 2024 Poverty Watch Report

1.7. Energy poverty

In 2023, the proportion of the population experiencing energy poverty further increased, reaching 10.6% (up from 9.3% in 2022 and 6.9% in 2021). The variations across EU Member States are significant, with particularly high levels in Spain (20.8%), Portugal (20.8%), Bulgaria (20.7%), Lithuania (20.0%) and Greece (19.2%). “Energy poverty increased more sharply for the population at risk of poverty (by 2.1 percentage points), to 22.2% in 2023, reaching more than double the EU average” (ESDE 2024).

As reported by **EAPN Greece**, national authorities aim “to reduce energy poverty by 50% by 2025 and 75% by 2030, but the measures are insufficient to support the most vulnerable households.” On the contrary, this phenomenon is expanding in various EU countries: “more than half of Czech households admit to financial problems related to energy prices”. Furthermore, “energy poverty is very closely linked to the risk of housing poverty—if

people lose their ability to pay for energy, they risk ultimately losing their own homes” (EAPN Czech Republic).

1.8. Housing

The **Housing cost** overburden rate has risen significantly in several Member States. This increase is linked to the high cost of servicing mortgages and rents, the levels of material and social deprivation across the population, as well as the poverty and social exclusion of children (SPC 2024 report). For instance, in the Czech Republic, between 2015 and 2023, “property prices rose most in regional cities—especially Prague and Brno—by an average of around 140%, while the EU average increase was 49% over the same period” (**EAPN Czech Republic**). As a result, “the chance of affordable housing for a large part of the population has become very small or even nil. It is clear that this is partly due to speculation on the housing market” (**EAPN Netherlands**).

“Apart from transport, the housing situation is a major constraint. Even if people want to move to a village that even has a job offer, they can’t because there’s no housing. Lack of housing and lack of transport.”

“In addition to these shortcomings, there is a lack of other services, etc.: no access to a crèche, no access to healthcare... [...] Single-parent families find it very difficult to accept shift work. Because they don’t have anyone to leave the children with.”

- Social Integration Income technicians,
Portugal - EAPN Portugal
National 2024 Poverty Watch Report

The housing crisis goes hand-in-hand with the growing phenomenon of over-indebtedness (EC, Beyond income poverty, 2024): **EAPN Greece** and **EAPN Czech Republic** depict a worrying situation, underlining that a large number of property owners are suffering from foreclosures.

In Ireland, “the **housing, homelessness and accommodation crisis** continues to have a devastating impact across the country. [...] The housing policy has led to a dysfunctional housing system that is a major driver of poverty and homelessness” (**EAPN Ireland**). Meanwhile, **EAPN North Macedonia** highlights the lack of national legislation addressing homelessness. State-owned apartments “are given under a minimum lease to socially vulnerable categories for which there are very restrictive conditions in the call for the distribution of apartments. One of the conditions is that the applicant is a recipient of a minimum income, but if he is homeless and is not such a recipient, then he is excluded from the possibility to apply.”

“There is no resocialization program, no second chance program. Three half-day stays and three shelters, that’s it...”

- Person experiencing poverty, Croatia.

2. Towards a systemic approach to social protection?

Having analysed the conditions of vulnerability and disadvantage in the previous chapter, along with their impact on specific population groups, we now examine the functioning of social protection systems as reported by EAPN members.

“Coherence between programmes, co-ordination between institutions, shared administrative systems, and efficient allocation of financial resources based on robust monitoring and evaluation processes as well as long-term planning” (OECD Social Protection System Review, a toolkit, 2018) are key elements of a systems approach to social protection. This also includes promoting coherence across the sector and “aligning social protection with a government’s broader policy framework, such as a development plan’s relevant sectoral strategies” (Rim J. and Tassot C., 2019). A commitment to multidimensional and coherent policy design and implementation, along with the necessary governance arrangements to support it, aligns fully with the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU), according to which the EU and its Member States are tasked with ensuring proper social protection and combating exclusion (Art. 151 TFEU). Furthermore, this approach contributes to the implementation of UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, particularly target 1.3: “Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.”

According to EAPN national members, addressing the “systemic and structural root causes of poverty, social exclusion and inequality” requires “the implementation of a genuinely integrated strategy across all Government policy” (**EAPN Ireland**). Policy integration and coherence must be understood in terms of both whole-of government coordination across administrative units (ministries, agencies) and vertical coordination across various levels of the government (central/local - OECD, Policy Framework on Sound Public Governance, 2021). This means that government action must be articulated into an “interrelated system of measures leading to the eradication of poverty” (**EAPN North Macedonia**). As a result, instead of relying on “short-term or one-off measures” [..], “we need to see sustained, long-term measures that address the underlying root causes and multidimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion” (**EAPN Ireland**). The long-awaited process of modernisation and reinforcement of the Social Welfare Services in Cyprus, which began with the establishment of the Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare (2021), is expected to move in this direction. Similarly, the first ever Dutch Minister for Poverty Policy, appointed in 2022, initiated a review of the Participation Act

(social assistance). The revised Act, to which **EAPN Netherlands** contributed, is expected to come into force in 2025.

Achieving policy coherence requires better integration between economic, social, and environmental policy areas (OECD, Recommendation of the Council on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development), resulting, for instance, in a clear strategy of “cooperation between social assistance, social services and employment” (**EAPN Lithuania**). However, in recent years, social protection policies have shown “an inconsistent, sometimes contradictory trend, with different measures alternating on the same problem, correcting or contradicting each other” (**EAPN Italy**). Otherwise, as in the case of Serbia, social policies do “not deal with the systemic solution of the problem of poverty, nor with the improvement of the existing social protection system” (**EAPN Serbia**). As underlined by **EAPN Cyprus**, social protection targets all citizens. In this regard, **EAPN Norway** stresses that “the fundamental idea behind the welfare state is not only to support the weakest in society but also to maintain a social and economic safety net by redistributing wealth amongst the population.”

IN A NUTSHELL

Towards a systems approach to social protection systems: key issues to target

Objective

Coherent coordination and integration of all policies linked to /or with an impact for concrete improvement on social protection systems.

Action

Address policy silos, fragmentation and insufficient coordination / cooperation between institutions at the vertical (central/ local) and horizontal (line ministries) levels.

2.1. Agenda setting and policy formulation

The construction of a social protection system begins with **agenda-setting**, through the identification and analysis of the issues policymakers intend to target. Open, equitable, and evidence-informed problem identification is key to meeting citizens’ needs and ensuring their concerns are acknowledged. It helps prevent public policies from being captured by specific interest groups (OECD - Policy Framework on Sound Public Governance, 2021) by fostering a more inclusive policymaking process. In Bulgaria, despite the very high number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion, EAPN has observed a “process of dropping the fight against poverty from the political agenda.” This “led to the development of strategies and programs with minimalist goals”. **EAPN North Macedonia** underlines that even when eradicating poverty is a high priority on the public agenda, and national authorities publicly express full commitment to this goal, it does not necessarily translate into a Poverty Reduction Strategy—or, for that matter, any other document with this purpose. On the other hand, “policymaking is supposed to contribute to problem solving or at least to the reduction of the problem load” (Fischer and Miller, 2007).

Based on the issues identified, through a process of **policy formulation**, policymakers transform the expressed problems and proposals into a policy document, including the definition of the general intervention logic, the policy objectives, and priorities (Ibidem). Such an exercise also requires balancing conflicting interests. Reaching a compromise between interest involves, for instance, in the case of Poland, “reconciling its export-driven model with domestic social needs and EU fiscal requirements,” while bearing in mind that “sustainable, institutionalised approaches to poverty reduction must be prioritised to ensure

IN A NUTSHELL

Towards a sound agenda-setting and policy formulation process of social protection systems: key issues to target

Objective	Action
Inclusive agenda-setting, policy formulation and design processes	Ensure dialogue with people experiencing poverty through participatory processes from multiple backgrounds.
Design sound policies based on evidence from disaggregated and intersectional data collection.	Improve the quality of data, design evidence-based policies, include reference indicators and monitoring frameworks to be further detailed in the policy implementation phase, with indicators that highlight structural and systemic barriers.

that export-led economic growth genuinely benefits all segments of society, particularly the most vulnerable.”

Policy formulation should be **evidence-based**, a fundamental element in improving coordination across multidimensional policies. Additionally, it should include a monitoring framework that allows both the measurement of policy impact, outcomes, and results and the highlighting of progress and achievements for stakeholders during implementation (OECD - Policy Framework on Sound Public Governance, 2021). In this context, it is paramount to draw on reliable and verified data. However, this is a major challenge for the effectiveness and reach of social protection systems, although it is not always the case. **EAPN Portugal** underlines that “policies are being defined [...] without monitoring and evaluation processes.” Similarly, in Bulgaria, the recently adopted National strategy against poverty and promotion of social inclusion 2020-2030, which pursues an abstract goal of reducing inequalities as measured by the Gini index, fails to specify how this objective will be achieved.

During the agenda-setting and policy formulation phase, the relevant public institutions also identify

the key stakeholders and populations impacted by the policy. In this process, policymakers should not neglect people experiencing poverty. The identification, formulation, and design phases present a unique opportunity for governments to develop or strengthen **dialogue with citizens** and civil society organisations “to innovate and deliver improved public service outcomes” (OECD - Together for Better Public Services, 2011). Including poor and vulnerable groups in this process is not only a matter of equity; “consultation and engagement eventually improve the transparency and quality of regulations through the collection of ideas, information and evidence from stakeholders regarding public policymaking (OECD - Policy Framework on Sound Public Governance, 2021). In addition, numerous economic arguments support this approach, including those posited by the Nobel prize winners Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson. Their research on the root causes of inequality includes an analysis of how inclusive institutions are instrumental in fostering long-term prosperity and sustainable economic development (Nobel prize in economic sciences 2024).

But how inclusive are these processes for people experiencing poverty? Indeed, while “the **participation** of people living in poverty is a

strategic principle in the fight against poverty and should be adopted as a working methodology”, participatory processes are not systemically embedded in decision-making and often have little to no impact on policy revision (**EAPN Portugal**). In this regard, **EAPN Bulgaria** identifies a trend towards crisisification—an approach that treats social and economic issues as emergencies, leading to first-aid-type reactions. “This conveniently prioritises certain decisions, centralises the decision-making process, avoids consultations and democratic rules, displacing decision centres and participants.” Conversely, **EAPN Finland** stresses that “efforts have been made to strengthen the participation of people with disabilities in decision-making, including through the use of disability councils.” Unfortunately, these councils “are often poorly resourced and are not always systematically taken into account in the various decision-making processes, so that the views of people with disabilities are taken into account only in a haphazard manner and often only after decisions.”

2.2. Financing social protection

As part of the state’s coordination and planning function, national authorities decide how **resources** are distributed across policy priorities. Within the EU, “the share of social protection expenditure in total expenditure decreased from 39.7% of total expenditure in 2021 to 39.2% of total expenditure in 2022” (Eurostat, Global expenditure by function, 2024). Government social protection expenditure as a percentage of GDP varied from 7.5% in Ireland and 11.8% in Cyprus to 23.6% in Finland and 21.9% in Italy (ibidem). In addition, **social protection benefit expenditures** decreased significantly in real terms (ESDE 2024) and, to some extent, also as a percentage of GDP (falling to 27.2% in 2022, 3 percentage points lower than in 2020 and 1.5 percentage points lower than in 2021 – ESDE 2024).

Some EAPN members underlined that this shift is also linked to a broader narrative promoting “the transformation of welfare into **workfare**, that is, a set of policies aimed primarily at reintegrating the unemployed and in general people in need back into the labour market, to remove them from “benefit dependency,” making them economically autonomous” (**EAPN Italy**). Similarly, “Ireland’s social welfare system shifted to a more conditional ‘work first’ form of activation policy” (**EAPN Ireland**).

Against this backdrop, EAPN members raised concerns that the relaunch of the **excessive deficit procedure** at the EU level (Council of the EU, 2024) could push Member States to implement further cuts. Nonetheless, in Poland, despite the launch of this procedure, so far, the new government has significantly increased spending on key social areas (**EAPN Poland**). **EAPN Spain**, on the other hand, fears that complying with the new fiscal rules might require reductions in public spending, including cuts to social programs and essential public services. Additionally, the required reforms and investment commitments could divert resources away from social protection towards other priority sectors, such as defence and the green and digital transitions.

IN A NUTSHELL

Towards adequate funding of social protection systems: key issues to target

Objective

Redistribute resources for the development of coherent and inclusive social protection systems.

Action

Ensure adequate financing to social protection systems, including by shifting the burden from labour to personal income through progressive income taxation.

A reduction in social expenditure has also been observed in countries unaffected by the deficit procedure, such as Finland, where national authorities introduced significant cuts to social security in 2023-2024 (**EAPN Finland**). When breaking down data per capita, **EAPN Croatia** points out that “social protection expenditures per inhabitant expressed in purchasing power standards lagged behind the EU-27 average by 50%”.

“I have the feeling that everyone got something during the pandemic, entrepreneurs, everyone worked normally, and my pension was getting smaller and smaller. I have the feeling that those extra few euros that I received through state aid suddenly disappeared in the first store.”

- Person experiencing poverty,
EAPN Croatia

In terms of public expenditure composition, old age, sickness and healthcare benefits accounted for the largest share of social protection benefits across all EU countries, followed by disability, survivors, family and children, unemployment, housing, and social exclusion (Eurostat, November 2024). In line with this trend, **EAPN Spain** reported that spending remains concentrated on pensions, while resources targeting other population groups are insufficient.

2.3. The implementation phase

A clear example of this is the impact of **austerity** measures following the 2008 global financial crisis on Ireland’s social protection system. “Welfare conditionality, means testing, and employment activation became key features of unemployment benefit and within the Irish social protection system after the financial crash. Ireland moved toward

utilising the social welfare system to ‘activate’ and ‘responsibilise’ the unemployed.” [...] “This was coupled with an emphasis on fraud prevention and an increasing narrative of benefit deviance that sought to problematise the behaviour of social welfare claimants. Researchers have suggested that these shifts ‘altered the nature of focus on social welfare provision and the relationship between state and claimant.’ The influence of austerity policies has not gone away—the framing used during this period still informs much of the approach to social protection we see today” (**EAPN Ireland**).

“I heard the Mayor’s speech blaming people who can’t work. It seems to be people’s own fault that they find themselves in a difficult situation. It feels very much that there is a focus only on numbers and statistics.”

- Person experiencing poverty, Lithuania
EAPN Lithuania
National Poverty Watch 2024

“Policy implementation distributes benefits to some groups, while imposing burdens on others. In doing so, designs establish incentives for some groups to participate in public life and offer them resources for doing so. Other groups receive negative messages from policies. For example, if benefits are distributed in a stigmatising way, individuals may be intimidated by the government, withdraw from public life, or feel alienated from it” (Fischer and Miller, 2007). Even more concerning, network members consistently report high levels of discrimination and **stigma** against people experiencing poverty, which manifest throughout the policy cycle. “Suspicion, mockery, and charity govern the welfare policy and turn beneficiaries into beggars” (**EAPN Greece**). This, in turn, amplifies the “perception of social benefits as a ‘help’ and not as a right” (**EAPN Spain**). In the

Czech Republic, receiving benefits is associated with “a feeling that one is a ‘loser’ and has hit rock bottom; this narrative has long been promoted by some politicians, for whom people on benefits were those who were lazy or unable to help themselves in their situation” **(EAPN Czech Republic)**.

In Ireland, “research has found that the social protection system is an area of public life in which people often face barriers due to **socio-economic discrimination**”, to the extent that the “frequency with which discrimination is experienced by social welfare recipients has led some to question whether this is a feature rather than a flaw of the system.” Combined with welfare fraud rhetoric, this represents a major barrier to accessing social services, “eroding the rights of people who are unemployed, migrants, disabled people, and women” **(EAPN Ireland)**.

Beyond this, some members underline a shift in how welfare is perceived, from a rights-based approach to a policy increasingly focused on supporting population groups deemed **deserving**, as opposed to **non-deserving**. As mentioned by **EAPN Italy**, “in work as in the allocation of social benefits, public housing, access to nursery schools, ‘Italians must come first’, that is, ‘our’ people, those considered ‘true’ on a racial-ethnic-linguistic level”. It could be argued that, “linked to a series of access conditions, social assistance has become more about disciplining and sanctioning rather than protecting social rights” (van Oorschot, 2006).

“Lately I have been sensing a repressive climate of intolerance toward the neighbour who is different. Rights that are being denied or even taken away.”

Person experiencing poverty, Italy
EAPN Italy
National 2024 Poverty Watch Report

Another widely emphasised issue linked to the enjoyment of social rights is that many people do not receive the social benefits to which they are entitled. A recent Eurofound report highlighted that “no Member State has more than 80% of eligible people receiving income benefits. In addition, no Member State compensates people retroactively for the non-take-up of benefits and at least 10% of applications are rejected, highlighting the challenge of inefficiencies and ineffectiveness” (Eurofound, Social Protection 2.0). **Non-take-up** can occur for a number of reasons: eligible individuals may be unaware of a particular benefit’s existence; they may be aware but not claim it; they may request but fail to obtain it; or, in some cases, a benefit may not be offered despite eligibility due to limited availability of the service or benefit (Lucas, Bonvin and Hübeline, 2021).

Almost half of all the households in Czechia are eligible for the child benefit, yet, only 13% receive it. In response, national authorities are undertaking a major reform of the benefits system to simplify both the submission process and the assessment of applications **(EAPN Czech Republic)**. In Spain, the Minimum Vital Income was not delivered to 56% of eligible households. Overpayments seem to have played a significant role in these coverage gaps. In such cases, the Ombudsman has intervened to limit the obligation to repay social benefits when beneficiaries have acted in good faith or when errors are attributable to the administration **(EAPN Spain)**.

As described above, “non-take-up can partly be the consequence of a chaotic benefit system, which will also experience high over-take-up. Improving the quality of administration, then, is likely to simultaneously decrease both over-take-up and non-take-up, reducing costs” (EUROFOUND - Access to social benefits, 2015). National reports highlight various systemic shortcomings in this regard, such as poor programme design, overly

stringent requirements, vague or overly specific definitions of target populations, and inadequate or eroding income criteria. Poland is the case in point: a “structural flaw in how eligibility thresholds are determined and updated means that some households living in extreme poverty are not eligible for cash social assistance intended to protect the poorest.” Similarly, in Portugal, “data is collected on the number of beneficiaries/families, but there is no comparative database of the Portuguese population that would allow us to understand whether the measure is reaching all potential beneficiaries”. In 2006 the non-take-up rate was estimated to be around 35 %, according to research analysed by **EAPN Portugal**.

In this scenario, the identification of the **reference population** is instrumental for the effective delivery of social benefits. A positive example in this regard comes from Finland, where “local authorities are becoming increasingly aware of the specific challenges faced by vulnerable groups, including single parents, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Tailor-made programmes targeting these groups are being developed to meet their unique needs.” This proactive approach implies reaching out to the group that is subject to the social risk that the benefit attempts to cover. Therefore, the impact of support measures also relies largely on updated information and databases on the intended beneficiaries. To support better and evidence-based policymaking, the EU is currently reviewing its framework for population and housing statistics (EP, Legislative Observatory). In this context, the European Parliament has called for the inclusion of data on **hard-to-reach population groups**, such as homeless people and people living in informal settings (EP, 2023).

Insights from our network further underline that, as reported by Greece, national housing surveys do not include certain “vulnerable groups of the

population, and as a result, may not provide a complete picture of the true extent of poverty.” These groups include people living in collective residences, such as hotels, boarding houses, hospitals, nursing homes, military camps, reformatories, Roma camps, cars, bridges, shanties near train stations, shelters for abused women, care facilities for the elderly, etc.” **EAPN Poland** details that “this exclusion arises from the survey’s methodology, which focuses on households, defined as people living in residential dwellings and maintaining a shared economy.” [...] “Therefore, we are faced with the exclusion of the extremely poor from surveys on extreme poverty and poverty in general.”

When it comes to **service delivery**, EAPN members described multifaceted scenarios. On a positive note, in 2024, Lithuanian authorities adopted a reform allowing social services to not only be provided by legal entities (social service institutions) but also by natural persons. “This initiative increases the availability and diversity of services, especially in regions where social services are more limited or inaccessible” (**EAPN Lithuania**). **Decentralisation** poses difficulties in this regard. EAPN Poland reports “coordination challenges between different levels of government and across various social protection and social service domains. There are issues with formal cooperation between municipalities and counties in providing integrated support, as well as challenges in coordinating between employment services and social assistance. This fragmentation creates barriers to providing holistic support to vulnerable individuals and families.”

What is more, **EAPN Italy** highlights regional disparities so significant that they call into question the universality of rights and uniformity of benefits and services. Clearly, the “lack of horizontal or vertical co-operation and co-ordination among actors at various stages of the policy cycle can negatively

impact policy outcomes” (OECD, Social Protection System Review, 2018). The effectiveness of social benefits can be measured by comparing the at-risk-of-poverty rate before and after social transfers. According to the SPC’s 2024 report, their impact has decreased in over a third of Member States. Adding the fact that the poverty risk for persons in (quasi-) jobless households has increased, the data suggest a weakening in the effectiveness of social protection systems (SPC 2024 Report).

“I went to social services and the education office with the diagnosis, and they handed me a slip of paper with a list of phone numbers: ‘Call these.’ And you call, and after explaining the situation, they just say, ‘Sorry, we don’t have space.’ After the tenth time, you just give up—you don’t want to try anymore.”

Person experiencing poverty,
EAPN Poland
National 2024 Poverty Watch Report

Digitalisation also seems to hamper access to services. According to **EAPN Finland**, the fundamental problem with approaching “the digital service may be the bureaucratic language, which, if not answered correctly, may lead to a refusal of unemployment benefit. In practice, many tasks and responsibilities previously managed by authorities have been shifted to citizens. Citizens must take care of obtaining the services and benefits they need and are entitled to. They are responsible for seeking and managing information regarding services and benefits, accessing services, and applying for benefits. At the same time, they also bear the risks associated with using these services.”

Moreover, **delays in payments** of social benefits significantly affect the social rights of people

experiencing poverty. **EAPN Croatia** depicts a situation in which, despite the pension increase for elderly people that came into effect in 2023, beneficiaries are experiencing severe delays in receiving the benefits they are entitled to. The Ombudsman has repeatedly warned the Croatian Institute for Pension Insurance. Delays have also been reported by **EAPN Czech Republic**.

“Even though I worked for 43 years, non-stop, with a couple of sick days throughout my life, I now depend on the kindness of my children to lend me money until my pension comes—does that make any sense? My wife has been working for two more years, so fortunately we live on her salary, and I didn’t have any debts before. I handed in all the papers on time, more than a year ago, and every time they miss something, some paper that I must manually chase around the city, even though they say they are networked and that they are great with these new IT technologies. I also borrowed a little from friends so that after I get my pension, I will pay back my debts in the next couple of months, but it’s good to have friends you can rely on in a crisis, along with family of course. And this is all happening because of the slowness of the state administration, and I don’t know how to hurry them up. I wrote to everyone, sent urgent letters, and everywhere I got the same answer - wait a minute, you’re not the only one with similar answers”.

Person experiencing poverty, EAPN Croatia -
National 2024 Poverty Watch Report

IN A NUTSHELL

Towards a sound implementation of social protection policies: key issues to target

Objective	Action
Inclusive social protection implementation and monitoring	Ensure dialogue with people experiencing poverty through participatory processes.
Sound implementation programmes based on evidence and quality that identify the multidimensions of poverty.	Improve the quality of data, design evidence-based policies, include reference indicators and monitoring frameworks to be further detailed in the policy implementation phase, with indicators that will highlight structural and systemic barriers
	Emphasise the dignity of the intended beneficiaries. Effectively reach out to the target populations of social protection programmes.
Effective and professional delivery of public services with targets to remove the structural and systemic challenges faced by People Experiencing Poverty.	Ensure transparency and responsiveness of public institutions' activities. Adopt a one-stop-shop approach, integrating all levels of the administration into organised and coherent social services for citizens. Promote a culture of respect and inclusion of people experiencing poverty in the provision of services.

It is also important to underline that the engagement of all stakeholders, including people experiencing poverty, is a key component in the delivery of public policies and services. Involving affected communities improves the evidence base for policymaking and contributes to the sustainability of social protection policies and programmes beyond the electoral cycle. As pointed out by **EAPN Portugal**, “people’s **participation** should be guaranteed throughout the monitoring, implementation and evaluation”. Under the Finnish system, social service clients must be involved in the ideation, planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of services, service chains, and service packages. While service organisers and providers are obliged to promote participation, active citizen involvement is not implemented systematically. Finland’s is not an isolated case. For instance, in North Macedonia, the revision of a programme

providing financial support to low-income families to mitigate social climate impacts (Programme for the Protection of Vulnerable Energy Consumers) was entrusted to an internal working group of the Ministry of Economy, without any consultation of the affected population groups. The programme was transformed into a support voucher for purchasing and installing high-efficiency inverter air conditioners.

2.4. Addressing present and future challenges in a fast-evolving scenario

Struggling with the radical technological transformations that our societies and economies are experiencing and impacted by the effects of the Russian aggression against Ukraine on the cost of living, our social protection systems face a range of new and different challenges. They “have been designed to cover risks such as sickness, old age,

pregnancy, accidents at work and occupational diseases, and unemployment” (**EAPN Lithuania**). While these risks remain relevant today, social protection systems must also address emerging societal challenges. For this reason, sustainable and well-designed social protection interventions require forward-looking analysis to identify future risks, vulnerabilities (OECD, Social Protection System Review), and key drivers of social protection demand, such as demographics, urbanisation, migration, and climate change (Devereux, Roelen and Ulrichs, 2015).

Such challenges include the **ageing of our societies** and the phenomena of denatality and depopulation, particularly in remote and rural areas. As noted by **EAPN Sweden**, these trends result in a growing demand for long-term home care and institutional care. The main providers of such services include the public sector (whether through the social protection healthcare systems), private service providers, and civil society organisations. **EAPN Serbia** underlines that most of them are informal caregivers who, as detailed by **EAPN Czech Republic**, “replace the missing or unavailable social services in the country. if these people gave up their mission, the system would collapse completely.” In addition, elderly people are at a high risk of social exclusion. Various EAPN members stress that measures must aim to prevent isolation, promote socially active and inclusive ageing, and therefore contribute to the intergenerational transmission of elderly people’s human, cultural, and social capital.

It is also worth considering that Europe is the fastest-warming continent in the world: “extreme heat, drought, wildfires, and flooding, as experienced in recent years, will worsen in Europe even under optimistic global warming scenarios and affect living conditions throughout the continent” (EEA, 2024). People living in low-income urban areas with poor infrastructure, and

population groups with lower incomes and assets in general, are disproportionately exposed to **climate impacts** while having fewer resources to face them. “Unemployed and socially marginalised people are among the most vulnerable to climate risks” (EC, DG for Climate Action). Social protection systems can play a fundamental role in managing risks arising from climate change (Costella, van Aalst, Georgiadou et al.; see also Arabadjieva K. and Barrio A).

Moreover, we live in a globalised and rapidly changing economy, in which our societies face extraordinary challenges. The technological transformations that we are experiencing are unprecedented in both their speed and impact. The pace of the so-called **Fourth Industrial Revolution** accelerated further during the pandemic, exposing gaps in digital skills and inequalities. **EAPN Lithuania** emphasises that “society is becoming increasingly stratified, leading to greater disparities between those with more and those with fewer opportunities. The disparity of opportunities is well reflected in the concept of social mobility—the movement between social positions in a multidimensional social space—which allows us to take stock of the challenges and barriers that arise in a society that limit the opportunities for higher education, occupational status, income, or even better health.”

EAPN members report several attempts by policymakers to address the “correlation between growing up in a household with low educational levels and the likelihood of experiencing poverty in adulthood” (**EAPN Spain**) and “compensate for the social skills that parents do not pass on” (**EAPN Lithuania**). This includes, in Norway, the recent adoption of “a new educational law that gives all students the right to complete upper secondary school, no matter how long it takes. Previously, pupils were entitled to only three years of education. This will likely help many who are

at risk of ending up outside of the workforce by ensuring they can gain the skills they need to work in a field that interests them. Giving more people the opportunity to have a job they enjoy is a relatively simple but very important way to combat poverty” (**EAPN Norway**). Furthermore, **EAPN North Macedonia** underlines the role of policies supporting the validation of informal and experiential learning in addressing skill shortages and facilitating the integration of vulnerable groups, unemployed individuals, and low-skilled workers into the formal economy. On average across OECD countries, 18% of adults do not reach the most basic levels of proficiency in literacy, numeracy, and adaptive problem-solving—“skills that are fundamental for personal, economic, and societal development” (OECD - Survey of Adult Skills 2023).

Finally, amid growing polarisation between democratic and autocratic forces and ongoing **war** in Europe, the focus on defence policies is growing. This shift is also visible in public expenditure (Eurostat, Government expenditure on defence, 2024). To sum up, as underscored by **EAPN Cyprus**, macrotrends such as “regional and global developments, regional conflicts, and wars as well as climate change are factors that must be taken into account, and the state machine can react immediately to changes so that citizens remain protected from the effects they cause.”

Therefore, how are EAPN members assessing the impact of social protection systems? Is their protective function effective? As described by **EAPN Spain**, the target population perceives a “widespread perception of inefficiency, lack of equity, and, above all, a significant disconnect between policies and the realities faced by people who rely on these benefits.” Politicians are seen as working “for themselves and not for a common good” (**EAPN Bulgaria**), while social services are “anachronistic and ineffective,” and the “social

security system is floated with deficiencies” (**EAPN Cyprus**). In this context, civil society organisations often “serve to fill the gaps or the lack of willingness of the state apparatus to reach truly vulnerable populations” (**EAPN Greece**).

The demand for an adequate level of service (both in efficiency and effectiveness) and for better-designed policies for people experiencing poverty is clear. As underlined by **EAPN Italy**, this translates into the **need to rediscover a systemic approach to social policies** and to restore “the role of the state and its function of guidance and coordination, alongside that of the regions, municipalities and territorial ambits. The role of the state is necessary to ensure equality among citizens.”

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of national reports and the main issues raised, the EAPN members identified several action points to ensure social protection systems are approached systemically. As highlighted throughout the research, we believe a systemic approach to social protection plays a crucial role in shaping public policies aimed at eradicating poverty.

These recommendations must be read within the policy context in which this report was drafted, marked by:

- The upcoming renewal of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan,
- The upcoming launch of two key initiatives: the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy and the EU Affordable Housing Plan.

Structural approach			
Recommendation	EU level	National level	Timeline
1) Guarantee an inclusive revision process of the Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights , ensuring full implementation of Principle 12 (Social Protection). The new action plan should: • be based on a structural approach to social protection, informed by knowledge, evidence, solid monitoring, and evaluation tools based on a pan-European framework of quality indicators for a revised Social Scoreboard. The revision process must guarantee a high level of participation and transparency; • and ensure full coherence with the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, European Affordable Housing Plan, Affordable Energy Plan, and other EU policies beyond social affairs.	✓		By 2025
2) Through an inclusive consultation and participation process, design an effective and comprehensive EU Anti-Poverty Strategy that leads to collective well-being by eradicating poverty and social exclusion, based on the EAPN roadmap and policy recommendations <i>[to be published in March 2025]</i> .	✓		Open
3) Address the housing crisis and homelessness through an ambitious European Affordable Housing Plan.	✓		Open

Structural approach

Recommendation	EU level	National level	Timeline
4) Guarantee adequate, accessible, and enabling minimum income schemes, shifting the burden away from individuals to solely adapt to social protection frameworks.	✓	✓	Open
5) Revise housing and population statistics to include hard-to-reach population groups within the framework of the revision of Regulation (EC) No 862/2007 and repealing Regulations (EC) No 763/2008 and (EU) No 1260/2013.	✓		Ongoing
6) Ensure full national implementation of the EU Directive on minimum wage.		✓	Open
7) Include the implementation of the Child Guarantee, Energy Poverty, Digitalisation, and socio-economic discrimination in the monitoring framework of the European Semester, beyond gender and disability.	✓	✓	
8) Introduce comprehensive poverty checks in the formulation, monitoring, and implementation of new legislation / policy documents, including in the fields of climate, the environment, anti-discrimination, migration, and digital transition.	✓	✓	Open
9) Guarantee the full and transparent implementation of the EU Care Strategy.	✓	✓	Open
10) Ensure the participation of civil society and people experiencing poverty in the formulation of national social climate plans, in line with the framework of the Regulation establishing the Social Climate Fund.		✓	By 2025
11) Develop a social taxonomy to increase transparency in the private sector regarding tax policies and adherence to social standards.	✓		Open
12) Increase revenue by tackling tax evasion and promoting fairer taxation systems, including tax on wealth, property, and capital.	✓	✓	Open

Systemic approach		
Recommendation	EU level	National level
1) Exclude social and climate investment from the deficit calculations, also known as the Green Golden Rule.		
2) Ensure the indexation of income from labour and benefits to inflation to ensure adequacy.		
3) Address inequality by recognising socio-economic background as a protected category.		
4) Secure legal pathways for the integration of migrants and guarantee access to essential services for undocumented migrants.		
5) Strengthen social dialogue and enhance the role of trade unions in collective bargaining.		
6) Ensure both horizontal (inter-ministerial, DGs) and vertical (from EU to local authorities) coordination to guarantee social protection for the most vulnerable.		
7) End the criminalisation of poverty and the legalisation of inequality, including within the labour market.		
8) Put an end to the general suspicion of fraud, surveillance, and policing of people living in poverty, prioritising ambitious rights-based access and addressing non-take-up of benefits.		
9) Support civil society organisations by securing funding and protecting them from public attacks.		

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