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**Publication date**

2024

**Document Version**

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Cantillon, B., Ferrera, M., & Keune, M. (2024). Stepping up the EU agenda on social citizenship. Web publication or website, Social Europe. <https://www.socialeurope.eu/stepping-up-the-eu-agenda-on-social-citizenship>

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# Stepping up the EU agenda on social citizenship

BEA CANTILLON, MAURIZIO FERRERA and MAARTEN KEUNE 12th April 2024

In a more precarious Europe, social protection and minimum-income guarantees must be more strongly embedded.



Applying for the French minimum-income scheme, RSA—from the beginning of this year beneficiaries will have to agree a contract of engagement with the agency *France Travail* on their training and labour-market insertion (RVillalon/shutterstock.com)

On Tuesday a 'High-level Conference on the European Pillar of Social Rights', organised by the Belgian presidency of the Council of the EU, will adopt an inter-institutional declaration to renew the commitment to the EPSR, promulgated in 2017. The 'La Hulpe Declaration' will mark the next step in the strengthening of European social rights.

The European Commission's 2021 **Action Plan** has begun to give substance to the principles of the pillar. But its focus has been primarily on the first ('Equal opportunities and access to the labour market') and second ('Fair working conditions') chapters, while on the third ('Social protection and inclusion') implementation has remained limited. As shown by the **EuSocialCit** research project, there are **deficiencies** regarding unemployment benefits, minimum-income protection, pensions and housing.

## **Marked precarisation**

The experience of recent decades teaches us that growth in employment does not necessarily benefit more vulnerable groups, that work is not always a guarantee of a decent life and that those lower in the social hierarchy tend to benefit less from social investments. During the 2010s, significant employment growth and *de-feminisation* of poverty went along with a **marked precarisation** of low-skilled men and women.

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Particularly striking has been the rise in the risk of poverty among jobless households. This fairly general trend is to a large extent **attributable** to the inadequacy of minimum-income provision and a weakening of the capacity of social protection to reduce poverty, due to tightened eligibility criteria and increased conditionality and the proliferation of non-standard jobs.

Without progress on these fronts, it will not be possible to meet the European Union's 2030 targets for social inclusion and poverty. Employment and gender-equality objectives are now firmly anchored in the European social agenda. An equivalent embedding of social protection and minimum-income guarantees requires:

- a 'social-inclusion proof' implementation of social-investment initiatives in employment, gender and work-life balance (including early-childhood education and care), prioritising the most vulnerable;
- a stronger role for EU social funding in enabling national policies to provide basic needs (such as through the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived), finance temporary unemployment services (making the pandemic-linked SURE programme to sustain employment permanent), increase employability and job opportunities for lower-skilled individuals (through the European Social Fund) and support vulnerable groups in the climate transition (through the Social Climate Fund to kick in in 2026);
- reinforcement of political processes that may lead to binding agreements on minimum standards in social protection, and
- ensuring adequate guaranteed minimum incomes—on the foundation laid by the directive on minimum wages, the next step should be a framework directive on minimum incomes that would make principle 14 of the EPSR enforceable.

## **Instrumental resources**

The success of the pillar depends not only on the enactment of more social legislation but, crucially, on the actual take-up of rights. EuSocialCit has shown that legal norms do not necessarily translate into effective realisation of the benefits envisaged. To guarantee effective access, instrumental power resources must be dedicated: information, guidance and counselling; user-friendly application procedures; easily accessible public administration and services; and mechanisms for problem-solving, mediation and legal advice where difficulties arise.

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These instrumental resources can take the form of fully-fledged procedural rights (such as to information) or practical supports provided by public bodies, the social partners and civil-society organisations. For example, in the implementation of the **work-life balance directive** some countries have dedicated instrumental resources to promote higher take-up of fathers' leave. The 2019 **recommendation** on access to social protection emphasises the importance of information and accessible procedures but this general appeal to 'transparency' needs to be spelled out, in terms of its practical implications, and enriched with more operational content.

In addition to serving as a guide, the EPSR must be turned into an effective governance tool. Its principles should be fully incorporated into, and reinforced within, the **European Semester**. Moreover, the pillar must become the key benchmark for **social conditionality**, with a view to promoting upward social convergence.

## **'Civil dialogue'**

Several studies associated with EuSocialCit have shown that social partners and civil-society organisations play a significant role in inputs to and outputs from EU policy. They serve as transmission belts for the needs and demands of citizens and they contribute to the implementation of social rights on at least two key fronts: facilitating access via instrumental resources and assisting (potential) users in case of complaints.

While the EU recognises social dialogue, civil-society associations still have **relatively limited** formal opportunities to make their voice heard. A civil-society strategy, with a view to establishing a fully-fledged system of 'civil dialogue', should feature prominently in the reform of EU social governance.

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