



# New measures and tools to close the gaps in social citizenship

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## INTRODUCTION

The EUROSHIP project (2020-2023) aims to provide an original and gender-sensitive assessment of the current gaps in social protection against poverty and social exclusion in Europe. Through the involvement of national and European stakeholders, EUROSHIP develops policy recommendations on how to strengthen social citizenship at the national and EU levels. The research results will support the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The EUROSHIP project considered new measures and tools that can be used to close the gaps in social citizenship in Europe. Social citizenship is crucial for ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all individuals in society. However, gaps in social citizenship persist across Europe, limiting access to social protection and leaving people in vulnerable situations at a disadvantage.

The research identified some primary barriers to the exercise of social citizenship in Europe: (1) the inadequacy of minimum income schemes; (2) digital divisions; (3) inadequate data infrastructure and monitoring tools; and (4) care and long-term care gaps in policies and infrastructures. This policy brief outlines new measures and tools that can be employed to close these gaps and foster inclusive social citizenship throughout Europe.



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This section aims to provide a brief summary of the preliminary research findings in order to conceptualise the policy recommendations below. For more detailed information on the findings, please consult the research papers.

Overall, the research found an **increasing trend in the at-risk of poverty and social exclusion (AROPE) and severe material deprivation rate in Europe**, coupled with varied gaps across EU countries. While substantial increases in employment rates since 2005 accounted for major gains in the field of poverty and social exclusion, the strategy of pushing people into low quality employment, particularly in expanding service sectors, combined with increasing “flexibilization” of labour markets, resulted in **increased income inequality and higher in-work poverty levels**.

Certain groups are disproportionately affected by the prevalence of poverty, such as persons with disabilities, single parent households, women, young adults and older persons, people with lower education or long-standing health problems, people who are unemployed, migrants and ethnic minorities such as Roma.

EUROSHIP has examined changes over time in minimum income benefit levels and their effects on the risk of poverty, as well as on unemployment (or poverty) traps. In almost all EU Member States the minimum income levels of out-of-work households across different household types do not reach the 60% national poverty threshold. Moreover, Central, Eastern and Southern EU Member States tend to have minimum income levels below the 40% national poverty threshold. Over time, **minimum income levels show a decline in relative benefit levels for most EU Member States**.

Our analysis shows that while the European Commission has continued to emphasise the importance of implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) principles in its Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) for EU member states, many countries are faced with a conflict between cutting spending to achieve their budgetary objectives and recommendation to invest in the field of education, employment and social protection. Moreover, even though the EPSR seems to be influential in the national debate on certain issues, we observe **variation among countries in terms of prioritising social CSRs in their National Reform Programs**.

Alongside the growth of employment mediated through digital platforms there has been an expansion of digitalisation of public service provisions across Europe. While on one hand digitalisation can enable a faster and more inclusive management of social provisions, on the other hand there is concern that particular groups will be excluded. The speed of this change across Europe is variegated with risks to individuals’ capacity to exercise their full social citizenship. **The implementation of digital technologies in public services is creating new layers of inequality between connected and disconnected communities**.

Considering the demographic changes in our societies the increasing need for long-term care will create challenges for health and social systems in providing affordable, comprehensive and high-quality long-term care for those who need it. Prominent among these challenges is ensuring equitable access to long-term care services for all populations of individuals in need. **People with disabilities are especially vulnerable to lack of access to long-term care** not only because they experience high levels of poverty, isolation and limited social participation generally, but also because often their disabilities require specialised long term care services that the system has limited capacity to provide. Equal access, moreover, is a precondition for autonomy – the ability of all citizens to decide for themselves what they believe is valuable. By following the principles of equal access set out by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the basic human right of autonomy of persons with disabilities can be supported when navigating the complexity of long-term care systems.

In light of our empirical findings, the EUROSHIP team derive some policy implications.

- 1) The launch of the Europe 2020 strategy highlights the importance of adopting precise, quantitative targets in order to create a commitment of the EU in the social sphere and upward social convergence. EUROSHIP findings demonstrate that the ability of the Social Scoreboard to describe the actual access to social rights for persons in vulnerable or marginalized positions is a weak point of the monitoring system. The improvement of child-specific indicators is indicated as an urgent need. There is a strong need of conducting sub-national level analyses as EU cohesion is based on an upward convergence both between and within countries, but the feasibility of these analyses is often undermined by actual sample sizes. Focusing on future developments of the indicator system, there is a need for multi-stakeholder consultations and work to fill the gaps in indicators.
- 2) There is a demand for EU binding initiatives in the social field. During the last decades, social stakeholders have mobilised and asked for more binding EU initiatives in the social sphere. Despite some steps towards a deeper Europe, most of the EU policy initiatives remain either not binding (e.g. 2023 Recommendation on minimum income) or limited and/or vague in the content (e.g. 2022 Directive on minimum wage).
- 3) In line with previous studies on the EU, the results of the working papers showed that supranational policy decisions ultimately rest on the political struggle at the EU-level. While the European Commission played a key role as policy entrepreneur in the social sphere, research findings revealed that many policy initiatives in the field of anti-poverty and social exclusion depend on the political conflict between national and supranational actors, on one hand, and within EU institutions, particularly in the European Parliament and the Council, on the other hand. The main line of tension between MS and the EU constituted an intrinsic feature of the EU governance during the last two decades, preventing the adoption of more EU binding initiatives in the social sphere, despite the legal feasibility.

### **Policy Recommendations to close the gaps in social citizenship:**

#### **Adequate minimum income:**

Following consideration of the findings we recommend the need for adequate minimum income schemes in the EU to address poverty and inequalities. We suggest lifting minimum income levels to ensure a decent standard of living based on national poverty thresholds and using reference budgets to account for varying costs of living. Regular updates and indexation are necessary to maintain adequacy in line with rising inflation, along with tailored support for vulnerable groups. Proactive and automatic provision, combined with comprehensive approaches promoting essential services and labour market inclusion, are recommended. Negative conditionality, asset tests, and stigmatization should be avoided, while the coverage should span across the lifespan and involve effective monitoring and civil society engagement. By implementing these measures, the EU can work towards comprehensive and inclusive minimum income schemes that reduce poverty and promote social cohesion. For these reasons, the EUROSHIP project calls for a legally binding Directive on Adequate Minimum Income.

#### **Better governance of Social Europe:**

The research findings propose key recommendations for the EU's social dimension. The review of the economic governance should prioritise fiscal space for social interventions, overcoming the tension between macroeconomic stability and social imbalances. A hybrid governance system, similar to the European Semester, can foster a social EU by combining hard targets with supranational recommendations and involving national actors. EU funding should be conditional on member states' social performance, incentivising the development of anti-poverty programs and social assistance schemes. Strong involvement of relevant stakeholders, such as trade unions and civil society, is crucial, and the European Commission should increase awareness and establish forums for systematic exchanges with national social actors.

Implementing these recommendations can strengthen the social dimension, address poverty and social exclusion, and promote inclusive social policies in the EU.

### **Reduce digital divisions:**

To bridge digital divisions and enhance access to social citizenship, effective solutions are needed. This includes identifying specific digital deficits that hinder access to digital infrastructures. Policy makers should address not only the accessibility and availability of digital public services but also citizens' skills and abilities to access and use these services for comprehensive digital inclusion. Robust income maintenance policies and social regulation of the labour market are necessary to address gaps in social protection coverage, particularly considering the potential inequities arising from the digitalization of employment. Closing regulatory loopholes in platform work is crucial to prevent the emergence of unregulated digital management in standard employment relationships. Civil and social dialogue plays a significant role in shaping inclusive digital welfare ecosystems.

### **Improve the existing data infrastructure and monitoring tools in the field of poverty and social exclusion :**

The existing data infrastructure needs improvement to enhance diversity measurement across social groups. Monitoring results with increased sample sizes and alternative data collection techniques would benefit the European Statistical System. Data coverage at the regional level is lacking, hindering comprehensive analysis and understanding of regional resilience and policy impact. Measurement of different dimensions of social citizenship remains challenging, and research is needed to improve indicator development, especially in poverty measurement. The Social Scoreboard, the main monitoring tool for the European Pillar of Social Rights, requires improvement in indicators measuring inequality, social policy outcomes, pan-European poverty incidence, child-specific indicators, quality of work, and access to social rights for vulnerable groups. The proposed European Social Rights Indicator (ESRI) offers a multidimensional composite indicator to measure the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which can be improved by incorporating child-specific and disability-specific indicators and disaggregating by regions and groups in vulnerable positions, subject to data availability.

### **Tailored policies for long-term care:**

In September 2022, the European Commission presented the European Care Strategy, setting out their vision on access to quality care throughout the life cycle. This strategy is a positive step forward for both carers and those receiving care. The Strategy is also accompanied by two Recommendations for Member States: on the revision of the Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care, and on access to affordable high-quality long-term care. As policies vary across Member States, a tailored approach to long-term care is necessary. In order to align with the values of autonomy and community, we recommend person-centred care, integrated care, workforce training, and maximising individual choice. To ensure full inclusion and participation in the community, reforms should prioritise universalism, home- and community-based services, and the voice of stakeholders. Long-term care is a universal human need, and reforms should respect human rights principles. Investments should prioritise community-based services over residential care, and the voice of stakeholders, including care recipients, families, providers, and civil society organizations, should always be heard in the reform process.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

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