

# 5. How the European Pillar of Social Rights can help to advance social policy in Ireland

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## 1. Introduction

### *An ambitious agenda*

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) sets out an ambitious agenda and is, potentially, the European Union's (EU's) most important social policy initiative in the last two decades. If it is energetically and rigorously implemented, and that remains a big if, it can be a key tool in redressing the imbalance between economic, employment and social policies by putting social and economic justice at the heart of EU and national policy making. It represents a new political realisation that there is a need to build a more social and inclusive Europe. It is a response to the threat to European democracy and the survival of the EU posed by the rise of populism and the growing alienation of many people who feel that the EU has not sufficiently benefited them and contributed to improving their daily lives and meeting their essential needs. It is also a recognition that issues of poverty, social exclusion and excessive inequality remain major challenges across the EU and that too many people in the EU lack adequate access to adequate income and to high quality essential services. While conceived before the outbreak of Covid-19, it provides an important framework that can guide efforts to build back better post the epidemic. It can also help to ensure that the major green and digital transitions that are at the heart of current EU policy making take account of the social dimension and do not lead to greater inequality and exclusion. As the European Social Platform has argued "It is the right tool to bring about the necessary policy changes to address key trends, such as poverty and social exclusion, job precariousness and in-work poverty, and barriers to accessing social protection, including for people in non-standard forms of employment and the self-employed" (European Social Platform 2021).

### *Some reservations*

While the EPSR undoubtedly has significant potential whether it goes beyond being a nice set of aspirations and achieves the impact many of us hope will depend on its effective implementation. In the period since the adoption of the EPSR in 2017 its implementation has been slow. However, momentum has increased significantly with the publication by the European

Commission (hereafter referred to as the Commission) of an Action Plan for the implementation of the EPSR in March 2021 (European Commission 2021) and then the public endorsement of the EPSR and the Action Plan at the Social Summit in Porto on 7 and 8 May 2021, organised by the Portuguese Presidency of the European Council.<sup>1</sup> The Commission’s action plan and the outcome of the Porto summit are encouraging steps forward. However, the action plan needs to be built on. The overall poverty target and the sub-target on child poverty are modest and don’t match the ambition of the Sustainable Development Goals. The plan is much more developed in some areas than others and in several areas does not go far enough in terms of legislative action. If the EPSR is to achieve a major impact several things will be required:

- continued political leadership and increased public awareness and support;
- strengthened social governance through effective mainstreaming of the EPSR principles in the European Semester process and the Social Scoreboard thus rebalancing social and economic priorities and effectively integrating the EPSR goals into fiscal policy and the digital and green transitions;
- increased use of EU legislation to establish enforceable minimum social standards;
- avoiding cherry-picking – i.e. avoiding piecemeal implementation with a greater focus on some principles (for instance those relating to the labour market) than others;
- ensuring that there is a focus on those who are in the most vulnerable situations when implementing all principles and not just in selected areas such as the principles relating to social protection and inclusion; and,
- overcoming data gaps and increasing the timeliness of data.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On 7 May, the Commission, the European Parliament, representatives of civil society, and social partners signed the ‘Porto Social Commitment’, whereby they undertook to place the EPSR at the centre of the strategy for a sustainable and inclusive recovery. On 8 May, the heads of state and government, in an informal gathering of the European Council, released the ‘Porto declaration’, which further stressed that the EPSR is a fundamental element of the recovery, as well as the importance of the Action Plan for achieving upward social and economic convergence in the post-pandemic phase.

<sup>2</sup> There is not space to elaborate on all these points in this short paper but many of these points are well developed in a recent ETUI Policy Brief (Rainone and Aloisi 2021), in Eurodiaconia’s April 2021 assessment of the action plan (Eurodiaconia

In the rest of this short paper, I will do two things. First, I will suggest some overall ways in which the EPSR can be used to strengthen Irish social policy. Secondly, I will focus on the role that the EPSR can play in addressing a few specific issues.

## **2. Overall ways the EPSR can be used to impact Irish social policy**

The EPSR can be a very useful tool both for policy makers and for those arguing for stronger social policies in Ireland. I suggest below nine ways the EPSR can be used as a lever for developing better social policies and creating a more inclusive society.

### ***2.1 Rebalancing economic and social policy***

The preamble to the EPSR stresses that its establishment “should be part of wider efforts to build a more inclusive and sustainable growth model” and thus recognises that policies to foster social cohesion need to be given the same status as policies to promote competitiveness and job creation. Thus, implementing the EPSR’s 20 principles on equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions and social protection and social inclusion should be at the heart of Irish policy making in the future. The EPSR thus provides a very useful tool to argue for stronger policies in all the areas it covers. Member States have an obligation to ensure that the principles they have agreed are implemented and the EPSR can be used to hold Irish governments to account in each of the areas covered. They are thus an important tool to support the development of a more balanced approach to economic and social policy.

### ***2.2 Providing a framework for assessing Irish policies and fostering a comprehensive, integrated and strategic approach to issues of poverty and social exclusion***

It is now widely recognised that in order to combat poverty and social exclusion, it is essential that there is a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach that combines supporting access to good quality employment, adequate income support and access to high quality essential services. It is not action in one area but action across a broad range of policy areas that is required and policies need to be developed and implemented in ways that are mutually reinforcing. Because the EPSR principles cover all these areas they provide a very useful framework

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2021) and in a European Economic and Social Committee Opinion (European Economic and Social Committee 2021).

for reassessing Irish policies to combat poverty and social exclusion as set out in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 (Government of Ireland 2020) and ensuring that those at risk of poverty or social exclusion have access to all the rights set out in the EPSR principles. Indeed, the Commission’s action plan stresses that to achieve the agreed poverty reduction target “an integrated approach is essential to address needs at all stages of life and target the root causes of poverty and social exclusion” (European Commission 2021). This is very much consistent with the emphasis in Ireland’s Roadmap for Social Inclusion on a cross-government approach, with the integration of relevant departmental strategies within the Roadmap.

### ***2.3 Setting clear goals and targets***

The principles set out in the EPSR are very clear and specific. They thus provide a basis for assessing where current Irish policies fall short of achieving them and then arguing for the establishment of a clear roadmap for each principle where more needs to be done which sets out clear steps and sets concrete targets to be achieved along the way. The Commission’s Action Plan, as well as setting the three EU headline targets which were agreed at the Porto Summit<sup>3</sup>, also “calls on the Member States to define their own national targets” (European Commission 2020). Ireland already has quite a good track record in setting goals and targets and the current Road Map for Social Inclusion sets quite an extensive range of goals and targets. The EPSR provides a useful framework against which to review and develop these further.

### ***2.4 Enhancing data, monitoring and accountability***

The Commission’s action plan recognises the importance of monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the EPSR and links this closely to the European Semester process. It recognises that this will require revising the Social Scoreboard and improving the timeliness of social statistics, though its proposals

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<sup>3</sup> The three headline targets are: at least 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 should be in employment by 2030, including a reduction of young people not in employment, education or training to 9%; at least 60% of all adults should participate in training every year, and access to basic digital skills must be promoted for at least 80% of people aged 16-74; and the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million by 2030 of which at least five million should be children. I would agree with Lukas Hochscheidt when he argues that “While the targets for employment and training are bold and clear, that for the reduction of poverty lacks ambition” (Hochscheidt 2021). Also, as Eurochild has highlighted, the sub-target on child poverty is not ambitious enough (Eurochild 2021).

in this regard need further development.<sup>4</sup> In the Irish context this can provide an impetus to further strengthen the indicators and availability of data in relation to each of the EPSR principles. In particular it provides an important tool to insist that, in those areas where we still lack adequate and timely data on those groups in the most vulnerable situations, we now fill these gaps. This will be key to both setting clear targets in each area and to monitoring progress. In Ireland we can also use EU level monitoring and reporting as an important lever to encourage policy efforts in Ireland. In my experience European Commission country desk officers preparing national reports monitoring the implementation of initiatives such as the EPSR and preparing country reports as part of the European Semester process welcome informed reports from civil society and researchers which can help them in their assessment of national policies and the progress that is being made. These reports and the Country Specific Recommendations they lead to can then increase pressure on a Member State to enhance policies in specific areas.

### *2.5 Increasing focus on those groups most at risk of poverty and social exclusion*

The EPSR and the Commission’s action plan refer several times to the need to focus on “those in need” and the “most vulnerable” and to focus on “under-represented groups”. It is also striking that the implementation of the EPSR is being linked to the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) though in several areas of the Commission’s action plan it lags behind the ambitions of the SDGs.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the Commission’s proposal in its action plan for updating the Social Scoreboard is linked to the SDGs. This is significant as the SDGs include a commitment to “leave no one behind” and to endeavour “to reach the furthest behind first” (United Nations 2015). Thus, this provides a useful tool for insisting that, in its implementation of the EPSR, Ireland prioritises the identification and development of measures targeting those in the most vulnerable situations such as ethnic minorities (especially

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, Eurodiaconia (2021) have argued for: adding an indicator on homelessness; adding racial or ethnic origin to the collection of data in line with the demands of the EU Anti-racism Action Plan and following the principles of equality data collection; using racial and ethnic origin as bases for the breakdowns to all the social scoreboard indicators; having breakdowns by age, gender, country of birth and disability status added to all the social scoreboard indicators; adding an indicator measuring the level of investment into social services as percentage of GDP spent or equivalent; and adding an indicator measuring self-reported un/met needs for social service.

<sup>5</sup> See Eurodiaconia (2021) for a useful elaboration on where the EPSR action plan lags behind the SDGs

Roma and Travellers), people with a migrant background, low skilled people, families in vulnerable situations (especially lone parents), those experiencing severe housing deprivation and homelessness, vulnerable elderly and persons with disabilities.<sup>6</sup>

## ***2.6 Tackling discrimination***

Closely related to targeting those in the most vulnerable situations is countering discrimination. In this area, the aim of the Commission Action Plan to combat stereotypes and discrimination in employment, training, education, social protection, housing and health, as well as allowing for EU funds such as European Social Fund (ESF+), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Creative Europe and Erasmus+ to finance initiatives that support these goals is important and can help to further strengthen national policies.

## ***2.7 Promoting greater gender equality***

Addressing gender inequality needs to be a key element in efforts to tackle poverty and social exclusion in Ireland. In this regard the EPSR can be a useful tool, particularly principle 2 on gender equality and principle 3 on equal opportunities. It can provide a helpful lever for strengthening policies to address issues such as gender pay gap and pension gap, to enhance family friendly working and affordable and accessible ECEC and strengthen policies against domestic violence. Indeed, these core principles can be the basis for ensuring that a gender perspective is applied across all the policy areas covered by the EPSR. The Commission's action plan contains some helpful commitments, for instance: to at least halve the gender employment gap compared to 2019; to increase the provision of formal early childhood education and care (ECEC); to present, by 2022 any legislation required to address shortcomings in the application of the Employment Equality Directive and the Racial Equality Directive, in particular to strengthen the role of equality bodies; and to propose

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<sup>6</sup> Principle 17 of the EPSR specifically focuses on the inclusion of people with disabilities and the Commission action plan is quite well developed in this area. The Commission action plan also encourages Member States to Member States to adopt and implement the proposal for a Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation.

legislation to combat gender-based violence against women, including work harassment on grounds of sex.

## ***2.8 Increased learning from good practice elsewhere***

One of the main tools for developing Irish social policies is through comparisons with other countries and learning from those Member States achieving more successful outcomes. As the implementation of the EPSR proceeds there should be an increasing body of evidence of what policies are proving most successful in achieving the different EPSR principles. By actively participating in the EPSR process Irish policy makers and activists can gain valuable insights and arguments for strengthening areas in which our social policies lag behind the best performing countries.

## ***2.9 A better use of EU Funds***

The European Commission has placed a strong emphasis on linking the use of EU Funds to the delivery of the EPSR and stresses that “Member States should make full use of the unprecedented EU funds available for the 2021-2027 period to support reforms and investments in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights” (European Commission 2021).<sup>7</sup> From a poverty and social exclusion perspective it is striking that 25% of the ESF+ resources should specifically be spent to combat poverty and social exclusion. Other EU funds such as the Recovery and Resilience Fund and ERDF can also make a significant contribution in this regard. This is thus a very strong lever for enhancing Ireland’s focus on poverty and social exclusion and ensuring an improved targeting of EU Funds on those in need.

## ***2.10 Enhancing the role of civil society in policy making***

The Commission’s action plan specifically recognises that civil society has a role to play along with EU institutions, national, regional and local authorities and social partners in the delivery of the EPSR. Also, in a very concrete recognition of the importance of civil society and social partners, under the ESF+ “Member States must dedicate an appropriate amount to the capacity building of social partners and civil society organisations: 0.25% of ESF+ resources should be programmed when Member States have a Country Specific Recommendations in this area” (European Commission 2021). This provides a strong basis for civil society involvement in the design, implementation and monitoring of Ireland’s

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<sup>7</sup> Member States to use the EU funding opportunities, notably through their national recovery and resilience plans and their ESF+ and ERDF operational programmes to support the national implementation of the Social Pillar.

efforts to realise the principles set out in the EPSR. It is also a reason why Irish civil society organisations should engage actively through their EU networks in the implementation process at EU level. This in turn can increase pressure for reforms back in Ireland.<sup>8</sup>

### **3. Using the EPSR to advance specific policies to combat poverty and social exclusion**

The EPSR covers a very broad range of policy areas all of which are important. In this paper I will focus on just 5 where I think it has particular potential to strengthen efforts to combat poverty and social exclusion in Ireland. These are: child poverty, income adequacy and inequality, housing exclusion and homelessness, access to essential services and just digital and green transitions. In looking at these areas I will give most attention to child poverty as that is the area in which most of my work at EU level has focussed on in recent years.

#### **3.1 Child poverty**

The fact that one principle of the EPSR, principle 11, focuses on early childhood education and care (ECEC) and on child poverty and children from disadvantaged backgrounds is very significant.<sup>9</sup> It is in many ways the culmination of two decades of work at European level on the issue of child poverty and social exclusion.<sup>10</sup> It is also one of the areas in which the Commission's action plan for implementing the EPSR is most developed. This is in part because, in parallel to the development of the action plan, work was in train to develop the European Child Guarantee and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The importance of and the right to meaningful involvement of civil society in the implementation of the Social Pillar at both EU and national level has been well argued by the Social Platform (Social Platform 2018)

<sup>9</sup> EPSR Principle 11. Childcare and support to children

- a. Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality.
- b. Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the evolution of EU policies on child poverty and social exclusion see for instance: Frazer, Marlier and Nicaise (2010), Frazer and Marlier (2013 and 2017) Frazer, Guio and Marlier (2020) and Guio, Frazer and Marlier (2021).

<sup>11</sup> The idea of a European Child Guarantee was first proposed by the European Parliament in 2015 which called for a guarantee that “every child in Europe at risk of poverty (including refugee children) has access to free healthcare, free education, free childcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition”. In response in 2017 the Commission launched an extensive process of consultation and feasibility studies



The Commission has stressed that the Child Guarantee (CG) represents a concrete deliverable of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan and will contribute to achieving its headline target of reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The CG in particular and the principles of the EPSR more generally can be a very important tool for enhancing and deepening Irish policies on child poverty.

## **Comprehensive and strategic approach with clear targets**

The requirement to develop a national action plan by March 2022 to deliver the EPSR principles and implement the CG creates a very important opportunity to review our existing policies and to identify any weaknesses. Out of this process there should emerge a very clear strategy that goes beyond existing strategies such as the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 – 2025 (Government of Ireland 2020). This should involve a comprehensive and coordinated approach and set out very clear steps and concrete measures to ensure that the objectives set out in the EPSR and CG will be met. It should also ensure that not only access to the five areas covered by the CG<sup>12</sup> but also access to adequate income support for children and families is part of the national action plan. The importance of this is further reinforced by principle 14 of the EPSR on minimum income<sup>13</sup> and principle 6b on adequate minimum wages.

## **Increased emphasis on rights**

The language of the EPSR emphasises the right of people to key services and supports and the CG is underpinned by a child rights perspective. This provides a basis for ensuring that Ireland’s policies in different areas are informed by

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between 2017-2021 (see Frazer et al 2020 and Guio et al 2021). The Commission launched its proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing a European Child in March 2021 (European Commission 2021a) at the same time as adopting the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (European Commission 2021b). This was adopted by the European Council in June 2021.

- <sup>12</sup> The CG emphasises: (a) guarantee for children in need effective and free access to early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities, at least one healthy meal each school day and healthcare; and, (b) guarantee for children in need effective access to healthy nutrition and adequate housing.
- <sup>13</sup> EPSR Principle 14: “Everyone lacking sufficient resources has the right to adequate minimum income benefits ensuring a life in dignity at all stages of life, and effective access to enabling goods and services.” EPSR Principle 6b: “Adequate minimum wages shall be ensured, in a way that provide for the satisfaction of the needs of the worker and his/her family in the light of national economic and social conditions, whilst safeguarding access to employment and incentives to seek work. In-work poverty shall be prevented.”

this. So, for example, if you take children’s rights as a starting point the primary consideration must be the rights of **all** children to high quality ECEC not just ensuring that ECEC is available to parents accessing employment, important though this is. The strong emphasis on children’s rights also suggests that the Ombudsman for Children can play an important role in the development of the Irish national action plan and subsequently in monitoring its implementation.

## **Clear identification of children most in need**

The CG puts a very strong emphasis on ensuring access of children in need to key services and specifically identifies children in the most vulnerable situations.<sup>14</sup> To ensure this, it will be important that in the national implementation action plan there is a clear identification of these children and that clear targets are set for each group ensuring their access to high quality and inclusive services. An important requirement in this regard will be to develop disaggregated data covering children in particularly vulnerable situations at both EU and national levels. In the Irish context this should certainly include Roma and Traveller children, children from a migrant background, children and families experiencing severe housing exclusion and homelessness, children with a disability, and children in precarious family situations.

## **Enhanced policy coordination**

The Commission stresses that the CG “will be effective only within a broader set of integrated measures, as outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, and within a broader policy framework of the EU strategy on the Rights of the Child”. It thus emphasises the need to “build a supportive enabling policy framework by: (i) ensuring that relevant policies are consistent with one another and improving their relevance for supporting children; (ii) investing in adequate education, health and social protection systems; (iii) providing labour market integration measures for parents or guardians and income support for families and children; (iv) addressing the territorial dimension of social exclusion, including in distinctive urban, rural and remote areas; (v) strengthening cooperation and involvement of various stakeholders; (vi) avoiding discrimination and stigmatisation of children in need; (vii) supporting strategic investments in children and services, including enabling

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<sup>14</sup> The CG particularly highlights the needs of: (i) homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation; (ii) children with a disability; (iii) children with a migrant background (iv) children with a minority racial or ethnic background (particularly Roma); (v) children in alternative (especially institutional) care; and (vi) children in precarious family situations.

infrastructure and qualified workforce; and (viii) allocate adequate resources and making optimal use of the EU funding”. All of this implies a strong emphasis on coordination so that policies are developed and implemented in an integrated and holistic way and are mutually reinforcing. To ensure this every country is expected to appoint a national coordinator to ensure effective involvement and coordination across different policy areas. While the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth already plays an important role in this regard, a specific named CG coordinator can play a key role in championing and promoting the CG across all relevant departments and agencies and enabling increased cooperation and coordination. It will be important that the remit for that role will include widespread consultation with relevant stakeholders including civil society organisations working with children and children and families experiencing poverty.

## **Enhanced monitoring and reporting**

The integration of the CG into the European Semester process and the requirement that Member States report on a biannual basis on progress together with the involvement of the Social Protection Committee in developing a common monitoring framework establish a strong emphasis on monitoring. In this regard the proposal in the Commission action plan to revise the Social Scoreboard and the new child specific headline indicator on child poverty and secondary indicators on children from age 3 to mandatory school age in formal childcare and underachievement in education - including digital skills is important. This focus on monitoring will be very helpful in holding the government and departments and agencies to account in delivering commitments in the national action plan. Irish civil society organisations can make important inputs to the monitoring process both at EU and national levels and use it as a very useful lever to enhance implementation of the CG

## **Enhanced use of EU Funds**

The first feasibility study for the child guarantee (Frazer et al 2020) highlighted the quite limited and haphazard way in which EU Funds have been used to support efforts to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. The very strong emphasis now being given in both the Commission’s action plan for implementing the EPSR and especially in the CG to using EU Funds in the 2021-2027 in support of the EPSR principles and the CG priorities is a very strong lever for ensuring a more strategic use of EU Funds here in Ireland to tackle child poverty and social

inclusion and promote the access of children in need to essential services.<sup>15</sup> Hopefully this can also act as a stimulus for further investment from the national budget.

## **Enhanced policy role for civil society and in those at risk of poverty**

Ireland is one of the EU Member States that has a relatively good track record in consulting with stakeholders and with children in relation to poverty and social inclusion issues. This should be further enhanced by the EPSR and the CG. The Child Guarantee stresses the importance of such involvement and provides an important basis for ensuring effective involvement of a broad range of stakeholders and children in the development, implementation and monitoring of its CG action plan.<sup>16</sup>

## **Specific policy actions**

The CG spells out in each of the policy areas covered (i.e. ECEC, education and school based activities, healthcare, nutrition and housing) a range of concrete policies that should be in place to ensure adequate access for children in need. These are too many to elaborate on in this short paper. However, considering whether existing Irish policies in relation to each of them are sufficient or need to be further developed provides a very good starting point for developing the Irish national action plan.

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<sup>15</sup> It has been agreed that the the European Social Fund Plus will support the achievement of the Child Guarantee and, very significantly for Ireland, that those EU members states who have levels of child poverty or social exclusion above the EU average **must** allocate at least 5 per cent of their European Social Fund Plus to tackling child poverty. Furthermore, the Commission also stresses that other EU funds (the European Regional Development Fund REACT-EU, Invest-EU, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Technical Support Instrument) can support investments in enabling infrastructure, such as social housing and early childhood education and care facilities, as well as equipment, access to quality and mainstream services and implementing structural reforms.

<sup>16</sup> The CG encourages Member States to “ensure the participation of regional, local and other relevant authorities, children and relevant stakeholders representing civil society, non-governmental organisations, educational establishments and bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion and integration, children’s rights, inclusive education and non-discrimination, including national equality bodies throughout the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the action plan”.

In addition to the priority areas covered in the CG several of the principles in the EPSR, particularly those relating to adequate minimum wages (principle 6), adequate unemployment benefits (13), adequate minimum income (14), access to health care (16), inclusion of people with disabilities (17), housing and assistance for the homeless (19) and access to essential services (20) are highly relevant to take into account when developing the national action plan to implement the CG. Also, as Eurochild has pointed out in its helpful analysis of the Commission’s EPSR action plan from a child rights perspective, the action plan’s “commitment to available, affordable and high-quality ECEC and the revision of the Barcelona Targets” and “The encouragement towards Member States to provide accessible and affordable ECEC” are welcome (Eurochild 2021). They can be useful levers to improve ECEC policies here.

In this short paper there is not space to examine in detail all the developments that could be incorporated in each policy area in Ireland’s national action plan to implement the CG. However, to stimulate debate let me just suggest three policies that might be given a very high priority. These are:

- put in place a clear scientific basis for setting levels of minimum wages and income support (i.e. unemployment benefits, minimum income, child benefit) for families and children in need which are adequate to ensure children’s well-being and development and their access to enabling goods and services;<sup>17</sup>
- while it may not be immediately achievable, given the importance of high quality and affordable ECEC in children’s development as well as the contribution it makes to supporting parents’ access to the labour market, set a goal to work towards a state provided system of free childcare and after-school provision for all children from a young age over the period of the CG (i.e. up to 2030);
- introduce a right to housing for families with children and to this end increase the supply of social housing stock with better targeting of children and families in vulnerable situations.

### ***3.2 Inequality and income adequacy***

Three of the key factors in Ireland that lead to high levels of inequality and too many people living on inadequate incomes in Ireland are low pay and insecure employment, high numbers of jobless households, and inadequate income

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<sup>17</sup> The work of the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice on reference budgets can be very helpful in this area.

support and these are compounded by high costs of housing and essential goods and services and the effects of discrimination and marginalisation experienced by some groups in vulnerable situations. Several principles of the EPSR can be helpful in enhancing efforts to reduce income inequalities and ensure adequate income. In particular principles 5 to 10 on fair working conditions, if effectively implemented, provide a useful framework for addressing the challenges of low pay and insecure employment providing that policies and programmes to address them identify and reach out to those most in need of support. In this regard the Commission’s action plan’s proposal for a Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages can be an important support in arguing for further improvements in minimum wage levels. The Commission’s action plan recognises the need to address in-work poverty and inequality and that “ensuring that jobs pay an adequate wage is essential to guarantee adequate working and living conditions for workers and their families” (Commission 2021). However, as the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) have pointed out the action plan lacks sufficient legislative initiatives to underpin the principles and to “establish binding social safeguards promoting working and living conditions” (Rainone and Aloisi 2021). In relation to social protection the principles on adequate unemployment benefits (13) and on adequate income benefits (14) are important. However, in its action plan the Commission only commits to proposing a Council Recommendation on Minimum Income which falls short of the Framework Directive on adequate minimum income schemes that many organisations such as the European Anti Poverty Network and the Social Platform and experts<sup>18</sup> have been arguing for over many years.

### ***3.3 Housing exclusion and homelessness***

Principle 19 of the EPSR on housing and assistance for the homeless is an important recognition of the urgency of this issue and this is recognised in the Commission’s action plan. The establishment of the European Platform on Combating Homelessness can lead to strengthened EU-level cooperation and help Member States to address homelessness effectively. As FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless, has pointed out the “European Platform could become a motor for progress in tackling homelessness in the EU Member States” and could “build the knowledge base for effective, integrated and rights-based homeless policies and services and improve comparative monitoring” (FEANTSA 2021). This can be very useful in developing policies in Ireland. However, as FEANTSA has pointed out “It is therefore regrettable that no political commitment or target related

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<sup>18</sup> See for instance Aranguiz, Verschueren and Van Lancker (2020)

to homelessness has been included in the Action Plan” and this needs to be rectified.

### ***3.4 Access to essential services***

Looking at Irish social policy from outside over a number of years what is striking when compared with the best performing countries is the imbalance between a focus on improving income support and investing in ensuring access to high quality, inclusive, accessible and affordable essential services. By EU standards Ireland’s social protection system does well in reducing the risk of poverty however levels of investment in high quality services has been less developed. Thus the EPSR’s principle 1 on the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning, principle 16 stating that everyone has the right to timely access to affordable, preventive and curative health care of good quality, principle 18 stressing the right to long-term care services of good quality, in particular and community-based services and principle 20 of the EPSR on access to essential services of good quality (water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communication) provide a very important focus for Irish policy. Indeed one of the key learning points of the Covid pandemic has been the unequal access to key services that too many people in Ireland experience. So the EPSR provides an important basis for arguing for increased investment in these areas in the future.

### ***3.5 Just Digital and Green transitions***

Ireland, like all other countries, faces a period of dramatic policy change as we adapt to a new digital world and make the transition to an environmentally sustainable future. It is vital that those transitions happen in ways that are fair and inclusive and leave no one behind. Ensuring a just transition is essential. It is thus helpful that the implementation of the EPSR is very much being placed in this context. In its action plan the Commission links the implementation of the EPSR and the green and digital transitions. It stresses that “We need to strengthen social rights and the social dimension across all policies of the Union as enshrined in the Treaties. This will ensure that the transition to climate-neutrality, digitalisation and demographic change are socially fair and just, and making the European Green Deal and the upcoming 2030 Digital Decade successes for all Europeans and to strengthen the European social dimension across all policies of the Union as enshrined in the Treaties. This will ensure that the transition to climate-neutrality, digitalisation and demographic change are socially fair and just, and making the European Green Deal and the upcoming 2030 Digital Decade successes for all Europeans.” Thus the EPSR can be a very useful tool through which to look at Ireland’s policies to achieve the green and

digital transitions to ensure that they are fair and just and are designed in ways to include and protect those in the most vulnerable situations.

## 4. Conclusion

The EPSR is an important political recognition of the need to build more inclusive and fair societies and to intensify efforts to build a more social and inclusive Europe. It is also a potentially important tool for building back better post the Covid pandemic. However, this will only be the case if there is effective implementation and if a new balance is found between economic and social policies so that they are mutually reinforcing. Governments must be held to account for delivering a more just and inclusive future. The EPSR principles provides an important lever for civil society organisations and policy analysts campaigning to hold them to account both across the EU and here in Ireland.

## Sources

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