

Social Rights for All? Time to deliver on the European Pillar of Social Rights

Social Justice Ireland 34th Annual Policy Conference

How the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) can help to advance social policy in Ireland

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EPSR – an ambitious agenda

- Most important social policy initiative in 2 decades (potentially)
- Represents growing political realisation of need to build more social & inclusive EU – a response to:
 - rise in populism and growing alienation from EU
 - persistent high levels of poverty, social exclusion & inequality
- **If** rigorously implemented can
 - redress imbalance between economic, employment & social policies
 - provide framework to build back better post Covid
 - help to ensure just green & digital transitions
- *“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)

EPSR – some reservations

- **Slow start to implementation but COM Action Plan and Porto summit important step forward**
 - BUT need to go further
 - Poverty target & sub-target on child poverty are modest & don't match ambition of Sustainable Development Goals
 - Action Plan is much more developed in some areas than others & in several areas does not go far enough in terms of legislative action
- **What will be needed**
 - continued **political leadership** & increased public awareness & 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 most vulnerable** when implementing all principles and not just in selected areas such as the principles relating to social protection and inclusion
 - **overcoming data gaps** and increasing the timeliness of data

10 overall ways EPSR can be used to impact Irish social policy (1-3)

- **Rebalancing economic & social policy**

- preamble to the EPSR stresses that its establishment *“should be part of wider efforts to build a more inclusive and sustainable growth model”*
- 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

- **Fostering a comprehensive, integrated & strategic approach**

- Reinforce emphasis in Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 on a cross-government approach & integration of relevant departmental strategies
- Commission’s action plan: *“an integrated approach is essential to address needs at all stages of life and target the root causes of poverty and social exclusion”*

- **Setting clear goals & targets**

- Member States encouraged *“to define own national targets”*

10 overall ways the EPSR can be used (4-7)

- **Enhancing data, monitoring & accountability**

- EU monitoring & reporting through European Semester can be an important lever to encourage policy efforts in Ireland
 - Give COM desk officers your assessments of strengths & weaknesses of Irish policies/programmes in each area
- Opportunity to identify and fill any gaps in data needed, especially in relation to those groups at greatest risk and to improve assessment of effectiveness of policies in ensuring that each principle is fulfilled

- **Increased focus on most at risk**

- EPSR and Action Plan emphasise need to focus on *“those in need”* & *“most vulnerable”* & *“under-represented groups”*
- EPSR implementation being linked with implementation of UN SDGs BUT lags behind in ambition
 - *“leave no one behind”* & *“reach the furthest behind first”*

- **Tackling discrimination**

- Action plan to combat stereotypes and discrimination in employment, training, education, social protection, housing and health
- Allows for use of EU Funds

- **Greater focus on gender inequalities**

- Especially principle 2 on gender equality & 3 on equal opportunities
- Strengthen policies on gender pay gap, pension gap, enhance family friendly working, ECEC, domestic violence

10 overall ways the EPSR can be used (8-10)

- **Increased transnational learning**

- New opportunities as EPSR is implemented

- **A better use of EU Funds to combat poverty**

- *“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”*
- 25% ESF+ on poverty & social exclusion + other funds (e.g. ERDF, Recovery & Resilience Fund)

- **Enhancing role of civil society in policy making**

- Emphasises role of civil society alongside EU institutions, national, regional and local authorities and social partners in the delivery of the EPSR
- Use of ESF+ to build capacity of social partners & civil society organisations (0.25% when country specific recommendation)
- Irish CSOs should insist on involvement in EPSR implementation in Ireland & work with EU CSO networks

Using the EPSR to advance specific policies to combat poverty and social exclusion

Child Poverty

Inequality & Income Adequacy

Housing Exclusion & Homelessness

Access to Essential Services

Just Digital and Green transitions

Child poverty

- **EPSR Principle 11 – one of the most developed areas**

- **EU Child Guarantee**

- 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

- **Comprehensive & Strategic Approach**

- **National CG Action Plan** by March 2022 – significant opportunity – should go beyond existing plans
 - **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 infrastructure and qualified workforce; and (viii) allocate adequate resources and making optimal use of the EU funding

- **Increased emphasis on children's rights**

- CG underpinned by child rights approach and also linked to EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child
 - Important role for Ombudsman for Children

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

- CG emphasises need to identify & target children in most vulnerable situations
 - 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
 - Need for disaggregated data on these children & their access to services

- **Enhanced policy coordination**

- Build on existing efforts - National CG Coordinator to ensure effective involvement and coordination across different policy areas

Child poverty (cont.)

- **Enhanced monitoring & reporting**
 - Biannual reporting on progress + link to European Semester
 - SPC developing a common monitoring framework
- **Enhanced use of EU Funds**
 - Strong focus on using EU Funds to support delivery of CG and lever additional national funds
 - 5% ESF+
- **Enhanced policy role for civil society & those most at risk**
 - Build on Ireland's good track record
 - Strong emphasis in CG on involving broad range of stakeholders and children in development, implementation & monitoring
- **Specific policy actions**
 - CG spells out range of concrete policies that should be in place in each area (i.e. ECEC, education and school based activities, healthcare, nutrition and housing) –
 - Use this as a starting point for examining strengths & weaknesses of existing Irish policies when developing National Action Plan
 - 3 Suggestions for policy areas to prioritise in development of Irish CG Action Plan
 - Establish scientific basis for setting & regularly updating **adequate levels of minimum wages & income support** for families and children in need to ensure well-being and development
 - Build on work of Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice on reference budgets
 - Work towards establishing **state provided system of free child care and afterschool provision**
 - Introduce **right to housing** for families with children
 - To this end dramatically increase supply of social housing stock with better targeting of children & families in vulnerable situations

Inequality & income adequacy

- **Low pay and insecure employment**

- Principles 5-10 on fair employment
 - *“ensuring that jobs pay adequate wage is essential to guarantee adequate working and living conditions for workers and families”*
 - Proposal for Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages helpful

- **Social protection**

- Principles 13 and adequate unemployment benefits & 14 on adequate income
 - Proposed Council Recommendation on Minimum Income should be Framework Directive

Housing Exclusion & Homelessness

- **Principle 19** on housing and assistance for homeless
- Establishment of **European Platform on Combating Homelessness**
 - *“could become a motor for progress in tackling homelessness”* (FEANTSA)
- But **no target** set on homelessness in Action Plan

Access to Essential Services

- **Irish policy imbalanced**: historically has tended to focus more on income support than ensuring access to high quality, inclusive, accessible & affordable essential services
- Covid has shone spotlight on **persistent inequalities in access** to services
- EPSR principles can help to **redress imbalance** & provide basis for arguing for increased investment in essential services
 - 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
 - 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

Just Digital and Green transitions

- COM Action Plan links implementation of EPSR and Digital and Green transitions
 - *“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.”*
- Use the EPSR as a tool to assess Irish digital & green policies & as a lever to ensure a **just transition**

Conclusion

- EPSR important political recognition of need to build more inclusive & fair societies & build **a more social Europe**
- Potentially important tool for **building back better post Covid**
- **Effective implementation & continuous public assessment of progress essential**

Thus:

- NGOs and policy analysts should use EPSR principles to **hold government to account** for ensuring that effective policies are in place that will deliver ALL the 20 principles