

Position Paper

A new architecture for youth social rights

Recommendations for
the new Action Plan on
the European Pillar of
Social Rights

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Introduction

The austerity measures observed in the aftermath of the last global financial crisis of the late 2000s and early 2010s were nothing short of an economic, social and political disaster. To counter them, the European Union agreed on a European Pillar of Social Rights¹ in 2017, which was designed to be the north star of social and employment policy with the mission of restoring balance between economic and social policy and revamping social cohesion across the Union.

The Action Plan² adopted in 2021 was a materialisation of the values agreed upon in 2017, and as a result, in the last 5 years numerous initiatives were discussed, negotiated and adopted. While the long term impact of these initiatives is yet to be seen, it is safe to say that the Pillar was a positive initiative, which must be retained and strengthened.

The European Youth Forum has contributed a youth perspective to this process since its inception. This policy paper lays out our views of what the architecture of the next Action Plan must look like to account for the realities of young peoples' lives and to improve working and living standards.

Technical note: This paper was written within the 1 year mandate of the Expert Group on Social and Economic Inclusion of the European Youth Forum³. We gathered the views of our members, and complemented them with a literature review, taking into account our previous position papers relevant to this field.

1 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/11/17/european-pillar-of-social-rights-proclamation-and-signing/>

2 <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/empl/european-pillar-of-social-rights/en/>

3 All together in Dignity (ATD 4th World), Erasmus Student Network (ESN), European Students Union (ESU), European Trade Union Confederation - Youth (ETUC Youth), Flemish Youth Council (VJR), National Youth Council of Croatia (MMH), National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS), National Youth Council of Slovakia (RMS), National Youth Council of Turkey (GoFor), TDM 2000 International, World Organisation of the Scout Movement (WOSM)

Key messages

- The **European Pillar of Social Rights** remains a **positive** initiative which must be retained **and strengthened**.
- Young people today find themselves juggling their time between **education, unpaid and underpaid internships**, and **precarious contracts**, leaving them in a state of **financial instability** and **struggling to afford housing**, and **make long-term plans**. The European Pillar of Social Rights should be a force against this.
- The EU must promote a **mainstreaming of youth rights across the entire Pillar**, which can only be achieved through **meaningful democratic youth participation mechanisms** **and the extension and championing of existing mechanisms, such as the EU Youth Dialogue**, and civil dialogue.
- Any new initiative needs to follow the **principle of Universal Workers' Rights** to avoid a two-tier labour market, a **holistic approach to social inclusion**, and a **principle of Do No Significant Harm**.
- The EU needs to **update the 2030 targets** to reduce the NEET rate by half, reduce early school drop out by half, reduce involuntary temporary employment by half in general and among young people as a subtarget, and reduce homelessness by half in general and among young people as a subtarget.
- The EU needs to **update the social scoreboard** to collect disaggregated data and have indicators which reflect quality of employment, rather than performance statistics.
- The social dimension of the **European Semester** needs to be taken into consideration. We should ensure **coherence between our economic and social recommendations**, and **include all Principles** of the Pillar into the Semester.

The young do not have it easy

Job precarity, low incomes, and housing unaffordability are very far from an idealised aspirational life. Growing up often means being hired for unpaid internships or on other precarious contracts, having multiple jobs at the same time to pay the monthly bills, living in overcrowded housing or being unable to move out of your parents house and therefore restricted from starting an independent life or planning to have a family.

At the same time, new terms emerged in our discourse to refer to young people, especially young graduates such as *adulthood*, *boomerang kids*, and *waithood*. In a lot of cases, terms which refer to an extended adolescence—and the fact that young people enter the labour market later, move out later, start a family later—infantilise and vilify young people for putting off adulthood as if it is by choice rather than a result of circumstances.

However, these realities are not by young peoples' design, but the consequences of political decisions. Life building aspects - decent jobs and affordable housing - which were available to previous generations, are simply not there for young people anymore.⁴

Today, youth unemployment rates remain twice as high as in the general population⁵

and the NEET rate is somewhat stagnant⁶, with gender discrepancies within these rates. We ultimately end up with the scenario where a quarter of young people are at risk of poverty and social exclusion⁷ and where 40% of young people in the EU currently find it difficult or very difficult to make ends meet.⁸ In 2022, 6.1% of young people were experiencing severe material and social deprivation.⁹

Today, quality of employment and access to social security protection are serious issues for young people. 1 out of 3 young people across the EU has a temporary employment contract, compared to just 9% of those aged 30 to 64 years old.¹⁰ Additionally, young people still face age-related barriers when accessing social security.

Today, a young person is less likely to own their house in comparison to their parents' generation at the same age. If they do, they are likely to have incurred massive debts. They are living in a world where rents have risen by 24% in the past decade and where it is no longer unusual to be forking out 40% of their income on rent.¹¹

Today, a young person is not living an aspirational life on an upward trend. They are looking into their present and future and seeing their

- 4 Hope for resilient and connected communities: Waithood, UNDP, available at: <https://www.undp.org/future-development/signals-spotlight-2024/waithood>; Eurofound (2024) Becoming adults: Young people in a post-pandemic world, available at: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2024/becoming-adults-young-people-post-pandemic-world>; Eurofound (2024) Housing cracks: Multi-pronged policy approach required, available at: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/blog/2024/housing-cracks-multi-pronged-policy-approach-required>; Eurofound (2023) Homeownership declines across EU as young adults find themselves locked out of market, available at: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/news/2023/homeownership-declines-across-eu-young-adults-find-themselves-locked-out-market#:~:text=Homeownership%20declines%20across%20EU%20as%20young%20adults%20find%20themselves%20locked%20out%20of%20market.-31%20May%202023&text=Between%202012%20and%202020%2C%20overall%2C%20Lithuania%2C%20Finland%20and%20Bulgaria>.
- 5 Eurostat, Youth unemployment rate by sex, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tesem140/default/?bar?lang=en>
- 6 Eurostat: Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by sex, age and citizenship (NEET rates), available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_23_custom_14752371/default/?bar?lang=en
- 7 Eurostat Statistics Explained: At-risk-of-poverty rate of young people, available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Young_people_-_social_inclusion&oldid=526294#:~:text=The%20at%20risk%20of%20poverty%20rate%20was%20at%2019.3,rate%20stood%20at%2016.5%20%25
- 8 Eurofound (2024) Becoming adults: Young people in a post-pandemic world
- 9 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20240223-1#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20the%20severe%20material,people%20living%20in%20private%20households>. Three countries had rates well above 10%: Greece (14.9%); Bulgaria (18.6%); and Romania (25.4%).
- 10 IndustriALL Europe. (2023). Cost-of-living crisis continues: Workers fight against Austerity 2.0. IndustriALL Europe.
- 11 <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20240705-1&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1740677086193170&usq=AOvWaw1z84eF13O5WHt5aEde5Ue>

living standards falling. In fact, young people are likely to live a life that is much more difficult than for the previous generation for the first time in recent history. The European Pillar of Social Rights must be a force against these trends.

The north star of employment and social policy in the EU

The set of principles put forward by the European Pillar of Social Rights came after the austerity measures of the late 2000s/ early 2010s. Their goal was to balance social integration and put the EU on a path towards social cohesion and upwards social convergence.¹²

When articulating the Pillar with binding instruments such as the European Social Charter, or the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, we have an architecture conferring EU citizens a vision of their social rights, and a set of initiatives, together with targets, monitoring, and funding mechanisms to implement them.

Nevertheless, living and working standards, particularly among young people, keep falling.

According to the European Parliament Youth Survey from 2024, tackling rising prices and cost of living continue to be the number one priority for young people.¹³ The next Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights needs to be an instrument capable of delivering working and living standards fit for this century. This is what young Europeans expect from their leaders.

12 Tommaso Grossi, Laura Rayner, Danielle Brady, Xheimina Dervishi (2024) The Social Pillar and the Future of the EU Social Agenda, available at: <https://www.socialplatform.org/content/uploads/2024/02/PS-Social-Agenda.pdf>

13 European Union (2025) Youth Survey 2024, available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3392>

This time we cannot miss

a. Mainstream youth rights across the entire Action Plan

Young people are not a homogenous isolated bubble in Europe's population - they are impacted by all EU policies - often without having the chance to vote or have their say on them.

That is why cherry picking particular social principles or initiatives to be directed at young people, but being oblivious to how all others affect the youth population does not deliver for young people. Therefore, we call for a mainstreaming of youth rights across the entire Action Plan.

What does this mean? **Mainstreaming youth rights is a means of ensuring that all policies and laws specifically - and intentionally - work for all young people in their diversity.**¹⁴ A practical example is recognising the exploitative practice of youth minimum wages and trying to tackle this exploitation through writing new laws on minimum wages or collective bargaining.

b. Promote meaningful youth civil society participation

We can only fully mainstream youth rights across the Action Plan through **meaningful youth participation promoted by the establishment of institutional mechanisms and the extension and championing of existing mechanisms where democratically elected youth representatives can have a direct impact on decision-making.**

The EU Youth Dialogue - which has reached hundreds of thousands of young people through the work of representative youth organisations since its inception - should also be mobilised to be consulted on the European Pillar of Social Rights. Meaningful consultation spaces should be provided by the European Commission during the EU Youth Conferences for discussions of key priorities in the Commission Work Programme - including the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The European Youth Forum has been advocating for an EU Youth Test - a mechanism that evaluates a new initiative's impact on young people, and designs implementable mitigation measures in case of negative impacts (particularly on those most vulnerable).¹⁵ **The EU Youth Test should be applied to the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan** and - as part of this - bespoke consultations held with representative youth organisations to seek their input.

Civil society organisations - even though they have unique knowledge and outreach that state or social partners do not have - are not systematically involved in policy processes (especially at national level). **Establishing a civil dialogue mechanism where civil society organisations can be more structurally**

¹⁴ European Youth Forum (2022) Mainstreaming youth rights in the UN human rights mechanisms, available at <https://www.youthforum.org/policy-library/mainstreaming-youth-rights-in-the-un-human-rights-mechanisms>

¹⁵ European Youth Forum (2022) EU youth test, A guiding framework for practical implementation, available at <https://www.youthforum.org/policy-library/eu-youth-test-a-guiding-framework-for-practical-implementation>

and consistently involved in the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights should be a priority.¹⁶

c. Guiding principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights

Firstly, it should be recognised and restated in the new Action Plan that **all principles in the European Pillar of Social Rights are equal** and equally important, and there is no hierarchy among them.

When it comes to the policy proposals under each principle for the upcoming Action Plan, we believe that they should follow the **principle of Universal Workers' Rights**. In other words, a policy proposal should apply to everyone, and not just a selected few, to avoid leaving behind those most vulnerable. In doing so, we avoid a two-tier labour market, further dividing those with decent working conditions and those who just embarked on yet another zero hour contract.

At the same time, active participation in society means more than having a job. The European Pillar of Social Rights should effectively confer on EU citizens access to their social rights - even when without a job. The EU should have a **holistic and intersectional view of social policies** and be aware of the interlinkages between education, employment, social security, housing and health.

In line with our proposal on the EU Youth Test, the EU should adopt the **principle of Do No Significant Harm**.¹⁷ This means that the governance of the Pillar needs to be socially responsible, transparent, and accountable, following principles of inclusivity, participation, and transparency. A Do No Significant Harm principle means that the EU strives to have policy decisions which will have positive consequences, but is not oblivious to unintended negative consequences, and plans preventative measures against them.

16 Tommaso Grossi, Laura Rayner, Danielle Brady, Xheimina Dervishi (2024) The Social Pillar and the Future of the EU Social Agenda, available at: <https://www.socialplatform.org/content/uploads/2024/02/PS-Social-Agenda.pdf>; Civil Society Europe Policy Paper EU Civil Dialogue: the foundations of an institutional framework, available at: https://www.google.com/url?q=https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/EU-Civil-Dialogue-the-foundations-of-an-institutional-framework.pdf&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1744971916846398&usg=AOvVaw2hgJS9w2f-ihJ_TJNXoY3v

17 Tommaso Grossi, Laura Rayner, Danielle Brady, Xheimina Dervishi (2024) The Social Pillar and the Future of the EU Social Agenda, available at: <https://www.socialplatform.org/content/uploads/2024/02/PS-Social-Agenda.pdf>

d. Measuring progress

The Action Plan established three headline targets to be achieved by 2030.¹⁸ However, young people are only specifically mentioned in one subtarget: reducing the NEET rate to 9%. There were no specific targets on reducing early school dropout (in contrast with Europe 2020¹⁹), the Action Plan only mentions the need to reduce early school leaving and increasing participation in upper secondary education.

Young people are also not mentioned in the poverty targets, despite the fact that young people are one of the biggest age cohorts experiencing a risk of poverty and social exclusion. There are also no targets on ending homelessness.

We call for the establishment of new targets for 2030:

- Reduction of the NEET rate by half;
- Reduction of the rate of involuntary temporary employment by half;
 - And by half among young people as a subtarget
- Reduction of the early school dropout rate by half;
- Reduction of homelessness by half;
 - And by half among young people as a subtarget;
- Reducing, at least by half, the youth population who is at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

These targets will put us on a path to achieve the goals set by the Agenda 2030, notably reducing the NEET rate, eradicating homelessness, and eradicating poverty.

To monitor progress, the European Pillar of Social Rights has a social scoreboard. Here, young people are only mentioned in three performance indicators: youth unemployment rate, NEET rate, and early school dropout rate. Moving forward, we call for:

- The collection of disaggregated data, which is currently not the case. This will allow us to paint a fuller picture on who is benefiting or being left behind with regards to their social rights.
- The collection of data on involuntary temporary employment, including amongst young people.
- The collection of data on homelessness, including amongst young people.

The current scoreboard shows that progress in the EU is considered primarily from the quantitative side - numbers and statistics looking at the total population, instead of quality of life and quality of employment. **We need diverse quantitative data that measures the progress in the EU and young people's quality of life and employment in a holistic way.** Even what we consider to be the measurement of a successful economy - the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) - does not show a full picture of the living and working standards in the population. To combat this, tools such as the **Youth Progress Index** (modelled after the Social Progress Index) should be incorporated into the Action Plan tools.

18 at least 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 should be in employment by 2030; at least 60% of all adults should be participating in training every year by 2030; a reduction of at least 15 million in the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion; https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en

19 "The share of early school leavers should be under 10% and at least 40% of the younger generation should have a tertiary degree.", European Commission (2010) Europe 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/COMPLET%20EN%20BARROSO%20%20%20007%20-%20Europe%202020%20-%20EN%20version.pdf>

e. Social policies in the European Semester

Currently, the European Semester places all its emphasis on coordinating economic and monetary policies. However, this predominance of macroeconomic policies risks impacting our social and environmental policies and targets.

Moving forward, the EU must **strengthen the social dimension of the European Semester**. Social policy must be given an equal weighting to economic policy, so as not to jeopardise the EU's social model, upward social convergence, and the achievement of the 2030 targets and SDGs.

All principles of the Pillar must be covered by the European Semester - not just those related to employment - and the Analysis and Recommendations must be balanced and ensure consistency between social and economic policy.

Final remarks

In 2017, when agreeing on a European Pillar of Social Rights, EU leaders came together because they recognised that economic prosperity needs to go hand in hand with social prosperity. We cannot have just economic integration without harming social cohesion.

There is nothing stopping us from having a society where everyone has equal opportunities regardless of their background, where economic prosperity is more evenly distributed among the different socio-economic groups, where houses are not luxury items, and where decent work that pays the bills is the norm rather than the exception.

Moving forward over the next 5 years, our leaders must show the political will and sageness to enact this reality through a new Action Plan which takes into consideration the involvement of young people and youth organisations, with ambitious targets and precise monitoring tools to improve the living and working conditions of all EU citizens.

Annexes

a. European Youth Forum's position papers relevant for the new Action Plan

- **More than a roof**, 2025, available at <https://www.youthforum.org/policy-library/more-than-a-roof>
- **Youth Guarantee: How to support young people finding a pathway**, 2025, available at <https://www.youthforum.org/policy-library/youth-guarantee-how-to-support-young-people-finding-a-pathway>
- **Workers' Rights for the 21st Century**, 2024, available at <https://www.youthforum.org/policy-library/workers-rights-for-the-21st-century>
- **Always on standby: How precarious work impacts young people's mental health**, 2024, available at <https://www.youthforum.org/policy-library/always-on-standby-how-precarious-work-impacts-young-peoples-mental-health>
- **Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships**, 2023, available at <https://www.youthforum.org/policy-library/quality-charter-on-internships-apprenticeships>
- **Quality Standards on the Youth Guarantee**, 2020, available at <https://www.youthforum.org/policy-library/quality-standards-for-the-youth-guarantee>

b. European Youth Forum's policy recommendations for the new Action Plan

Principle 4: Active support to employment

- Directive banning unpaid internships
- Binding quality standards on the Youth Guarantee

Principle 10: Healthy, safe and well-adapted work environment and data protection

- Directive on the right to disconnect
- Directive on psychosocial risks at work
- Directive on algorithmic management and data rights at work

Principle 14: Minimum income

- Directive on an adequate minimum income

Principle 19: Housing and assistance for the homeless

- Funding for social housing

Principle 20: Access to essential services

- Council Recommendation on Universal Basic Services



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