

**Open letter of Civil Society
to the European Social Summit on 17th November in Gothenburg**



Social Pillar or Social Pillow?

Viable rights or soft intention?

Dear Madam, dear Sir,

From 25-27 October 2017 representatives of civil society, trade unions and church-related organisations from 8 EU member states met in the Protestant Academy Baden (Germany) for an International Network Meeting to discuss the EU's initiatives for a European Pillar of Social Rights, which is to be solemnly proclaimed at the European Social Summit in Gothenburg on 17th November 2017. The participants in the International Network Meeting wish to address the participants in the Social Summit in Gothenburg with the following open letter:

Economic and Social Progress

We, the participants of the International Network Meeting, welcome the joint commitment of the European Parliament, the European Commission and EU's member states to strengthen the European Pillar of Social Rights. We explicitly support the analysis of the inter institutional Proclamation that *“economic and social progress are intertwined, and the establishment of a European Pillar of Social Rights should be part of wider efforts to build a more inclusive and sustainable growth model by improving Europe's competitiveness and making it a better place to invest, create jobs and foster social cohesion.”* An economic system of free movement of persons, of goods and of services doesn't work without adequate social protection systems. Therefore the commitment of the European Institutions and the Member states should lead to a much speedier alignment of social protection systems by an upward convergence.

Involvement of Civil Society

We are disappointed to see that civil society does not appear at all in the inter institutional Proclamation. How would European societies look without the commitment of millions of people from churches, Caritas, Diaconia and many other

non-governmental welfare organisations? We believe that the involvement of civil society in the provision of social services is a fundamental element of the European social model and an everyday demonstration of an appropriate understanding of subsidiarity, which is based on the involvement of those who are closest to the people in need.

Legal Liability

The Proclamation explains that the European Pillar of Social Rights shall promote the aims of the European Union as laid down in Art. 3 of the Treaty on European Union. We believe that the provisions of inter institutional Proclamation must lead to legally binding European minimum standards - not only for the Eurozone, but for the EU 27. Otherwise, the European social pillar risks remaining a social pillow, i.e. window dressing without any real consequences for the well-being of the people in Europe.

Implementation

We expect the commitment of the European Institutions and member states to ensure that “better enactment and implementation of social rights” are implemented in the EU’s work programme and financial planning. We therefore regret that the new working plan of the European Commission lacks a visible ambition to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights. The European Pillar of Social Rights should have priority in the negotiations for the multiannual financial framework and should be present as a consistent theme in the European structural and investment funds. In particular, the Central and Eastern European member states should be enabled to make best use of these financial instruments in the future.

Coherence of European Policies

The Proclamation explains that the establishment of a European Pillar of Social Rights should be part of wider efforts to build a more inclusive and sustainable growth model. We understand this as a commitment to more coherent EU policies. In the past the EU’s austerity policies have led to growing injustice and an increase in poverty and social exclusion in the affected countries. Investments in education, job creation and social protection should be regarded as an investment into the future and not as a burden to economic development.

Social Scoreboard

We welcome the introduction of a social scoreboard to monitor and benchmark the social performances of the EU Member states with the intention of ensuring an overall improvement. From our experience with social benchmarking systems the suggested indicators are insufficient to reflect social developments in their entirety. We therefore suggest adding more and significant indicators to the social scoreboard.

Please allow us to give you some examples of our expectations with regard to the legal implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights:

Ad 1: Education, training and life-long learning

We support the strong focus on education and equal opportunities, but, in our more holistic understanding, education is not only an instrument of training for the labour market, but also includes social, cultural and political dimensions.

Ad 3: Equal opportunities

As a first step in the area of equal opportunities and access to the labour markets, the European institutions could make an effort to realise the European framework for the recognition of professional qualifications (formal and non-formal) by the end of the legislative period.

Ad 4: Active support to employment

Despite three years of Youth Guarantee, the youth unemployment rate in the EU remains persistently high at 16.6 percent. The European Semester foresees sanctions for those Member states that do not fulfil the Economic commitments. Why doesn't it provide more binding measures with benchmarks related to employment, education, and social protection?

According to the Recommendation, everyone in the European Union shall have *“the right to an in-depth individual assessment at the latest at 18 months of unemployment”*. Our experience shows that 18 months are much too long for a successful reintegration into the labour market. Consistent support needs an individual assessment within 3 months of unemployment and access to continued education, training or a job within 6 months.

Ad 5: Secure and adaptable employment

With regard to the *“digital revolution”* the Proclamation describes the profound changes in the labour market and its challenges, *“such as significant inequality, long-term and youth unemployment or intergenerational solidarity”*, but it is missing any follow-up in its recommendations. What is the European Union intending to do to provide fair working conditions and access to social protection systems for click workers, freelancers and other self-employed digital workers?

Ad 6: Wages

We support the EU's commitment to the “right to fair wages that provide for a decent standard of living.” For many European workers, this is still a dream. Many people in Europe need several jobs to survive. The phenomenon of the “working poor” destroys the dignity of the people affected. The inequality of wages leads to a disconcerting “brain drain” in Central and Eastern European countries. We are concerned to see that in many European countries the cost of living is rising much faster than wages, thus widening the gap. We ask the EU's member states to ensure minimum wages that guarantee a decent standard of living. In our understanding “fair wages” are “living wages”, that enable workers and their families to live a decent life.

Ad 11: Childcare and support for children

We strongly emphasize the role of childcare as a key issue for the future of the European Union. In this regard social rights couldn't be only focused on children, but have to be addressed to families as an essential framework for children's

development and well-being. And we mean “family” in the broad sense of present day diversity as mentioned in the “reflection-paper on the social dimension of Europe”. We also suggest having more and better indicators for monitoring than “Children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare” as it is listed in the accompanying Social Scoreboard. A key indicator could be e.g. the quota of GDP spent on childcare and support of children.

Ad 13: Unemployment benefits

Unemployment benefits should not include any elements of pressure on the unemployed. Instead of limitations in the duration of support or fear about disincentives we need ambitious and effective tools which are appropriate to different individual backgrounds and the actual requirements of the labour market. Unemployment benefits must enable the recipients and their families to participate in social and cultural life.

In 2016 we already engaged in the Commission’s consultation on the European Pillar of Social Rights. We are now attentively interested in its implementation.

On behalf of the participants of the International Network Meeting on “Social Europe” from 25-27 October in the Protestant Academy Baden

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