



Commission of the Episcopates
of the European Union

Public consultation “Have your say on reinforcing Social Europe” towards implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights

*A contribution by the
Secretariat of COMECE
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Introductory remarks

In a time of COVID-19 pandemic and transformative changes in the labour market, the European Union should lead just social and ecological transitions in the benefit of all people, with the principles of solidarity and common good as fundamental ideas. COMECE released on 28 May 2020 its statement “[Let Europe Recover Through Justice](#)” to call for solidarity in the recovery process.

Implementing the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) in a coordinated manner across EU social policies is important more than ever to reinforce **Europe’s social market economy**, and to ensure just transitions for all, while answering to the urgent social and economic challenges of our time. Therefore, COMECE welcomes the announcement of the European Commission to present an Action Plan towards the implementation of the Social Pillar in early 2021.

The Holy Father reminded in his [recent letter on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of COMECE](#) that “*the **uniqueness of Europe** rests above all on its conception of the human being and of reality, on its capacity for initiative and on its **spirit of practical solidarity***” (27.10.2020). He expressed his dream of “*a Europe that is a **friend** to each and all*”, “*a Europe that is a **family and a community***”, and “*a Europe that is **inclusive and generous***”.

Solidarity is not only an option to answer to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Pope emphasized that the *path of solidarity* is embedded at the heart of the founding principles of modern Europe that inspired its founders, beginning with Robert Schuman. Europe, “*find yourself, be yourself*”, the Pope urged.

Against this background, COMECE makes **five recommendations** that we would like to see reflected in the European [Pillar of Social Rights' Action Plan](#) towards its implementation across the European Union:

1. Apply an **inclusive approach** in respect of each person's human dignity
2. Preserve the **dignity of work and rights of workers**
3. Show **more solidarity** within society
4. Strengthen Europe as a place of **family and community**
5. Rethink the notion of **Education** and promote care for our common home

Recommendations for the 2021 Social Pillar' Action Plan

1. Apply an inclusive approach in respect of each person's human dignity

“The right of some to free enterprise or market freedom cannot supersede the rights of peoples and the dignity of the poor, or, for that matter, respect for the natural environment, for if we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all” (Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti, 122). Pope Francis also calls for *“integral human development that goes beyond the idea of social policies being a policy for the poor, but never with the poor and never of the poor”* ([Fratelli Tutti](#), 169).

When adopting measures towards the implementation of the Social Pillar throughout EU policies and in Member States, the EU should make sure that most vulnerable people (such as people in poverty, the sick, people with disabilities, homeless persons, people with a migrant background, the elderly, women) are not left behind (Principles 17, 19). On the contrary, their voices should be heard, and they should be involved in the decision-making process of social policies that impact them directly. Every person has a fundamental “right to physical and moral integrity” ([Art. 2, CFR](#)).

Human dignity should be placed at the center of each social policy. COMECE welcomes the broader inclusiveness of the recent [Council Conclusions on Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee](#) (October 2020) to boost access to employment for **all youth**, while promoting green and digital skills to answer to new labour market needs and care for our common home (Principle 4).

- **Strengthen cooperation with each EU Member States in the eradication of discrimination of all forms, and in the improvement of poverty reduction** efficiency in the social welfare system, including through mutual learning, technical assistance and funding.
- **A special fund for the Child Guarantee:** COMECE Secretariat recommends in particular for the [Child Guarantee](#) to be linked with a dedicated fund so that every vulnerable child can access adequate nutrition, free healthcare, free education, and decent housing (Principles 1, 11).

2. Preserve the dignity of work and rights of workers

“A society in which this right [to work] is systematically denied, in which economic policies do not allow workers to reach satisfactory levels of employment, cannot be justified from an ethical point of view, nor can that society attain social peace” (St. John Paul II, The Hundredth Year [[Centesimus Annus](#)], no. 43).

*“All people have the right to work, to a chance to develop their qualities and their personalities in the exercise of their professions, to **equitable remuneration** which will enable them and their families to lead a worthy life on the material, social, cultural and spiritual level”.* (Blessed Paul VI, A Call to Action [[Octogesima Adveniens](#)], 14).

*“The solution is a **society of fraternity**, which contains not only the **right to equal and just wages**, but also supports the development of skills in correspondence to the **individual’s vocation and dignity**.”* (Pope Francis, Vatican City, May 1, 2017)¹.

In 2018, COMECE Social Affairs Commission released a [reflection on the Future of Work](#) highlighting the role of work as an integral part of **human identity**. Work is more than a source of income. It is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation.

The future world of work has, on the one hand, the potential to **promote decent employment** in Europe. On the other hand, the paper also identifies several challenges, such as the increasing **job polarization** in a number of EU Member States, as a result of the digitalization and automation of our economy, that created many work opportunities for high-skilled people, while *“putting the routine-task jobs of the middle class at risk”*.

- COMECE Social Affairs Commission advocates for **more inclusiveness in the world of work**, with the primary goal of full employment to enable every human being to take part in society and become a free actor for the authentic development of the society.

The dignity of work and the basic rights of workers must be respected when implementing the Social Pillar. Dignity at work assumes the **right to decent and fair wages**. COMECE Secretariat welcomes the European Commission proposal of an [EU Directive](#) (October 2020) to ensure that workers in the EU are protected by **adequate minimum wages** that allow decent living conditions, as a way to preserve each human’s dignity. Supporting adequate minimum wages will have a significant impact on **women**, as the majority of minimum wage earners in the EU, as well as on reducing the **gender pay gap**. It is worth reminding that “man and woman are both with **one and the same dignity**”². It is time to end the cycle of poverty and to help the “working poor”, who can’t afford to make ends meet.

- **Consider a ‘universal basic wage’ for unprotected workers:** This time of COVID-19 pandemic has left many people with unpredictable working conditions, and no legal

¹ <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-francis-work-is-more-than-money-its-about-the-person-41866>

² Catechism of the Catholic Church, 369.

guarantee to protect them. Many people who lived from day to day, such as street vendors, recyclers, carnies, small farmers, construction workers, dressmakers, caregivers, face today a difficult economic and social situation. In light of this context, COMECE Secretariat encourages the consideration of a ‘universal basic wage’ for unprotected workers, answering to Pope Francis’ call on Easter Sunday 2020³ (Principles 2, 3, 6, 14).

- **Reflect on new paths towards common good:** In his upcoming book “*Let Us Dream*”, to be published on December 1st, 2020 (Simon & Schuster), Pope Francis emphasizes that a **basic minimum income** could reshape labour market relations by ensuring that people have the dignity to refuse employment conditions that lock them into poverty. The EU institutions should provide a framework to reflect further on the dignity and value of all people living in the EU and explore new proposals towards common good.
- **Update EU labour law** to ensure that people working under new unpredictable forms of employment are sufficiently covered by labour regulation and social protection (Principle 12). New, more flexible forms of employment challenge job security of mostly young people, who are left to provide their own social security, health and personal protection. The 2018 COMECE Social Affairs Commission’s reflection on the Future of Work emphasizes that it is essential to ensure **decent working conditions in all forms of employment** and advocated to ensure access to **adequate social protection** for all EU citizens. Reflecting on common EU standards will also help to reducing gaps in access to social guarantee among EU Member States.
- **Build experience from SURE to renew the debate on a strong European Unemployment benefit scheme** (Principle 13): The idea of a European Unemployment Reinsurance Scheme has been announced by President von der Leyen on several occasions ([2019 Political Guidelines](#), [Commissier Schmit’s mission letter](#), [Commission Gentiloni’s mission letter](#)). The proposal was planned for the [fourth quarter of 2020](#), yet it was postponed with the COVID-19 pandemic, and no proposal has been announced for 2021. COMECE welcomes the European Commission immediate action with the COVID-19 pandemic to help people most impacted by the crisis and prevent poverty, in particular with the [temporary funding SURE](#) with up to 100 billion euros to mitigate the unemployment risks in this emergency context, and to finance short-time work scheme and other employment protection measures. However, this instrument is temporary and nothing has been announced for a next step. COMECE recommends to build experience based on SURE and to encourage a further debate on the feasibility of a permanent instrument.
- **Discourage the use of short-term contracts or other non-standard forms of employment as cost-cutting measures.** Already in 2018, COMECE Social Affairs

³ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-04/pope-letter-popular-movements-universal-basic-wage.html>

Commission advocated for “stable and more secure employment”. A temporary job can be a stepping-stone to permanent employment, but it should not become a regular device for companies to hire people. The EU should therefore improve protection levels and labour regulations of fixed-term contracts to increase incentives for employers to convert temporary into permanent employment. EU labour law should guarantee that in the changing world of work, every worker can exercise her or his rights in full respect for their dignity as worker and human being.

3. Show more solidarity within society

“All people have a **right to assistance** in case of need arising from **sickness or age**” (Blessed Paul VI, *A Call to Action* [[Octogesima Adveniens](#)], 14).

Against a growing ‘*culture of indifference*’, Pope Francis invites us to rediscover the **meaning of solidarity**. “*Solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity. It means thinking and acting in terms of community. It means that the lives of all are prior to the appropriation of goods by a few. It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labour rights. It means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money*” ([Fratelli Tutti](#), 116).

- **Improve accessibility and quality of basic and healthcare services in rural areas:** We observe that opportunities are often not the same in rural areas, as compared to urban areas, in terms of **affordability, availability, accessibility of basic and healthcare services**. Often, rural areas have limited access to transport services or to the internet. The European Pillar of Social Rights’ Action Plan should build bridges and coherence with the other EU strategies, such as the [long-term vision for rural areas](#) in order to fully implement the Social Pillar and enhance **equal opportunities for all people**. (Principles 16, 20). Regions lacking essential services should be particularly looked after.
- **Ensure the enforcement of social rights and solidarity through policy coherence and the involvement of social partners, civil society and Churches:** COMECE Secretariat sees with a positive eye the increasing convergence of the European Pillar of Social Rights with the European Semester through its integration in the process. Moreover, the extraordinary adaptation of the Semester with the Recovery and Resilience Facility to respond to the COVID-19 crisis should reinforce policy coherence, by linking EU funds directly to the Semester priorities. However, this should not come at the cost of the participation of European partners, by cutting processes of dialogues with the EU institutions. As emphasized in the 2018 [reflection paper on the Future of Work](#), is of utmost importance to include social partners, civil society and Churches with the design and implementation of the European Semester. They should likewise be engaged in the national recovery and resilience plans and to support governments to develop reforms.

- **Future generations should not be left behind.** The **short, medium and long-term objectives of the Semester** should not be mixed up, while being sufficiently covered. On the medium and long-term, the EU seeks to restructure its production system and strengthen its economic competitiveness, with the green and digital transition. On the short-term, there are intensive anti-cyclical measures which aim to neutralize the negative impact of the pandemic. Member States should take into account that funds borrowed on the capital market will have to be paid by the next generations. Young people are already more affected by unemployment than the rest of the working-age population, and COVID is fragilizing young people's situation even more. We should prevent another lost generation. Hence, Member States should introduce structural reforms to make sure that the investments of today will have a long-lasting impact on the economy.

4. Strengthen Europe as a place of family and community

“In today’s world, the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading, and the dream of working together for justice and peace seems an outdated utopia. What reigns instead is a cool, comfortable and globalized indifference” ([Fratelli Tutti](#), 30).

*“The gap between concern for one’s personal well-being and the prosperity of the larger human family seems to be stretching to the point of complete division between individuals and **human community**... It is one thing to feel forced to live together, but something entirely different to value the richness and beauty of those seeds of common life that need to be sought out and cultivated”. [29] Technology is constantly advancing, yet “how wonderful it would be if the growth of scientific and technological innovation could come with more equality and social inclusion. How wonderful would it be, even as we discover faraway planets, to rediscover the needs of the brothers and sisters who orbit around us”* ([Fratelli Tutti](#), 31).

New forms of employment, the increasing digitalisation of our economy, and the possibility to telework have to potential to rebalance work and family life as they bring more flexibility. However, they can also put more pressure on the working parents, with the blurring of private and professional lives, as emphasized in COMECE Social Affairs Commission latest [reflection on the Future of Work](#).

- **Promote family work-life balance:** family policies should ensure the possibility of flexible working arrangement and other measures for family carers to conciliate work with family life, while preventing from its potential negative effects on health. COMECE welcomes innovative provisions on a carers’ leave in the [Work-life balance directive](#). While it is up to the Member States to implement this provision in accordance with the respective systems, we encourage the Commission to **ensure that national authorities adopt ambitious national provisions**⁴.

⁴ <http://www.comece.eu/time-for-the-eu-to-take-a-stand-for-the-rights-of-the-elderly>

- **Promote a day of synchronised free time:** COMECE proposes to incorporate decent working hours and the right to a common weekly day of rest. This day should in principle be the Sunday, which is recognized by tradition and custom in most of the Member States or regions⁵ (Principles 9, 10). This common day of rest would **enhance the sense of community in our society** and give the space needed to experience **social friendship and fraternity, as members of one human family**. COMECE as part of the [European Sunday Alliance](#), a network of more than 100 national Sunday Alliances, trade unions, civil society organizations and religious communities, advocates for the EU and its institutions and Member States to reiterate their commitment to the spirit of **European Social Charter** in the context of an EU directive on the **right to disconnect**.

- **Place rights of elderly at the center:** Elderly should be fully integrated in our society, through relational networks and in particular in the family. For elderly who are not living in a family setting, it is all the more important that they are included in all parts of society.
 Moreover, family policies should also promote access to quality, affordable healthcare for families, and in particular for its most vulnerable members (children, the youth, the elderly). In this time of COVID-19 pandemic, many elderly people have been left behind. Sometimes because of the lack of place in hospitals. Sometimes by lack of means, staff support, and medical care in retirement home. Sometimes because of isolation. Old people have equal rights to life and to health as everyone else ([Art. 35, CFR](#)). It is time for the EU to place rights of elderly at the center. It is time for intergenerational solidarity. **Next week, COMECE will released its reflections on “Care for elderly people”**.

5. Rethink the notion of Education and promote care for our common home

Pope Francis invited everyone interested about education of the next generation, including young people themselves, to sign a [global pact on education](#), to create a global change of mentality through education. “*To educate is always an act of hope*” reminded Pope Francis in October 2020 on the occasion of the meeting organised by the [Congregation for Catholic Education](#) (to which refer 216 thousand Catholic schools, attended by over 60 million pupils and 1,750 Catholic universities, with over 11 million students⁶).

The Pope insisted that education has the power to open up “*new horizons in which hospitality, intergenerational solidarity and the value of transcendence can give birth to a new culture*”⁷.

⁵ Cf. Art. 2 (5) *European Social Charter*, 1996 (revised)

⁶ <https://www.educationglobalcompact.org/en/global-compact-on-education/>

⁷ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201015_videomessaggio-global-compact.html

He outlined [seven commitments](#) for people to make. In addition to the commitment of “*finding new ways of understanding the economy, politics, growth and progress that can truly stand at the service of the human person and the entire human family, within the context of an **integral ecology***”, he urged “*to safeguard and cultivate our common home [...], and to adopt a more sober lifestyle marked by the use of renewable energy sources and respect for the natural and human environment.*”

- **Rethink the notion of education** (Principle 1): The Social Affairs Commission's latest [reflection on the Future of Work](#) emphasizes that not only is education the foundation for a self-determined life and should be made accessible to all, but also, in a rapidly changing of the world of work, it should become a constant element as part of working life. The European Commission should therefore facilitate the exchange of best practices about how to promote life-long learning schemes.

- **Schools, a place for sensitizing young people to the care for our common home:** COMECE welcomes efforts made by the European Commission to consolidate and further develop the [European Education Area](#), in particular in making Education more inclusive and accessible to all young people, while making young people fit for the digital and green transitions. However, learning should never be limited to providing technical expertise alone. Schools should promote **care for our common home** and provide a space of reflection on our current consumption pattern to reach a common understanding of our nature as a common good, and our responsibility to protect it. This principle should better reflect this broad understanding of education. (Principle 1)

- **Call for ‘integral’ education:** Moreover, education should always strive to be integral and **address all facets of the human person**, accompanying children in learning to be sensitive to other cultures through transversal, intercultural and interpersonal skills. Educational systems should aim at **fostering a culture of dialogue that can shape solidarity among generations and within the global family**, a project that must be inclusive of all actors, involving families, teachers and learners.

COMECE Secretariat
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