



European Centre of Expertise (ECE) in the field of labour law, employment and labour market policies

The European Pillar of Social Rights and European
Semester as tools for delivering Social Europe
– a reflection with civil society

Tuesday 2 October 2018

Summary Report



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Unit A.1 – Employment and Social Aspects of European Semester

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The Seminar on **the Social Pillar and European Semester as tools for delivering social Europe – a reflection with civil society** on **2 October 2018** in **Brussels** was the second event organised in the context of the European Centre of Expertise (ECE) in the field of Labour Law, Employment and Labour Market Policies on behalf of the Directorate General (DG) for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission, Unit A.1 (Employment and Social Aspects of European Semester). It brought together ECE experts, European Commission officials and representatives of civil society active in the fields of employment, education, social affairs and inclusion. Participants examined progress within EU Member States in response to the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) of the European Semester and discussed further necessary actions to meet the targets of Europe 2020 and to deliver the social rights for citizens, outlined by the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Seminar examined recent policy developments in the context of the European Pillar of Social Rights and European Semester in order to raise awareness of the European Semester process among the national-level civil society stakeholders, receive feedback on country reports and CSRs from civil society and widen the evidence base for the analytical part of the Semester process. In particular participants discussed four thematic areas:

- Social protection and inclusion;
- Healthcare and long-term care;
- Education, skills and lifelong learning;
- Work-life balance.

1 Key messages on civil society engagement to increase the social aspect of the European Semester

Working towards a more social Europe, the European Commission considers the European Pillar of Social Rights to be at the heart of its political agenda. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are a crucial partner, along with other stakeholders such as social partners, to design and implement reforms in the best way possible considering the limited resources available, and also in view of the shaping of the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF). The Reflection Seminar invited representatives of various civil society stakeholders from the Member State as well as the European level to analyse the European Semester and its progress in including social alongside (macro)economic recommendations, and concluded with the following **general key messages**:

- Many country-specific recommendations (CSRs), including recitals, accurately address social and economic challenges of the respective countries. However, the wording of the CSRs is sometimes **too general**.
- The CSRs are filtered through a macro-economic perspective driven by the 'jobs and growth' paradigm rather than a social inclusion and anti-poverty approach, which would resonate with the European Pillar of Social Rights. This leads to exclusion of certain target groups and sectors. A different kind of macro-economic policy is needed, one which would put **social rights first** and would promote **inclusive, social and sustainable development**.
- The main challenges in involving civil society and other actors in the European Semester Process lie mostly at the national and the regional level. There is a **lack of dialogue, transparency and long-term thinking** in the discussion on how to implement EU recommendations.
- **Fragmentation in governance** of the European Semester process poses a difficulty for the constructive involvement of civil society. **Obligatory guidelines to engage civil society** at all levels could be very helpful.
- The **important role of European Semester officers** was underlined. In some Member States, however, there is not enough coordination and engagement with certain civil society groups (e.g. Roma).
- Consultation with stakeholders may be challenging in countries where civil society is less organised. **Capacities** of the organised civil society needs to be built and strengthened, particularly during this period of shrinking space for civil society in some Member States.
- **Better data** is needed to monitor national reforms more effectively. The burden for producing qualitative, and particularly quantitative data, should not lie with CSOs who do not have the **financial or human resources to collect such data**.
- The European Semester and its aims remain unknown by many civil society as well as other stakeholders at the Member State level. This may also be linked to **inadequate reporting by the media which focusses on deficits and spending**. The European Commission is encouraged to actively engage with the media at national level when the Country Reports and CSRs are published.

Key messages on social protection and inclusion

- Although there are some CSRs that focus on funding of social protection and poverty reduction, they should include more concrete requests and proposals for how **Member States who are lagging behind can converge towards the EU average** in spending on social protection.

- Contradictory recommendations (such as limiting expenditure and improving social protection) should be avoided. Priority should be given to **remedy the low effectiveness of social protection** schemes aiming to reduce poverty.
- Although housing shortages are identified in the country reports, **housing is seen rather as a commodity than a human right** and thus remedies are sought in a market approach that focuses on housing prices.

Key messages on healthcare and long-term care

- For most countries, the CSRs refer to cost-efficiency of health provisions, with recitals stipulating that quality and access should not be impacted negatively by the reforms. Nevertheless, the superficial understanding of cost efficiency when implementing the CSRs might bring adverse effects. A **long-term perspective must focus on the quality of care**, and the **European Structural Investment Funds could be linked to the implementation of CSRs targeting improvement of public health**.
- Some controversial topics, such as the **provision of care provided by economic migrants in informal employment**, are not sufficiently addressed in country reports. (See also key messages on work-life balance).
- Some CSRs can be best addressed at the local level, which may not be made aware of the European Semester process by the respective national government. It is thus important to **involve local and regional actors**, also when identifying challenges and disparities within a country as national averages may not fully capture the situation in certain regions and areas.
- The Commission is encouraging the Member States to share the outcomes of their reforms in the health sector and to **exchange good practices**.

Key messages on education, skills and lifelong learning

- Reflection on the connection between precarious jobs and learning is inadequate. **Lack of resources for on-the-job training continues trapping people in precarious work**. In addition, higher education and skills do not guarantee better jobs, although this narrative is maintained leaving the responsibility with the learner. Access to life-long learning, including high-quality offers, need to be provided.
- **Comprehensive life-long learning strategies** are needed at Member State level, focussing also on inclusive education and skills strategies. These should be funded and monitored accordingly.
- **Non-formal and community learning**, often provided by civil society, is frequently ignored as an important tool to bring people into employment or foster social exclusion. The emphasis on skills and education for the labour market excludes certain groups, such as older learners.

Key messages on work-life balance

- The Work-life Balance Package and the Directive are generally supported, although there is concern that the **minimum standards** might discourage Member States with higher standards to maintain these.
- There is a need for a more **holistic and life-cycle approach to work-life balance**, which should also be reflected in the Social Scoreboard. Indicators should not only reflect the existence, but also the efficiency of family related benefits or the number of hours children spend in child care. Semi-formal childcare services should be considered, and it is suggested to further disaggregate the age group of 0-3-year-old children to be able to give more targeted recommendations.

- Long hours and lack of **flexible working arrangements** should be monitored in the European Semester along with the **availability and affordability of care services**, also in view of addressing gender equality in the labour market.
- **Women are still disadvantaged at several levels:** Care is still perceived as a women's job and many women have difficulty re-integrating into the labour market after longer parental or carer's leaves. A new phenomenon deserves more attention in the country reports and the CSRs: mostly women working as carers (e.g. for elderly people) in another Member State in often precarious working arrangement and for low pay, while their skills may be lacking in their country of origin.

2 Summary of participants' contributions during the Seminar

2.1 Opening remarks

Katarina Ivankovic Knezevic from the *European Commission* opened the Seminar highlighting that with the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (forthwith, the Pillar) demonstrates that 'Social Europe' is at the heart of the agenda of the European Commission. The European economy is recovering after the crisis and 12 million new jobs were created since 2014. However, social challenges remain and common efforts are needed to accelerate the decline of poverty and inequality. The European Commission has adopted several legislative and non-legislative initiatives on this topic. Nevertheless, a better coordination between Member States is necessary. In this perspective, the European Semester is a framework for the coordination of policies throughout the EU. Last year the Country reports included the analysis of poverty and the 20 principles of the Pillar were reflected in the indicators of the Social Scoreboard. These elements are important to consider all Member States from the same perspective, identify persistent gaps and set up a benchmarking framework to achieve real convergence. In addition, she stressed that the current European policy-making is also feeding the debate on the next Multiannual Financial Framework: the Pillar principles need to be integrated into the future programming to ensure their implementation and to reach the Pillar's goals. Therefore, it is crucial that civil society organisations (CSOs) share their view with European Semester officials at national and EU level.

Krzysztof Balon from the *European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)* explained that the EESC has a broad understanding of Social Europe, to which the Pillar is central. In this perspective, an EU Action Plan for the Social Economy is necessary. He also emphasised that the Pillar as such is only a political declaration. Therefore, a roadmap for its implementation should be adopted. The way forward should be to deepen the social dimension, ideally with all Member States; if this is not possible, some Member States should lead the process and invite the others to follow. He also stressed the need for an economic and social European semester. As concerns European funding, the correlation between the Pillar and the transnational dimension are extremely important.

2.2 State of play (1)

Céline Thevenot from the *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)* shared the results of the latest OECD report on inequality: "A broken social elevator?". The report shows the magnitude of inequality in OECD countries, measured with the GINI coefficient. There are many differences across OECD countries: the level of inequality is rather low in Northern countries. USA, Turkey, Chile and Mexico demonstrate high levels of inequality, while other countries such as France, Belgium and Germany hover around the average. In most emerging economies, the level of inequality is much higher. In the last three decades, inequality has been increasing in virtually all OECD countries. The consequences of a high level of inequality are ethical, social, political and economic.

She also referred to another dimension presented by the report: social mobility. In general, social mobility is low, even though there are big differences across countries. The lack of social mobility has two features: the “sticky floor” that prevents movement from the bottom upwards and the “sticky ceiling” that protects better off families from social descent (due to access to better information, social networks, informal capital, etc). According to the report, it takes - on average - five generations for the offspring of low-income families to reach the mean level of income. High level of inequality and low social mobility are related: countries that are unequal also have lower mobility. The policy choices can improve the level of social mobility in society: it requires a long-term investment in education, health, etc., but results tend to be positive and pay-off.

Céline Thevenot focused also on the factors that affect social mobility over an individual’s life course, such as the labour market, health or family events. In the lower-middle class, on average 1 out of 5 people is at risk of descending from the middle class and reaching the bottom within four years. This can be due, among other things, to unforeseen events such as divorce or the loss of a job. In some countries, this risk is bigger than in others, depending on the “safety nets” that the country provides and the labour market structures. Good policies have a strong impact on the level of social mobility from one generation to the next: for instance, countries that spent more on education and health in the past, now have a higher social mobility.

Amana Ferro from the *European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN)* pointed out that higher education is not always connected with a higher level of earning. *Céline Thevenot* from *OECD* agreed but pointed out that social policies need to give people more opportunities.

2.3 State of Play (2): the needs and rationales for Social Europe

2.3.1 Comparing social welfare provision across Europe

Adeline Otto from *KU Leuven* presented different policy input indicators as a way to get an idea of what is going on in terms of national welfare state reforms. Variation in public welfare provision is often measured through social expenditure (for instance in the Social Scoreboard of the Pillar). Other indicators are social rights, administrative caseload or survey-based benefit receipt data. However, none of these indicators is without flaws and limitations. For example, they focus mainly on cash benefits and not so much on services; the available data often allows only limited comparison across time and countries; policy implementation and coordination are rarely regarded; and the operationalisation of each indicator is based on certain conceptual assumptions. Applying indicators without caution may paint an incomplete picture or even defeat the objective of measuring policy change. To better understand policy reform intentions in the design of particular welfare benefits, more-detailed data and analyses might be needed (e.g. activity-related eligibility criteria in unemployment benefits or measuring the targeting of benefit schemes across different income groups).

In addition to policy input indicators, *Adeline Otto* suggested using more nuanced social outcome indicators than overall employment rate, work intensity, unemployment rate etc. For instance, unspecified data analyses showing an increase in employment rate do not reveal whether only one part of the population benefits from this increase or who exactly profits from more spending in a particular policy field. One of the biggest concerns in this respect is the Matthew effect whereby social policies do not benefit the most vulnerable. Such adverse effect is in contrast with the ambitions of the Pillar. The latter generally envisages poverty alleviation targets and indicators, socialises social policy monitoring, and foresees more interaction with civil society and other stakeholders. However, just like the European Semester, it focusses on large-scale outcome indicators when monitoring policy reforms and it lacks enforceability mechanisms. The first is a problem because it might mask changes and challenges at lower levels or with regard to particular social categories. The second is an issue as Member States perform welfare reform by voluntarism, ignoring

the multidimensional approach to poverty that has been developed at EU level. For the monitoring of national reform processes at the EU level, the introduction of new indicators for policy input measurement is suggested. Moreover, triangulation with qualitative research is recommended to go beyond easily quantifiable information.

Frank Sioen from the *European Network on Independent Living (ENIL)* pointed out the lack of data related to disability in the areas of health, education and employment. *Mary Collins* from the *European Women's Lobby (EWL)* stressed that gender aspects should be better measured to overcome inequalities.

2.3.2 The work-life balance landscape in the European Union: recent developments in policies and practices and the European Semester

Livia Sz. Olah from *Stockholm University* gave an overview on the work-life balance landscape in the European Union. The target for the employment rate for 2020 is 75 %: in 2017, the total employment rate was very close to the target (72.2 %), and above that for men (78 %), but only at 66.5 % for women. In Nordic countries, the female employment rate is high (close to or above the target). There are, however, substantial differences across countries and most Member States have a large gap. Nevertheless, 12 Member States did not receive CSRs regarding female employment in the period 2011-2018.

Work-life balance is closely linked to flexible working time arrangements. Part-time work is often used and even overused in some Member States such as Austria and Germany, where it leads to insufficient participation of women in the labour market. In Southern and especially Eastern Europe these kinds of arrangements are available at a limited extent. In some countries (Italy, Ireland, UK) the well-paid segment of post-natal leave is very short which in turn discourages fathers' uptake of parental leave. In Austria and Germany, care-related leave is quite long and well paid but there is no specific paternity leave. Some countries (Italy, Malta, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania) have received CSRs on care-related leave, because of the lack of a gender-balanced design. The changes in childcare provisions show limited progress over time. There is a positive trend in Nordic countries and in most Western European Member States (except for Ireland, UK, Austria and Germany), however, concerns remain for Southern European countries, even though there are some positive changes. On the other hand, there are few positive changes in Eastern European countries. In this area, CSRs are important for encouraging reforms in the Member States.

Reka Tunyogi from *Eurochild* underlined the importance to consider also the rights of the children to a quality childhood care.

Stecy Yghemonos from *Eurocarers* reminded that 80% of the long-term care is provided informally by family and neighbours.

Mary Collins from *EWL* highlighted that care is still perceived as a woman's issue. Instead it should be seen as a collective responsibility. Moreover, the CSRs should adopt a holistic approach on this issue.

Paola Panzeri from *COFACE Families Europe* said that Work-life balance is also seen as a means to trigger higher female employment, while it should be seen as a tool benefitting everyone.

2.3.3 Education, skills and lifelong learning for a social Europe

In her presentation, Lore Schmid from *CEDEFOP* explained that CEDEFOP provides information that the European Commission uses for the CSRs. The education and training priorities are interlinked with other policy areas as well. If the share of lower skilled people (i.e. low qualifications, unemployed and inactive, not meeting the labour market demand anymore, precarious workers, etc.) could be reduced there would be advantages in other sectors, such as health or in productivity, increasing the revenues for the government. The current priorities of CEDEFOP are the access to Vocational Education and Training (VET) and qualification for all. It is important to invest in skills and in guidance services to reach

specific targets and to also improve of the validation of qualification as there are many differences across the Member States. A common challenge is to inform people about the benefits of education. A policy package is needed to help countries to sustain the measures. All actors need to work together: social partners, VET and education actors as well as CSOs.

Luisa Bosisio from the *Italian Disability Forum (IDF)* raised the issue on the inclusion of persons with disability in VET. At the moment, they have little gain in improving their professional skills.

Philippe Seidel from *AGE Platform Europe* stressed the importance to acknowledge the value of learning also beyond labour market participation, for instance after retirement.

2.3.4 The European Semester – health care

Ruslan Lukach from the *European Commission* explained how the health systems are taken into consideration in the European Semester. The different health systems across the Member States reflect different policy choices. The European Commission's vision on health policies is reflected in several policy documents (EU Fiscal Framework, European Employment Guidelines, the European Pillar of Social Rights, 2018 Annual Growth Survey, etc.), which share three basic assumptions: (i) a population in good health has a positive impact on economic prosperity; (ii) healthcare is fundamental for social cohesion; (iii) the expenditure on healthcare is set to increase, entailing long-term fiscal challenges for EU governments. In the 2018 European Semester, 12 Member States received health-related CSRs. The main issues identified are fiscal sustainability and access to healthcare services. Healthcare expenditures have been increasing in the last decades and are expected to grow in the future: this is due both challenge related to demographic changes and ageing populations as well as developments in technology and treatment that make healthcare more expensive.

Mary Collins from the *EWL* commented that cost effectiveness and reforms translate into cuts that have a negative impact on health.

Tom Van Benthem from the *City of Amsterdam* suggested the inclusion of indicators on life expectancy in relation to the level of education, since these reveal big inequalities.

2.4 State of Play (3): Mapping of the involvement of Civil Society Organisations in the European Semester at national and EU level

Kélig Puyet from the *Social Platform* presented the results of a survey carried out amongst CSOs in 22 Member States to identify the impact of the European Semester at national level. 17 out of 22 national organisations were following the process to a certain degree via their EU level representative organisations. Only 10 were involved in the European Semester at the national level. This is due to a lack of awareness and difficulties in engaging in the process and also due to a limited interest, since they have the impressions that there is no impact of their engagement. She argued for involving the civil society in the European Semester to a greater extent. Her final recommendations for the European Commission are following: (i) raise awareness and invest in capacity-building of CSOs; (ii) provide guidelines and methodologies to Member States on better involvement of the CSOs; (iii) take into account the specific needs of certain groups when looking at indicators and setting up monitoring systems; (iv) make the dialogue with CSOs more systematic and structured with a focus on people rather than on macro-economics.

Bianca Faragau from *Eurocities* said that there are growing divergencies between regions within the Member States. Since the European Semester focuses on national aggregates, it does not reflect the reality of diverse outcomes and situations at the local level.

3 Summary of the break-out sessions

3.1 Social Protection and Inclusion

Mike Allen from *Focus Ireland* provided some background about the situation in Ireland: during the crisis housing construction stopped and now there is the need to build 35 000 homes a year to respond to the demographic change. The EU has helped Ireland and has played an important role in rebalancing the negative effects of the financial crisis. However, there is a strong inequality today and homelessness has become a serious issue that is not properly addressed. One of the primary causes of homelessness is that of turning housing into a commodity. This is also why it is difficult for the people to see the EU as an ally rather than an enemy. The European Semester is still dominated by economic reflections and the Pillar will probably just be an appendix to it. The CSRs do not mention the social consequences that could be triggered by the implementation of some of the recommendations. The European Semester genuinely needs to consider social and economic issues on an equal footing.

Mart-Peeter Erss from the *Estonian Anti-Poverty Network* said that Estonia's expenditure on social protection is lower than the EU average and that the safety nets are inadequate. This was mentioned in the CSRs. As concerns the country reports, they should be more concrete. The support from the European Commission is important to foster the involvement of CSOs to analyse the situation on the ground and to give advice to the government. The communication about the European Semester needs to be improved at the national level. For instance, it could be positive to make a press conference in each Member State when the CSRs are published.

Gabriela Hrabanova from the *European Roma Grassroots Organisation Network* shared some insights about the issues affecting Roma, such as structural barriers, low level of education and discrimination. 58% of Roma are young and investing in Roma would break the cycle of discrimination and deliver lasting changes. Roma women report much lower employment rates than Roma men (16% compared to 34%), whereas 72% of young Roma women belong to the 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (NEET) category compared to 55% of young Roma men. The access to data is problematic. There is also a segregation issue in housing and health. Moreover, she pointed out the lack of transparency about the contacts between national contact points and European Semester Officers.

Anemari Neculescu from *Ateliere Fără Frontiere* shared the experience of her organisation that prepares vulnerable people to enter the open labour market. In Romania the allocation of state budget for active inclusion is very low. The access to social services is also inadequate. Most providers are churches, NGOs and private entities and there is no support from the Romanian government. In Romania, it is difficult for CSOs to work with the ministries on the European Semester.

Kapka Panayotova from the *Centre for Independent Living* explained that many EU countries face similar challenges concerning people with disability. As concerns the use of EU funds for deinstitutionalisation, there was little progress across Europe. Bulgaria is apparently a good example on deinstitutionalisation because they closed large institutions and the government used EU funds to open small institutions. However, there is a lack of community-based services. There needs to be a debate on how we understand social protection and social inclusion: people should be protected and included in the mainstream environment. The CSRs do not have a strong impact and the European Commission does not really question what is done by the Bulgarian government.

The European Commission warned not to mix the European Semester and EU funding. In the future, there will be some changes and there will be a stronger alignment. The European Semester is one tool to implement the Pillar.

Jeroen Jutte from the *European Commission* disagrees with the thesis that the Commission does not monitor the actions of the Bulgarian government. Addressing citizens' concerns, such as insecurity in the labour market and migration, makes European Semester relevant for them. The process of reducing poverty takes time. The European Commission engages with social partners and would like to have a similar engagement with CSOs.

Bianca Faragau from *Eurocities* said that the European Semester does not reach its full potential: currently it does not translate into impact because it is not very well known. The guidelines on the European Semester should involve CSOs and regional authorities at national level. Moreover, there is contradiction between the economic and social sides of the European Semester.

Bert Luyts from *ATD Fourth World* stressed the importance to talk about people in vulnerable situation and be more impartial at the level of citizens.

3.2 Healthcare and long-term care

Gunta Anca from *Sustento*, an NGO that works closely with the ministries of Welfare and Health in Latvia, explained that the situation of people with disability in Latvia is one of the worst in the EU. *Sustento* welcomes the Semester process and the range of relevant objectives. However, it focuses more on economy than people. The workshop participants agreed that the CSR for Latvia on the healthcare system is quite general and could be applied to any healthcare system.

Mojca Gabrijelčič Blenkuš from the *National Institute of Public Health* in Slovenia explained that health and long-term care have had more prominence in the European Semester more recently, which has allowed her organisation to build more forms of cooperation at national level. It is not always easy to influence at national level due to short policy cycles. The Semester process can provide a longer timeframe that national policy development can be hooked onto. Sectors other than health and long-term care are seen to be more sensitive to CSRs as they are linked to funding.

Vertti Kiukas from *Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health* explained that NGOs have a significant role in service delivery in Finland. One of the CSRs ask Finland to ensure the adoption and implementation of a big reform on health and social policy. Many academics, service users and municipalities in Finland strongly oppose the proposed reform, believing it will not lead to more cost effective and integrated services. Whilst a reform of the present model is needed, there are big differences on what the new model should be. *SOSTE* is very involved with the Semester delegation from the European Commission. In general, the Semester process is not known by the general public: media coverage focusses mostly on economic issues.

Giovanni Lamura from *INRCA-IRCCS National Institute of Health and Sciences on Ageing*, Italy illustrated the situation in Italy: there is a strong demand for long-term care due to demographic ageing. In general, there is a very strong provision of family care. The cash for care schemes are well developed. Most Italian families hire private care workers (usually female migrants often doing undeclared work). The European Semester is not widely known. The CSR on long-term care focusses on financial sustainability, not on quality. Reforms of long term care system can take place only if the fact that most of care is provided by migrants doing undeclared work is considered.

Tom van Benthem from the *City of Amsterdam* pointed out that CSRs address the national level, but in the Netherlands a lot of competencies for healthcare are decentralised at city level. Moreover, there are important differences at regional level that should be reflected within the CSRs. The demographic change in the Netherlands will require investment at every level. The Commission can help Member States by taking a long-term view and identifying such upcoming challenges. The European Semester cycle is not well known.

Linking the funding to the outcomes of CSRs could certainly raise awareness of the Semester process.

Sylvain Giraud from the European Commission confirmed that in the current European Semester, the regional dimension will receive more attention, also with the involvement of DG REGIO. The European Commission also pointed out that health-related CSRs see least progress of all the CSRs due to the large scale and complex nature of the reforms required.

It was agreed that the country reports have improved significantly, even though the fact that CSRs are negotiated with national governments sometimes results in controversial issues being left out. In some countries, the Semester allowed them to build more forms of cooperation at national level e.g. bringing ministries together. Link with funding and investment could create opportunities in the area of health: currently investments and use of structural funds in this area are quite low. Another problem identified is that CSRs are too general. The national averages do not capture differences within countries. Moreover, data from non-state actors should be used as well.

3.3 Education, skills and life-long learning

The topic of education is reflected in the Pillar, but is not fully included in the European Semester. As explained by *Denis Crowley from the European Commission*, DG EAC contributes to the work of DG EMPL and DG ECFIN identifying the challenges to be addressed in the sector of education. At the beginning, the European Semester was strongly linked with austerity and education was generally seen as a spending area. There is an ongoing struggle to prioritise education in the Semester. Moreover, in education policies, the involvement of the civil society is limited.

Martina Brandstätter from the EAPN presented the situation in Austria: the members of the network engage with the European strategy and would like to see policies against poverty included in the European Semester. The recent reduction of funds for childcare in some parts of Austria had a strong impact on the participation of women in the labour market. In Austria, the socio-economic background of the family has a high impact on education of students and their treatment is unequal. Students with a migrant background find themselves segregated, because Austrian families tend to send their children to private schools. Another issue is that the EU is not visible at school level. Austria gives low priority to CSRs about education: more specific instruction on how to reach the goals would be more efficient.

Koen Bastiaens from Eurocities and the City of Antwerp highlighted that challenges in the field of education are similar in major cities across Europe, even when the educational system is different. Local authorities have a better understanding of what goes on at the grassroots level and can share information about the measures needed.

Robert Napier from European Students' Union (ESU) pointed out that in Malta early school-leaving is an issue. The main problems are that students are not implicated enough in the education policy-making and there is no concretisation of the intended outcomes of the policies. Beneficiaries should be part of the process.

Susana Oliveira from Associação Portuguesa para a Cultura e Educação Permanente explained that in Portugal, VET and the validation of previous learning work quite well. Adult learners' needs, however, are not taken into account enough and funds are insufficient.

Ciarán McKinney from Age and Opportunity said that community education is a good tool to promote social cohesion. The main problem is that the European Commission focuses on education in the perspective of labour activation, therefore people over 65 are not a priority target for long-life learning. In the CSRs to Ireland there is no reference to older people's education.

3.4 Work-Life Balance

Greet Vermeylen from the *European Commission* opened the discussion explaining that work-life balance is mainly about childcare, important for social inclusion and for educational aspect and dismissal protection, whilst the European Semester looks at this topic from a more holistic perspective.

During the panel discussion *Iwona Baraniec* from *Diakonia Kościoła Ewangelicko-Augsburskiego* highlighted the difficult working conditions in Poland, notwithstanding the legal measures protecting workers in terms of discrimination. Gender inequalities prevail, also in other aspect such as retirement age.

In Croatia, the challenge is to involve men in childcare, as illustrated by *Mirjana Kucer* from *Women's Network of Croatia*.

In France, indicators on work-life balance are good, but *Servane Martin* from *Union Nationale des Associations Familiales* explained that in reality there are some issues. Indicators should include informal care including parental leave, as well as childminding and childcare centres. Early childhood policy goals should be different for different ages. For example, for children lower than 1-year old, increased parental leave should be part of the target.

Kinga Joo from the *National Association of Large Families* explained that in Hungary the situation concerning parental leave is quite good. The problems identified by the CSRs are related to the long working hours, to young parents leaving the country, to the excessive length of the summer break. Moreover, women struggle to find a job because the employers are reluctant to hire them because maternity leave is quite long.

Ricardo Ibarra Roca from *Plataforma de Infancia* pointed out that in Spain there are not enough social transfers for families and children and even if the country is above the average in terms of childcare indicators, there are high inequalities hidden behind these numbers.

The panellists agree that work-life balance is about the bigger picture. It should be possible to transfer parental leave to anyone (for example, the grandmother). The European Commission has funded projects to encourage men to engage in childcare, also as grandmothers leave the labour market to care for their grandchildren and the burden still stays on women. Concerning paternity leave, Spain was one of the first countries that introduced this measure.

The panellists agree that Work-life balance is also about children's best interests, which is to spend time with their family.

The discussion focussed also on the case where women (from Bulgaria, Romania and Poland) leave to be a full-time career in another country. This drains care of the elderly in these countries and should be considered as a European matter. This issue is related to fair care policies and some countries are discussing how to ensure that care is not given by providers in the grey economy.

4 Conclusions and the way forward

The rapporteurs of the four break-out sessions shared the main discussion points and the conclusion reached within their panel.

Sian Jones from the *EAPN* presented the discussion on Social Protection and Inclusion and explained that the general public is not aware of the European Semester. Civil society should be formally involved as an equal partner otherwise the impact is too low. The overall credibility of the process should be improved. She also recognised the importance of EU organisations in providing inputs.

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Freek Spinnewijn from *European Public Health Alliance* presented the discussion on health and long-term care and pointed out that there is awareness of the process but that the lack of involvement of the civil society is due to a lack of capacity. Most of the CSRs related to health focus on the cost-efficiency, with the quality and the access presented as conditions that may not be impacted negatively by reforms. The group acknowledged that the European Semester allowed to draw a new focus on cooperation at national level. Moreover, the links with funding and investment are an opportunity in the healthcare sector. On the other hand, the CSRs are often too vague and generic. They use national data that often do not capture the reality, therefore it would be better to collect data from non-governmental entities. Another issue is that the European Semester process is very political and that the CSRs are negotiated with the Member States.

Gina Ebner from *Lifelong Learning Platform* reported from the session on education, skills and life-long learning that the CSRs in general reflect the real situation. One issue is related to education seen from the broader angle of jobs and growth only, excluding some target groups and some forms of learning. The main findings are: a lack of dialogue with the grassroots level, a lack of implementation of the recommendations, a lack of long-term thinking, a lack of transparency, a lack of capacity and a lack of involvement of civil society. The CSRs could be more useful if they were more concrete.

Paola Panzeri from *COFACE Families Europe* reported from the work-life balance session. The panellists show general support to the work-life balance package but there are concerns about the minimum standards, which are considered too low. Another element is that work-life balance should not be considered a topic related to women only, but to everybody. This is linked to the right for children to have the care of both parents. Another issue is also the care of adults with disability. The country reports reflect the reality but do not consider transnational families and the working conditions of (migrant) carers. Civil society should be more involved in the process. Currently the semester only reaches few. Moreover, the need for holistic approach is not reflected in the CSRs and in how the indicators are designed.

Jeroen Jutte from the *European Commission* said that the country reports, which are based on various studies and research activities, seem to present a correct picture of the countries. The European Pillar of Social Rights has given a new dynamic stressing the fact that social policies are not a cost but an investment for a stronger Europe, also from an economic perspective. The European Semester aims at engaging and convincing Member States to include the identified issues on their agenda. The European Commission will work on the analytical framework and provide more clear guidance to the Member States on dialogue with civil society. Delivering the Pillar is a long-term process. At this stage, it is important that the CSOs get in contact with the European Commission to share their views and give feedback.