



Council of the
European Union

Brussels, 24 July 2024
(OR. en)

12483/24

SOC 585
EMPL 381
COH 48
ANTIDISCRIM 133

NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Draft Council Conclusions on Improving access to enabling services and employment services in order to reduce territorial inequalities and promote social inclusion

Delegations will find attached a set of draft Council Conclusions on "Improving access to enabling services and employment services in order to reduce territorial inequalities and promote social inclusion " prepared by the Presidency.

This document will be examined by the Working Party on Social Questions at its meeting on 2 September 2024. Delegations are encouraged to submit written comments already before the meeting wherever possible. Please send your comments to the following email addresses:

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NB. The deadline for written comments will be on 5 September (COB).

Improving access to enabling services and employment services in order to reduce territorial inequalities and promote social inclusion

Draft Council Conclusions

ACKNOWLEDGING THAT:

1. Respect for human dignity, freedom and human rights are fundamental values of the European Union, and the European Union is committed to the elimination of inequalities, the fight against social exclusion and combating discrimination, and the strengthening of economic, social and territorial cohesion.
2. The European Pillar of Social Rights highlights, inter alia, that everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning (Principle 1), to equal opportunities (Principle 3), and to active support to employment (Principle 4). Moreover, children have the right to protection from poverty and to good-quality early childhood education and care (Principle 11). Anyone lacking sufficient resources has the right to adequate minimum income benefits ensuring a life in dignity at all stages of life, and effective access to enabling goods and services (Principle 14), and everyone has the right to timely affordable preventive and curative healthcare (Principle 16), and to have access to essential services of good quality (Principle 20).

3. The Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation adopted by the Council in 2021 called on the Member States to consolidate efforts to effectively prevent and combat social and economic exclusion and their root causes, and to that end, to pursue an integrated approach. In addition to preventing and fighting antigypsyism as a cross-cutting priority to combat discrimination and segregation, for all sectoral objectives covered by the Recommendation such as education, employment, health care, housing and essential services it recommended that Member States ensure effective equal access without barriers to those services. The Council also recommended that Member States encourage regional and local authorities to develop or update their local action or desegregation plans, as well as their strategic frameworks, and that these contain measures, baselines, benchmarks, measurable objectives and funding allocations.
4. The European Commission recommends in its guidelines for planning and implementing national Roma strategic frameworks that national Roma strategic frameworks target interventions territorially to ensure that they take into account local conditions and combine territorial and social group targeting in the form of broad interventions (e.g. to tackle poverty), and tackle digital exclusion of Roma. Member States are encouraged to ensure that interventions reach Roma. The indicators necessary for monitoring, reflecting residential segregation, the geographical aspects of the situation of Roma, and access to basic services and infrastructure in different areas, are still to be developed further.
5. In its resolution adopted in 2022, the European Parliament emphasised that many Roma in Europe still live in poverty and are socially excluded, a problem that goes hand in hand with territorial segregation and unequal access to services. It noted that many Roma live in socio-economically disadvantaged regions, and called on the Commission and the Member States to urgently address the situation of Roma people living in settlements in a comprehensive and effective manner, with appropriate policies and funding.

6. The 2021 Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee recommends that Member States guarantee that children in need have effective and where relevant free access to services under its scope. To that end, Member States are encouraged to address the territorial dimension of social exclusion using an integrated and multidisciplinary approach and taking into account the specific needs of typical urban, rural, remote and disadvantaged areas.
7. The report of the High-Level Group on the future of social protection and the welfare state in the EU emphasises ‘the importance of an inclusive and fair welfare state’ and finds, inter alia, that digitalisation and technological change present both risks and opportunities, while gaps in skills and IT access carry the risk of increasing inequalities. The report suggests, moreover, that technological developments create opportunities for the organisation and efficiency of social protection. With this in mind, the High-Level Group recommends inter alia that Member States improve service provision at local level, foster co-production and professionalisation, and make the most of digitalisation opportunities. It also recommends that social inclusion should be part of urban and rural planning and supported by public subsidies, with particular attention being paid to deprived areas.
8. The European Union and its Member States make continuous efforts to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion. Through its cohesion policy, the EU aims to reduce disparities between the levels of development of the various regions, with particular attention paid to rural areas, regions affected by the industrial transformation, and regions with severe and long-term natural or demographic disadvantages. The EU supports the implementation of agreed objectives affecting the territorial aspects of the promotion of territorial cohesion and socio-economic development through cohesion policy funding, including the Just Transition Fund, with a particular focus on less developed regions.
9. All Member States are obliged to allocate at least 25 % of their European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) resources to promote social inclusion and at least 3 % on measures to support the most deprived, such as food, basic material assistance and social inclusion measures.

10. While highlighting the successes of the EU's cohesion policy, especially in terms of continued upward convergence in the EU, the Commission's ninth report on economic, social and territorial cohesion, published in March 2024, points out that territorial differences still remain that may affect Europe's overall economic and socio-economic development. The differences in economic trends are partly reflected in labour market and educational differences, and despite the convergence observed in the EU, challenges remain, such as sub-national inequalities between large metropolitan, urban areas and other regions, including regions caught in 'development traps' and those that are lagging behind. The Commission's report also points out that in urban regions people have better access to education and health services, and not all regions benefit from the same growth dynamics. Territorial polarisation can undermine the competitiveness of the Member States and the EU, as well as the sustainability of growth in the long term.
11. In the same report, the Commission also points out that between 2013 and 2019 the proportion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion decreased from 35 % to 28 % in less developed regions, while it remained unchanged at 19 % in more developed regions. The proportion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in the EU decreased between 2015 and 2019 and remained unchanged from then until 2022 in towns, suburbs and sparsely populated areas. In the seven years to 2022, the figure decreased by an average of 2.4 percentage points to 22 %, and the decrease was particularly large in rural areas (4.3 percentage points), especially in the eastern Member States (7.4 percentage points). In view of all this, it is clear that one important success factor in the fight against poverty and social exclusion is the reduction of territorial inequalities, which also helps to increase the competitiveness of the EU.

12. The findings of the 2021 Roma survey of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) show that Roma across Europe face high levels of deprivation, marginalisation, discrimination and social exclusion. The proportion of Roma living in households at risk of poverty varies across the countries¹ covered by the survey. As many as 80 % of Roma are at risk of poverty (AROP) and this did not change between 2016 and 2021. On average, the AROP figure is highest among Roma living in cities (densely populated areas, 87 %) and rural areas (thinly populated areas, 83 %). In towns and suburbs (intermediate density areas) it is 78 %. The survey findings show that more Roma complete at least upper secondary education in urban areas compared to rural areas. Regarding employment, only 43 % of Roma aged 20-64 years were in paid work across the eight EU Member States² surveyed, regardless of whether they lived in rural or urban areas.
13. On average, 55 % of Roma have an internet connection for personal use when needed (38 % of Roma cannot afford it). The proportion decreases to 47 % for Roma living in rural areas, and increases to 60 % for Roma in cities, towns and suburbs. The difference is even bigger when comparing Roma living in households at risk of poverty (52 %) and those not (71 %). While there are no real differences to be seen between rural and urban areas as regards smartphone ownership, only 34 % of Roma in rural areas have a computer (46 % cannot afford one), in comparison with 43 % in cities and 42 % in towns and suburbs.
14. *[Place holder for a para based on an upcoming Opinion of the Committee of the Regions]*. Impact assessments with territorial aspects, such as those regularly prepared by the Committee of the Regions, support the analysis of the territorial aspects and expected effects of individual EU measures.

¹ Croatia, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, North Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, Serbia and Spain.

² Croatia, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania and Spain.

UNDERLINING THAT:

15. Despite the slight decline since 2019, around 95 million Europeans were still at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2023, which shows that reaching the 2030 headline target³ and the national targets for poverty reduction will require more rapid progress and further efforts before the end of the decade. Although the Member States face different challenges in their attempts to support and integrate people living in poverty or experiencing social exclusion, including Roma, promoting social and territorial cohesion and reducing territorial inequalities is a common endeavour which can make a crucial contribution towards the achievement of the EU's poverty reduction target and increase competitiveness and growth.
16. In accordance with their national circumstances, and within the broader context of their respective social inclusion policies and in line with the EU Roma strategic framework, Member States have prepared national Roma strategic frameworks to support Roma in the EU in seven key areas of focus: equality, inclusion, participation, education, employment, health and housing. While the aim is full equality, the Commission has proposed minimum targets for 2030, which require adequate policies to be put in place by the Member States. The implementation and monitoring of these frameworks require further efforts, in close cooperation with all relevant stakeholders.
17. Territorial and social inequalities, including the situation and territorial location of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including Roma, vary significantly between Member States. In the European Union's approach to territorial development, tools based on strategic territorial planning and different territorial characteristics, as well as the importance of local innovations, are increasingly emphasised, and the establishment of partnerships is an increasingly important aspect. In terms of regional development practices and their effective implementation in Member States, many unexploited opportunities remain.

³ The EU 2030 headline target of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan is a reduction of at least 15 million in the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (of which at least 5 million should be children).

18. Although the European Union and its Member States make continuous efforts to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion, different challenges and gaps in convergence can be identified not only between Member States or regions, but also between smaller territorial units. Certain parts of municipalities (especially in larger cities), or even entire municipalities, such as smaller villages, can become territories with a high share of people at risk of being socially excluded. Complex challenges such as socio-economic disadvantages and high unemployment are often present in these disadvantaged territories. In addition to lack of essential services⁴, the availability of enabling services⁵ and employment services that play a role in social inclusion and contribute to social cohesion is also a characteristic challenge. Disadvantaged territories are often home to marginalised groups facing poverty and multiple forms of exclusion, including discrimination
19. In order to promote social cohesion and inclusive growth, it is essential to create and operate inclusive social, infrastructural and service networks at local and regional level and ensure effective and equal access for all. More efficient utilisation of regional resources, strengthening of local networks, and taking advantage of digitalisation in service delivery are other key factors in terms of ensuring the sustainability of developments and their sub-regional and community embeddedness, and mainstreaming social inclusion in regional developments.
20. The digital transition has accelerated in the context of globalisation and technological progress. In addition to the challenges it presents, digitalisation in the field of employment provides significant social and economic benefits and offers opportunities to improve the availability of good-quality and affordable enabling services and employment services. However, the rapid pace of digital transformation can lead to a digital divide, with individuals, households, enterprises and geographical areas having different levels of access to information and communication technologies. In order to ensure social inclusion, it is essential that measures be taken to bridge the digital divide by promoting digital inclusion and supporting people in need, so as to facilitate their access to digital services and improve their digital skills.

⁴ In accordance with Principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the following services are meant: water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications.

⁵ This term is used in line with the Council Recommendation of 30 January 2023 on adequate minimum income ensuring active inclusion [paragraph (2) point f)]

21. This set of conclusions builds on previous work by and political commitments voiced by the Council of the European Union, the European Commission, the European Parliament and relevant stakeholders in this area, including the documents listed in the annex.

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

22. [Takes note of the European Commission's report on the implementation of the Council recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation, and calls on the Member States to make further efforts to implement the recommendation, taking into account the Commission's findings and this set of conclusions.]

INVITES THE MEMBER STATES, in accordance with their national competences, and circumstances, TO

23. Promote the coherence, effectiveness and embeddedness of their regional development strategies and their local and micro-regional social inclusion policies, including their Roma inclusion policies, with the aim of ensuring equal access to services for all, regardless of where people live, by:
- a. supporting the preparation and implementation of place-based strategies or action plans and maintaining or gaining the necessary capacities and expertise for the development of those strategies or plans, for example by issuing government guidelines;
 - b. ensuring adequate or strengthening existing multi-level governance and consultation mechanisms, enabling those working at different levels of government in all relevant sectors to collaborate in policy planning, implementation and evaluation, and to coordinate and mutually reinforce their interventions and adapt them to the local/micro-regional needs of people living in poverty and experiencing social exclusion, including Roma, and promoting involvement of civil society, organisations and experts working for social inclusion;

- c. supporting the territorial cooperation of local governments (including, where relevant, in cross-border contexts), so that the challenges in access to enabling services and employment services can be tackled by more efficient use of available resources;
- d. strengthening the identification of disadvantaged territories (municipalities and/or parts of municipalities) where a high share of the population, including Roma, is living in poverty or experiencing social exclusion, based for instance on appropriate social indicators (e.g. including employment, income, material deprivation, education, training and skills, housing);
- e. initiating, with the support of EU and national funds, integrated local/micro-regional developments that respond to complex challenges in disadvantaged territories, paying attention to the different characteristics of rural and urban areas, and making even more effective use of the opportunities provided by existing tools, such as community-led planning or social planning, including in developments aimed at the social inclusion of people living in poverty or experiencing social exclusion, including Roma;
- f. making best use of available funding, both national and European, while ensuring complementarities and integrated approaches.

24. Pay attention to the territorial aspects of access to enabling services and employment services, and to tackling territorial inequalities that hinder social inclusion. As a possible means to this end, Member States could:

- a. make use of digital technology, including electronic public services, with a view to improving equality of access;
- b. support access to digital technologies for people living in poverty or experiencing social exclusion, including Roma, and take concrete measures to allow them to improve their digital skills, thereby reducing the digital divide; and
- c. use the opportunities provided by digital technology to reduce disadvantages related to skills, particularly in peripheral and remote areas.

**INVITES THE MEMBER STATES AND THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, IN
ACCORDANCE WITH THEIR RESPECTIVE COMPETENCES, TO**

25. Develop community and place-based policies that foster regional development, reduce internal disparities and support the inclusion of people living in poverty or experiencing social exclusion, including Roma, and strengthen cooperation between relevant policy areas in order to ensure that social inclusion aspects are better reflected and mainstreamed in regional and rural development.
26. Strive to pursue a territorial approach and assess the effectiveness of developments from a territorial perspective in national and EU-level reports on and evaluations of the implementation of national strategic frameworks, including for improving the situation of people living in poverty or experiencing social exclusion, including Roma.

INVITES THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO

27. Consider reducing territorial inequalities the in the EU action plan for the implementation of the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights beyond 2025 when preparing the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy..
28. Prepare guidelines as to how social inclusion aspects, including Roma integration, can be made more effective and better mainstreamed in regional and rural development policies.
29. Examine territorial patterns of socio-economic disadvantage in Member States and consider strengthening the set of poverty and social exclusion indicators, including with respect to the urban-rural divide, used in territorial development policy in order to better target disadvantaged territories and to identify and respond to the needs of marginalised communities, including Roma.
30. Consider reviewing the voluntary European Quality Framework for social services, and in this context, consider the potential of social services for reducing territorial inequalities and the use of digitalisation to improve access to enabling services and employment services.

INVITES THE SOCIAL PROTECTION COMMITTEE TO

31. Consider the possibility of strengthening social indicators for mapping and monitoring territorial inequalities, including in particular:
 - a. indicators helping to better identify disadvantaged territories, such as areas with a high share of people living in poverty or experiencing social exclusion, including Roma, and a significant urban-rural divide; and
 - b. indicators helping to better assess access to enabling services and employment, services as well as essential services in disadvantaged territories.
32. Initiate, in cooperation with the Commission, exchanges of best practice between Member States as regards identifying, measuring and managing territorial inequalities.

References

EU interinstitutional

- European Pillar of Social Rights

https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/social-summit-european-pillar-social-rightsbooklet_en.pdf

EU legislation

- Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin (OJ L 180/22, 19.7.2000, p. 22)
- Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1296/2013 (OJ L 231/21, 30.6.2021)

Council of the European Union

- Recommendation of 12 March 2021 on Roma equality, inclusion and participation (OJ C 93/1, 19.3.2021)
- Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee (OJ L 223/14, 22.6.2021)
- Recommendation of 30 January 2023 on adequate minimum income ensuring active inclusion (OJ C 41/1, 3.2.2023)
- Conclusions on measures to ensure equal access for Roma to adequate and desegregated housing, and to address segregated settlements (13517/23)

European Parliament

- European Parliament resolution of 5 October 2022 on the situation of Roma people living in settlements in the EU (2022/2662(RSP))

European Commission

- European Commission guidelines for planning and implementing national Roma strategic frameworks (COM(2020) 620 final)

- Ninth report on economic, social and territorial cohesion

https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/cohesion-report_en

- Access to essential services: key challenges for the most vulnerable – report

https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=10595&pk_source=newsletter&pk_medium=email&pk_campaign=eusocial_newsletter

- Territorial Agenda 2030 – A future for all places

https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/brochures/2021/territorial-agenda-2030-a-future-for-all-places

Committee of the Regions

- Territorial impact assessment (TIA)

<https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/Pages/Territorial-Impact-Assessment.aspx>

Fundamental Rights Agency

- 2021 Roma survey

<https://fra.europa.eu/en/themes/roma>

- Equality in the EU 20 years on from the initial implementation of the equality directives

<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2021/fra-opinion-eu-equality-20-years>

- Fundamental Rights Report 2024

<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/fundamental-rights-report-2024>

Other

- Report of the High-Level Group on the future of social protection and of the welfare state in the EU

https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=88&eventsId=2057&furtherEvents=yes&pk_source=newsletter&pk_medium=email&pk_campaign=eusocial_newsletter