



Statement on La Hulpe Declaration

April - 2024

A Europe that cares? Encouraging prospects for the EPSR, yet challenges persist for the care sector

At the High-Level Conference gathered by the Belgian Presidency of the EU in La Hulpe and dedicated to the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, key stakeholders including the EU institutions, social partners, and civil society reaffirmed their commitment to a stronger social Europe. This joint effort was underscored by the signature of **a Declaration on the Future of the European Pillar of Social Rights** by the European Parliament, the European Commission, the European Economic and Social Committee, European cross-sectoral social partners and representatives from 25 EU Member States on the 16th of April 2024. The inter-institutional commitment focuses on continuing the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, including revising the action plan in 2025 and achieving the 2030 Porto targets, which need to be adapted to the current socio-economic context.

EFSI welcomes the initiative of the Belgian Presidency as well as the social focus of the Declaration, highlighting the commitment of EU institutions to pursue a social Europe, by reiterating that **'economic and social progress are intertwined'**. In this regard, integrating the Pillar into the European Semester process as well as establishing the 'Social Convergence Framework' should be regarded only as the initial measures within a broader, long-term coordination strategy. Even more so, if considering the importance of social investment and the earn-back effects stemming from it, since socio-fiscal incentives contribute to reducing undeclared work and increasing the quality of care services.

EFSI expresses its appreciation for the key role attributed to **social dialogue and collective bargaining**, when it comes to improving working conditions, promoting skill trainings, and guaranteeing the professionalization of the workforce in the care sector. In light of current labour shortages, this is crucial for attracting and retaining

care workforce. Looking forward, EFSI calls for the forthcoming Social Dialogue Pact to be instrumental in reinforcing the capacity of national PHS social partners. In this regard and with the same aims, EFSI and the other EU social partners in the sector are moving forward with the next steps of the EU-funded PHS Dialogue project.

As called for in [EFSI Memorandum 2024](#), the ‘importance of fostering **work-life balance**’ - pointed out in the Declaration - is very appreciated, especially when acknowledging the role of care services as means-to-an end. Providing women with informal care and household responsibilities with alternative support systems contributes to mitigating the existing gender gaps. In the same vein, the declaration calls for a new and ambitious **gender equality** strategy, by encouraging new actions ‘*to tackle gender segregation and to close the gender employment, pay, pension and care gaps*’. In this regard, EFSI stresses that access to domestic and home care services is crucial for increasing the participation of women in the labour market, reinforcing their mental health as well as fostering equal economic independence.

While welcoming all the above-mentioned, EFSI regrets that the **Declaration is a missed opportunity to put the care sector at the core of the long-term policy agenda**, despite one of slogans of the presidency being ‘*Europe that cares, prepares, protects*’.

Regrettably, this Declaration seems to fall short of the commitment undertaken when the EPSR was launched. In fact, the EPSR highlights the importance of the care sector which is streamlined across different principles. Access to care services is firstly mentioned in Principle 9 as an enabling factor that contributes to ensuring work-life balance. Specific fields within the general care sector, i.e. childcare and long-term care are covered under dedicated principles, respectively 11 and 18.

EFSI stresses that the Declaration **lacks ambition in proposing new initiatives and specific measures** to address current challenges facing the different sub-sectors of the care field¹. More specifically, the ongoing demographic trends in the ageing European society exacerbate the sustainability of the care systems, with the consequent need to reconcile quality and affordability. Besides, the diverse, non-standard and fragmented work arrangements characterizing the sector lead to increased challenges to guarantee adequate social protection for all.

Overall, EFSI believes that these sector-related concerns, among others, would require the Pillar to effectively serve as a **compass**, by initiating new policies and adapting existing ones to meet the needs of the societal transformation.

¹ Regarding long-term care, EFSI, together with other 15 EU-level organisations, calls for setting up a European Long-Term Care Platform under the next legislature as part of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. This Platform would gather national coordinators on long-term care, national and EU-level civil society organisations representing and supporting persons in need of care and their families, and service providers, as well as social partners.

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