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# Policy Briefing

Implementing the Sustainable Development  
Agenda: the Role of Social Services

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POVERTY



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## Implementing the Sustainable Development Agenda: the Role of Social Services

The global agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provides social services an opportunity to emphasise their role related to people's empowerment, upholding human rights, social justice, promoting social inclusion, and social development and investment. The global agenda enhances this possibility as the SDGs have a series of similarities in relevance and application with social services practice. However, we have also identified a number of challenges as social services authorities and agencies are not always part of cross-cutting initiatives adopted to implement the sustainable agenda at national and local levels.

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ESN's working group on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals

## The European Social Network and the sustainable agenda

As part of the European Social Network (ESN) work programme, in 2018 we launched a working group on the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#). The aim of our Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, which will run till 2021, is to highlight the role of social services in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Each year the Group addresses a specific goal and in 2018 the members of the Group met to address the implementation of SDG 1: the eradication of poverty<sup>1</sup>. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognises that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development. Social services across Europe and beyond have also a responsibility to address poverty.

According to Eurostat data, 22.4% of the European population is at risk of poverty and social exclusion.<sup>2</sup> In-work poverty is a critical problem in many Member States<sup>3</sup>. Extreme forms of poverty persist: homelessness has been increasing in all EU Member States except for Finland while housing costs keep increasing, affecting mainly the poorest households<sup>3</sup>. Young people are the age group at the highest risk of poverty or social exclusion. Many Europeans suffer from unequal access to quality education, health care and social protection<sup>5</sup>.

The Agenda 2030 principle of "leaving no-one behind" means ending extreme poverty and reducing inequalities, disparities and all forms of discrimination. To achieve this, all policies should first reach out to those who are left furthest behind. There is a need to prioritise actions for the poorest and most marginalised in society

such as ethnic minorities, refugees and migrants, persons with disabilities, the homeless, as well as children and young people. Social services are key actors in the fight against poverty as they protect and support vulnerable people, uphold their dignity and independence, listen to service users and respond to their needs, and promote solidarity with people and their communities.

Although poverty means scarcity of resources to meet basic needs, the SDG 1 aims at reducing poverty by tackling causes of the situation, rather than only the provision of direct material support. For this reason, the role of social services is vital in the fight against poverty. Apart from providing direct support to vulnerable people through social benefits, social workers use participation, self-reliance, sustainability, and empowerment as key principles in the design of poverty reduction strategies and in fostering social integration.

## Objectives of the group: enhancing the role of social services in implementation



Adriana Conconi, Policy Director and Outreach of OPHI speaking about the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) at ESN's working group.

1. To find out more about this meeting, please visit: [ESN's webpage](#).

2. Eurostat - People at risk of poverty or social exclusion

3. Eurofound report (2017). In-work poverty in the EU.

4. Europe moving towards a sustainable future. Contribution of the SDG Multi-Stakeholder Platform to the Reflection Paper "Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030" October 2018.

5. Ibid.

The international poverty line is currently defined as 1.90 US dollars per person per day using 2011 purchasing power parity. In 2013, there were an estimated 767 million people lived under the poverty line. The number had gone down from 1.7 billion people in 1999. Though this represents a reduction in the global extreme poverty rate from 28% in 1999 to 11% in 2013<sup>6</sup>, a large proportion of people living in poverty have limited access to social protection and basic services.

The challenge for social services is not only to provide resources and services needed to raise people above the poverty line, but to also ensure that they remain out of poverty, particularly in times of crises and shocks. Aiming to end poverty in all its forms implies going beyond income support. Poverty should be addressed by considering multiple aspects of non-monetary deprivations related to health, education, nutrition, empowerment and security, among others.

At ESN, we believe that local and regional social services have a crucial role to play in implementing the SDGs. Most underlying policies and investments are a shared responsibility across levels of government and it is estimated that 65% of the 169 targets underlying the 17 SDGs will not be reached without proper engagement of and coordination with local and regional authorities that usually have a responsibility for social services<sup>7</sup>.

Achieving inclusive and sustainable societies, means ensuring that nobody is left behind. Vulnerable segments of society, such as people living in poverty, marginalised and discriminated minorities, often face more important social difficulties. By supporting them across the life cycle, social services play a key role for the implementation of global frameworks aiming to achieving social inclusion, such as the SDGs.

6. United Nations Statistics Division.

7. OECD. A territorial approach to the Sustainable Development Goals: A role for cities and regions to leave no one behind.

## Key priorities for the implementation of SDG 1: fighting multidimensional poverty and improving social protection

### Leave No One Behind: Fighting multidimensional poverty



Eradicating all forms of poverty is at the core of sustainable development. Poverty encompasses deprivation in many domains, including income, hunger, poor health, social exclusion, discrimination and lack of access to basic services. Deprivations in any one of these domains can in turn exacerbate the depth or duration of deprivations in one or more of the others. Due to age, socioeco-nomic status, gender, ethnicity and geography, vulnerable groups do not have access to good education, health care, electricity, safe water and other critical services.

The lack of sound disaggregated data for many vulnerable groups exacerbates vulnerabilities by masking the extent of deprivation and disparities<sup>8</sup>. What's more, a lack of rigorous evidence and comprehensive data has long compromised the ability of governments and the international community to accurately document the

8. The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2017.

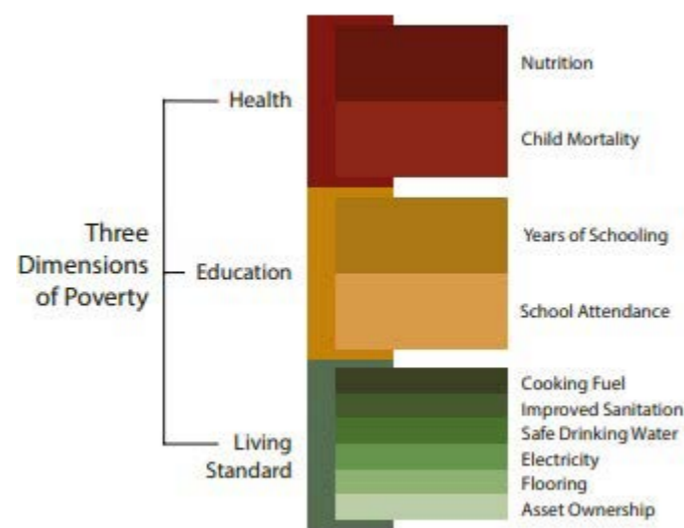
discrimination faced by various groups. As a result, planning and budgeting for necessary services along with effective policymaking lacks accuracy. In this sense, more resources and capacity-building efforts are needed to ensure that vulnerable groups receive their long-overdue place in the development agenda.

High-resolution poverty diagnostics are important to leave no one behind. Multidimensional poverty measures can be used to create a more comprehensive picture. They reveal who is poor and how they are poor – the range of different disadvantages they experience. These are key to understand as to why people are poor and act accordingly. As well as providing a headline measure for poverty, multidimensional measures can be broken down to reveal the poverty level in different areas of a country, and among different sub-groups of people.

The [Global Multidimensional Poverty Index \(MPI\)](#) was developed in 2010 and is used by the United Nations Development Programme for its flagship Human Development Reports. The global MPI is a new generation of multidimensional measures that support key priorities in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Global MPI has 3 dimensions and 10 indicators. A person is identified as 'multidimensionally poor' if they are deprived in at least one third of the dimensions.

The MPI is calculated by multiplying the incidence of poverty (the percentage of people identified as MPI poor) by the average intensity of poverty across the poor. Therefore, it reflects both the share of people in poverty and the degree to which they are deprived. The Global MPI shows not just which people are poor and where, but how they are poor – in which indicators they are deprived simultaneously. It shows different intensities of poverty, as some people are disadvantaged in more indicators than others. And it can be disaggregated to reveal the levels and trends of poverty within a country, or between ethnicities or social groups.<sup>9</sup>

### Dimensions and indicators of the global MPI



### Leave No One Behind: Improving social protection

Giving people in every part of the world the support they need to lift themselves out of poverty in all its manifestations - is the very essence of sustainable development. Social protection systems are fundamental to preventing and reducing poverty and inequality at every stage of people's lives. Benefits for children, mothers with newborns, persons with disabilities, older persons and those who are poor and without jobs help ensure that no one is left behind<sup>10</sup>.

Preliminary data show that in 2016, only 45 per cent of the world's population were covered by at least one social protection cash benefit, and that the proportion varied widely across countries and regions<sup>11</sup>. In 2016, just 68% of people above retirement age received a pension. This meant that social services need to protect and support those not covered by a social protection benefit and are therefore at risk of poverty. Other vulnerable groups also lack social protection. In 2016, only 22 per cent of the unemployed worldwide received unemployment benefits, 28 per cent of people with severe disabilities collected a disability pension, 35 per cent of children were covered by social protection, and 41 per cent of women giving birth received maternity benefits<sup>12</sup>.

9. Sabina Alkire and Gisela Robles. Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2017. OPHI briefing 48. June 2017. University of Oxford.

10. Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere. United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD).

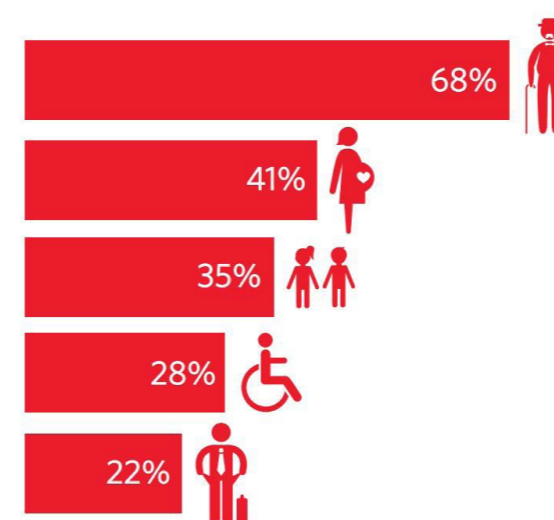
11. World social protection report 2017. International Labour Organisation (ILO).

12. Ibid.

"In order to accomplish the objectives of Agenda 2030, an increase in effort is necessary to accelerate progress in the extension of social protection as an investment in people, and to ensure that the range and level of benefits provided adequately meet the needs of the population"<sup>13</sup>. Social protection systems are among the key policy instruments that policy-makers have at their disposal to address inequalities and advance social inclusion. Yet existing patterns of inequality, discrimination, and structural disadvantages are often reflected in social protection systems. It is, therefore, essential to better understand the drivers behind social exclusion, and to design and implement social protection systems in such a way as to promote social inclusion.

Since poverty is multidimensional, individual wellbeing depends not only on the level of income, but also on access to other social benefits and public services, all of them forming a floor of protection. For this reason, a consideration of the adequacy of benefits should simultaneously include the access of recipients, i.e. families or individuals, to an adequate mix of in-cash and in-kind benefits with a focus on public services such as water and nutrition, education, housing, health care, and long-term care, among others.

### Proportion of vulnerable populations covered by social protection systems is still low



13. Ibid.

### Linking principles with indicators to monitor progress towards the eradication of poverty

As highlighted at the working group meeting by Serban Scricciu (DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion at the European Commission), the [European Pillar of Social Rights \(EPRS\)](#) which was jointly proclaimed by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission in November 2017, is very much in line with the social dimension of the SDG agenda. The EPRS principles serve as the main guiding framework for integrating the SDGs within a European context. The SDG 1, on the reduction of poverty, is linked to most of the twenty principles of the EPRS and particularly to principles 11-20. The EPRS is accompanied by a 'social scoreboard', which monitors the implementation of some of the Pillar principles by tracking trends and performance across EU countries. The implementation of these principles is addressed by the European Commission in the country reports that are drafted in the framework of the European Semester of policy coordination between the Commission and Member States.

The scoreboard assesses progress related to living conditions and poverty by monitoring the following indicators:

- At-risk-of-poverty-rate (AROP);
- Severe material deprivation rate (SMD);
- Persons living in a household with a very low work intensity;
- Severe housing deprivation (% of owners, with mortgage or loan);
- Severe housing deprivation (% of tenants, with rent at market price).

To assess people's levels of income, which is clearly linked to the fight against poverty, the social scoreboard monitors the following indicators:

- Real unadjusted gross disposable income of households per capita;
- Net earnings of a full-time single worker without children earning an average wage (levels in Purchasing Power Standards (PPS), three-year average);

- Net earnings of a full-time single worker without children earning an average wage (levels in Purchasing Power Standards (PPS), three-year average);
- Net earnings of a full-time single worker without children earning an average wage (percentage change in national currency and real terms, three-year average);
- In-work at-risk-of-poverty rate.

In addition, The European Commission also monitors a set of EU SDG indicators to evaluate progress towards sustainable development in total are 100 indicators covering all 17 SDGs. For SDG1, on the reduction of poverty the EU monitors a set of 10 indicators:

- People at risk of poverty or social exclusion
- People at risk of income poverty after social transfers
- Severely materially deprived people
- People living in households with very low work intensity
- In work at-risk-of-poverty rate
- Population living in a dwelling with a leaking roof, damp walls, floors or foundation or rot in window frames of floor by poverty status
- Self-reported unmet need for medical examination and care by sex
- Population having neither a bath, nor a shower, nor indoor flushing toilet in their household by poverty status
- Population unable to keep home adequately warm by poverty status
- Overcrowding rate by poverty status

At international level, the UN has established 14 indicators [see table 1] covering key areas of poverty to monitor progress towards the SDG1. These indicators cover a wide range of areas ranging from coverage of social protection through people living in poverty to the proportion of total government spending on essential services (education, health and social protection).

**Table 1: UN Indicators to measure progress towards the SDG1**

Proportion of population below the international poverty line, by sex, age, employment status and geographical location (urban/rural)
Proportion of population living below the national poverty line, by sex and age
Proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions
Proportion of population covered by social protection floors/ systems, by sex, distinguishing children, unemployed persons, older persons, persons with disabilities, pregnant women, newborns, work-injury victims and the poor and the vulnerable
Proportion of population living in households with access to basic services
Proportion of total adult population with secure tenure rights to land, with legally recognized documentation and who perceive their rights to land as secure, by sex and by type of tenure
Number of deaths, missing persons and directly affected persons attributed to disasters per 100,000 population
Direct economic loss attributed to disasters in relation to global gross domestic product (GDP)
Number of countries that adopt and implement national disaster risk reduction strategies in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030
Proportion of local governments that adopt and implement local disaster risk reduction strategies in line with national disaster risk reduction strategies
Proportion of domestically generated resources allocated by the government directly to poverty reduction programmes
Proportion of total government spending on essential services (education, health and social protection)
Sum of total grants and non-debt-creating inflows directly allocated to poverty reduction programmes as a proportion of GDP
Proportion of government recurrent and capital spending to sectors that disproportionately benefit women, the poor and vulnerable groups

As discussed above both the SDGs agenda and the EPSR have common goals along the lines of the fight against poverty and inequalities as well as the promotion of sustainable societies. Therefore, there is an opportunity to ensure that the indicators developed to assess the implementation of these two set of principles are aligned as much as possible to allow a more efficient monitoring of poverty levels and implement the necessary policies. Social services professionals are in direct contact with the most vulnerable in our societies. Therefore, they can fulfil a key role in the provision of essential data for the indicators mentioned above and the implementation of principles aimed at fighting poverty and promoting social inclusion.

## IMPLEMENTATION IN PRACTICE

### How do the SDG principles relate to local plans against poverty implemented by social services?

The 'Action Plan Against Poverty' from Barcelona County Council aims to fight against the increasing level of poverty by supporting families to cover basic needs such as food, housing and utilities. In this region, 20% of the population live at risk of poverty (the rate increases to 35% in single-parent households), and 30% of minors aged under 16 live at risk of poverty or social exclusion<sup>13</sup>. The Social Welfare Department of Barcelona County Council aims to improve, in cooperation with local councils, the quality of life of vulnerable people by providing specific services aiming at fighting poverty. The 'Action Plan Against Poverty' is part of Barcelona County Council strategy for localising the SDGs to achieve SDG 1 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere'.

Basic social services in the municipalities have a crucial role in combating poverty by detecting situations of vulnerability and covering basic needs. To achieve this, they take preventive and inclusive measures and give financial support when there is an urgent social need for basic subsistence. This is a municipal responsibility and the plan seeks to reinforce and improve these services taking a preventive approach to cover people's basic needs of food, housing and utilities with the aim to fight poverty and improve quality of life.

The plan consists of three programmes:

The [Home Debt Intermediation Service \(SIDH\)](#) offers free information, advice, and mediation with financial entities and large property owners for individuals and families at risk of losing their home because of difficulties in meeting the cost of mortgage repayments or rent. The Service is provided by Barcelona Provincial Council in partnership with the Government of Catalonia, local councils and lawyers' associations. The aim is to prevent, as far as possible, families losing their homes because they cannot pay the mortgage or the rent.

Since 2012 it has assisted more than 6,000 families with serious mortgage- or rent-related debt. A total of 56% of mediation processes have ended in agreements between banks and the families concerned.

The social cash card is a debit card that local social services give to socially vulnerable people so that they can buy food and other basic goods (such as personal hygiene), as well pharmaceutical products, items purchased from opticians, and educational material. It allows users to access fresh food products and ensures they are not stigmatised by being associated with charitable centres providing food. Currently, over 6,000 families have this card in 59 municipalities in the province of Barcelona.

The third strand, which is related to [fighting energy poverty](#), aims to provide support for local councils in launching programmes to prevent this sort of poverty, by encouraging more efficient use of energy and training the individuals and families affected. It aims to reduce energy poverty by reducing the consumption of those households which are unable to pay their utility bills. The programme includes two home visits by a specialist in energy efficiency and a specialist in social intervention. During the first visit, an energy audit is conducted, and consumption patterns are studied by analysing the bills. In addition, support workers also assess the social and employment situation of the occupants and their health perceptions. During the second visit, professionals install devices for increasing energy efficiency and provide advice on efficient energy use. Finally, the programme includes a group training session for the beneficiaries, dealing with topics related to analysis of bills and consumer rights.

Between March 2016 and February 2017, 1,540 homes in 212 municipalities benefited from this programme. It was estimated that vulnerable families were able to reduce their utility bills by 18%. A new edition of the programme is being implemented from March 2018 to July 2019.

<sup>13</sup>. Catalan statistics institute, Idescat, 2017

## Way Forward: Recommendations for social services engagement

- ✓ The global agenda on sustainable development provides social services with a tool to strengthen their voice and join other sectors to influence policy and develop a more just society. The global agenda can be a guiding document for social services that connects global concerns and local practice and reflect on the sustainable development agenda for social services practice at local level. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline strategies for countries to end poverty and improve the lives of children and families, people with disabilities, and older people by addressing health, education, justice, migration and protection from violence. These goals cannot be achieved without a strong and locally-based social services workforce.
- ✓ However, social services have suffered a significant reduction in funding during the financial crisis. Policy and decision-makers can demonstrate their commitment to support the most vulnerable and achieve the SDGs for social inclusion by allocating budgets for the planning, development and support of social services. Investment in strong social services workforce is a long-term investment in a resilient and prosperous society.
- ✓ To fully implement and monitor progress on the SDGs, decision makers need data and statistics that are accurate, timely, sufficiently disaggregated, relevant, accessible and easy to use. Though data availability and quality have steadily improved over the years, statistical capacity still needs strengthening and data literacy should be enhanced. This requires coordinated efforts on the part of data producers and users from multiple data systems as well as work with decision-makers so that available data is adapted to their needs.
- ✓ Social services professionals, who are in direct contact with the most vulnerable in our societies, can fulfil a key role in the provision of data related to the indicators developed to assess the implementation of principles aimed at fighting poverty and promoting social inclusion. Professionals and practitioners requested to provide this information should be trained in ways of gathering the necessary information and be actively involved in the development and review of indicators.
- ✓ There is a need to increase the capacities of local social services so that they become more motivated, meaningfully engaged, and active participants in dialogues and platforms for exchange on the SDG implementation. Therefore, it is important to develop or enhance a national level a space for dialogue or exchange between politicians, public administrations and professionals involved in planning, budgeting, and managing social services towards strengthening the role of social services in supporting the implementation and achievement of the SDGs.
- ✓ These platforms can act as a space where participants can share and exchange good practice examples from all levels on the SDGs implementation in order to inform local and regional decision-makers about the benefits and opportunities pursuing the sustainable development agenda, how this agenda relates to local practice, and which tools are necessary to effectively contribute to its implementation.



ESN's working group on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals



# Get involved!



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