



**Thematic Discussion on Social Protection and Social Inclusion in the context of  
the 2022 SPC Multilateral Implementation Reviews**

*(April 2022)*

**1. Background**

Reducing poverty and fighting social exclusion remain key challenges for all Member States. The positive developments in the social situation observed prior to 2020 were interrupted and then put into reverse by the crisis caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. The impact of the various restrictions on social and economic activities, driven by pandemic, has been mitigated by the actions taken at EU and Member States levels. These actions included short-time work schemes and other job retention efforts to protect jobs and livelihoods at the onset of the crisis. In addition, social protection systems helped to further weather the pandemic without substantial increases in poverty risks or income inequality. Still, poverty and social exclusion risks remain high for certain population groups.

Young people, and in particular those that needed to enter the labour market for the first time were also strongly impacted by the pandemic, as witnessed by the notable increase of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET), which marked the end of the six-year trend of declining NEET numbers. In addition, young people are generally less well covered by social protection systems across the Member States, resulting in a higher risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) for 16-29 year olds, than for older people.

To reflect on these developments, on 5 April, the SPC held a thematic discussion on ***Social Protection and Social Inclusion***, with a particular focus on the specific situation of young people in accessing various benefits and services of social protection. The exchange was framed by presentations from the European Commission and Denmark and was moderated by Sarah Marchal, assistant research professor at the University of Antwerp.

## 2. Outcome of the discussion

In the first round of exchanges, the delegates reflected on the ***role of the minimum income schemes to assist young people in actively participating in the society and the labour market***. During the exchange, the following key elements emerged:

- Means-tested minimum income schemes exist in all EU Member States to provide income replacement for those without sufficient means of existence. They may supplement low wages and pensions. These schemes vary significantly in terms of adequacy, coverage, take-up, articulation with labour market activation measures and provision of enabling goods or services.
- The exchange has shown that young people in all Member States are covered by income support schemes, either under a general scheme, or - in some cases - under more targeted schemes. As income support is provided at household level, in several instances the eligibility criteria are adapted to better reflect the circumstances of families with young individuals. This may entail, for example, not taking into account certain education-related incomes (student loans or grants) during the means testing.
- Typically, people aged 18 and above have access to such schemes, but in several Member States, minimum income support can be granted to minors subject to specific conditions. In a few national practices, the age criterion is set higher than 18.
- A major condition for receiving minimum income benefits across all Member States is the requirement for beneficiaries, who are able to work, to actively seek employment and participate in active labour market policies. This condition also applies to young people, but is often modified to incentivise a return to education, especially for young people with low or incomplete qualifications.
- Evidence from some Member States points to more significant non-take-up rates among the younger persons. Among the main reasons identified were lack of information, fear of stigmatization and the level of the benefit. The importance of outreach activities was highlighted in a number of interventions.
- In contrast, in some other Member States, young people seem to be over-represented among minimum income recipients, which can be attributed to the overall generosity of the benefit in these countries, rather than to obstacles preventing access to the labour market. This illustrates the issue of financial incentives and the need for a

multidisciplinary approach to support youth. Important efforts are made by the Member States to prevent, or reduce long-term benefit dependency, in particular by outreach activities and the provision of various services.

- Tailoring and targeting social and employment support to the individual needs is of high importance as barriers for young people to enter, or return to the labour market often differ from the barriers faced by the rest of the population. Efforts to integrate various services into one stop-shops have proven beneficial, as they often lead to reinforced case management through multidisciplinary teams and better serve the needs of the individual beneficiaries.

In the second round of discussions, the delegates focused on the question of how to ***further improve the access of young workers to effective and adequate social protection.***

- The exchange confirmed that in most intervening Member States, the rules governing access to social protection are not age-specific, but certain gaps and obstacles to access are more significant for young people, compared to the rest of the population. For example, formal eligibility criteria may exclude certain categories, such as interns or apprentices, or impact certain types of non-standard work in which young workers are overrepresented. In addition, contributory requirements for workers to qualify may prevent recent graduates or young persons with short or unstable careers from accessing social protection, in particular contributory benefits such as unemployment or sickness benefits.
- For instance, the qualifying period needed for accessing unemployment benefits is 12 months or more for employees in more than half of the Member States. This eligibility condition is more difficult to be met by young workers when losing their job. 3 Member States are taking this into account by imposing a shorter qualifying period for young people. Moreover, young people entitled to unemployment benefits tend to receive them for a shorter period than other workers (due to shorter periods of contributions) and the method used to calculate benefits often leads to lower level of benefits
- The COVID 19 pandemic increased the visibility of these obstacles and in response, a number of countries took temporary measures to ensure the protection of young workers from major social risks.

- In response to the 2019 Council Recommendation on Access to Social Protection, Member States have initiated various reforms through national plans submitted throughout 2021, as described in the detail in the dedicated section of the 2021 SPC Annual Report. The exchange confirmed that – with a few exceptions – those reforms and measures do not target specifically younger people, but could indirectly benefit them. Such measures include efforts to improve access to unemployment benefits, extend healthcare insurance, better access to sickness and maternity leaves, as well as efforts to extend the formal coverage of specific categories, such as, for example, platform workers, seasonal or day workers.
- Multidimensional approaches may be required to improve the formal and effective access to (adequate and transparent) social protection benefits for young workers in need. Such approaches could include actions like monitoring the situation to address explicit obstacles (such as lack of formal access), adapting the eligibility rules to support access for young workers, as well as building on the temporary measures introduced as a response to COVID-19 crisis, to promote structural reform.
- The discussions confirmed that there is scope for further exchanges on the issue in the context of the mutual learning activities of the Member States and in the Minimum Income Network.