Background

On 29 and 30 November 2018 Social Platform organised its first flagship conference at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, Portugal. The conference was organised in cooperation with the Portuguese Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security. The two days were filled with engaging debates, interesting workshops and elaborate discussions. The conference brought together 150 participants from 14 EU Member States, and 23 European and national representatives from Social Platform’s membership.

Social Platform’s flagship conference brought together European and national decision-makers, social partners, civil society organisations and academics. It is envisaged that the flagship conference will become an annual platform to discuss and find ways to translate the commitments of the European Pillar of Social Rights and of the Sustainable Development Goals into tangible political goals.

The conference took place at a critical time, a few months before the European elections and institutional transitions in 2019. In order for the commitments made at last year’s Social Summit in Gothenburg to be carried forward, it is necessary to demonstrate how people’s lives will benefit. It is important to show not only how the European Union can help create more and better quality jobs, but also how it can help strengthen effective social safety nets so everybody can live in dignity and realise their full potential.

The conference plenary panel discussions were moderated by Tamsin Rose. The first panel session focused on the Social Pillar and how to make sure that it delivers for citizens. We had a lively and free flowing exchange between panellists and the audience. The second panel explored how to get citizens engaged in the conversation about a social Europe. The format for the session was that of a TV style political debate. The panel answered questions from the audience based on their expertise.

The plenary discussions were followed by a series of interactive workshops on the following topics: the new EU Investment Plan – what’s in it for the social sector?; a non-binding Pillar of Social Rights – how to use legal frameworks for its implementation?; involving civil society in the EU Semester process – challenges and opportunities.
Conference programme overview
**Plenary discussions**

*European Pillar of Social Rights: A political opportunity to shape our future, from proclamation to implementation*

In Europe, we need to highly prioritise social issues and the actual implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, not just window dressing – this was one of the key messages from the first plenary discussion. Inequalities are a huge problem and politics that do not tackle these inequalities undermine our democracies. If the issues transcend individual countries shouldn’t the solutions do so too? There was a call to make sure Social Europe does not become another missed opportunity to act at EU level.

Building social Europe is too important to be left to political parties. Jana Hainsworth (President of Social Platform) stated that, in a time of change, one year after Gothenburg, it is the right moment to have a conversation. She welcomed the audience with the wish for the Social Pillar to be a game changer at the European level.

Keynote speaker **Professor Carlos Farinha Rodrigues** (Associated Professor of Economics at Lisbon School of Economics and Management) warned that the new hope of a social Europe upheld by the Pillar will only be successful if there are concrete measures. We need a decisive instrument to fulfil social rights and strong political will.

On the question of what the European Commission is doing now that could not be done a year ago without the Social Pillar, **Katarina Ivanković Knežević** (Director for Social Affairs in the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission) highlighted that challenges of implementation lie with the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Member States. The EU social fairness agenda belongs to everyone. Importance of securing financial resources.

For the Social Pillar the choices will be to either do everything possible to work on its implementation or it simply becomes window-dressing. As highlighted by Kélig Puyet (Director of Social Platform) at end of the plenary, “Actions speak louder than words”. For this, we need decisions that will positively impact on people’s lives. Participant from Social Platform member European Disability Forum gave the example of the European Accessibility Act: there were positive first steps but only half-results.

Last year in Gothenburg, Social Platform gave very strong and important messages to Heads of State and Government. The first one was to urgently tackle inequalities as a way to safeguard our democracy. One year later, participants confirmed that the social crisis is well and truly here, creating fertile grounds for all sorts of extremism and therefore putting our democratic system at risk. It also confirmed that ‘social’ needs to be seen in connection to the environment. The Agenda 2030 with the Sustainable Development Goals is a comprehensive framework that puts both people and the planet at its heart. In her concluding remarks, Ms Puyet said, “Looking at both social and environmental aspects, what we have to achieve by 2030 is the transformation of our societies and our democracy. It will be difficult but not impossible.”

Beyond the Social Pillar as new instrument, there is therefore another choice to be made regarding the direction of travel: will we challenge the current frame in which our societies are built, based on
an economic model that is leaving a growing number of people behind, creating fears and leading to ‘fragmentation’ in our societies? There is a divide of competition and a cost-focused market versus an economy aimed at people’s dignity and wellbeing.

Economy and social justice: beyond employment and beyond growth

Professor Farinha Rodrigues explained that there are areas where the Pillar should have gone further: the social dimension and economic approach need to be more coherent, and social protection should not only be linked to employment.

Heather Roy (Secretary-General of Eurodiaconia, a member of Social Platform) asserted that our society has changed and that we talk a lot about the economic system we have had for over half a century. She added that we might need to look at how to change the economic framework. We always speak about a cost-focused market and not the wellbeing of the people. We force new initiatives like the Pillar into the same economic structures that have not worked in the past.

Samuli Virtanen (State Secretary for the Blue Reform ministers in Finnish government) welcomed the audience with an introduction to the upcoming Finnish Presidency of the Council of the European Union. He emphasised how safeguarding peace, security and prosperity are the most important tasks of the EU. Promoting well-being for people is one of its main objectives. However, in Finland there are many EU citizens who do not see the EU as a source of prosperity and well-being, he added. Promoting the social dimension is therefore important to enhance the EU’s legitimacy. In 2019, the Finnish Presidency will focus on the single market, defence cooperation and trade. A major topic will be the ‘economy of wellbeing’, whereby economic policy and wellbeing are mutually reinforced and implemented. Wellbeing of citizens should enhance economic growth and budgetary balance. We need to cooperate closely, Samuli Virtanen concluded, and the ‘economy of wellbeing’ will be a common project.

Miguel Cabrita (Portuguese Secretary of State for Employment) stated that the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) needs to include the Pillar principles. Some of the challenges faced include different voices and actors with different perspectives, demographic challenges, migration movements, strategic economic impact and how it relates to globalisation. If there is no close relationship between the Pillar and the MFF our capacity to respond to challenges will be humble, with irreparable fractions in our economic and social models, he added.

There was common agreement between speakers and participants that we will need the EU to better balance social and economic policies, as nations alone cannot put the necessary changes in place. Currently we are dividing Europe when more than ever, European leaders need to think together about solutions to the environmental and social crises that put humanity at risk. They do in a certain way, but not enough to convince citizens about the EU’s role on social and environmental issues affecting them. It’s about the EU’s role now or in the future – and it will depend on who is leading it.

Tools and mechanisms

Mr Virtanen suggested that at EU level we need a strong commitment: responsible and strong macro-economic reports, economic growth and high employment rates can only be achieved through participatory societies. The European Semester can be a key tool here. EU legislation should be enhanced where EU competences are given (occupational safety and health and gender equality legislation in particular).

Mr Cabrita mentioned that the Pillar could be an instrument to make a difference in Europe and to the lives of citizens. The challenge here is to ensure a growing coherence between growth, employment and the social dimension. There is a long way to go for the Pillar, its substance and
measures. He added that we need joint responses and different levels adequate to all Member States. We need to invest in people, in our companies, and ensure inclusion of everyone into the workforce. The principles of the Pillar are essential to the bigger EU equation.

Professor Farinha Rodrigues warned that the new hope of a social Europe upheld by the Pillar will only be successful if there are concrete measures. We need a decisive instrument to fulfil social rights and strong political will. He also raised the issues of income support for children: the right to be protected from poverty is a great step, but specific measures need to be highlighted.

He highlighted the minimum income scheme as fundamental to ensure social integration of people in the most vulnerable situations. Tax justice is a major limitation to the Pillar in his opinion. There need to be clear targets, with timeframes so that achievements can be monitored. Coordination between the European Semester and the Pillar is not sufficient.

Maria João Rodrigues (Member of the European Parliament, Vice-President of the Socialists & Democrats (S&D) Group and President of the European Foundation of Progressive Studies (FEPS)) added that we need much stronger instruments to make sure Europe can protect people for stronger convergence. The budget should be used specifically to finance social investment, for the Eurozone.

When closing the conference, José Antonio Vieira da Silva (Minister of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security of the Republic of Portugal) stated that it is going to be risky or even dangerous if we limit the social dimension to the Social Pillar – it is just a tool. All EU policies have to have a social dimension; all the policies of the EU should be assessed from a social impact analysis.

It is therefore necessary to enhance the Social Pillar and also the global perspective, he concluded. 27 Member States of the EU have to be present. We live in a period of recovering trust but are also experiencing a sense of crisis in the collective life. The Social Pillar links not only to the European Semester but to all policies of the EU.

Why does it matter? Because we need a Europe that matters to its people

Regaining people’s trust is key. Just focusing on what Europe does and communicating this is not enough. Good politics means solving problems with and for people.

Juan Menendez-Valdez (Director of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound)) identified three trends:

1. After the crisis, some living conditions are improving in a steady way, mostly related to education, gender gaps, employment, job quality.
2. This is concerning, because this growth is not going steadily up. Unemployment, the social conditions of people, the risk of poverty, material deprivation, and trust went down.
3. Indicators going down even though there is economic growth: involuntary part-time work, income levels.

Democracy is a battlefield between competing interests. Ms Hainsworth gave the example of children having rights, which can be seen as threatening the role of parents. We need to listen to parents’ fears in order to explain our solutions in a simple way.

In 2017, 22.5 percent of the EU population were at risk of social inclusion: Professor Farinha Rodrigues concluded from this that the hopes of the Lisbon Treaty did not become a reality. European social objectives were not deemed important enough. There is low trust in the EU project, with rising populism and nationalism, Brexit, poverty of children, unemployment of young people, the working poor, migration crisis etc.
Ms Rodrigues MEP claimed that the purpose of the Pillar is to reconnect with citizens. But we need to deliver on subjects that deliver on their rights.

When asked if social issues appear in national campaigns and whether social policies and issues play a role in EU elections campaign, two main responses came up:

- **Maria Golubeva** (Member of the Latvian Parliament) responded that whether this is considered an issue for the EU to solve in the eyes of citizens is questionable. Citizens expect funds, but not so much policy instruments.

- **Leo Williams** (Director of European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), a member of Social Platform) answered in turn that they launched a poll about this among their members, but responses varied greatly depending on the country. In the Irish presidential election social issues were not a big thing. In Sweden, the integration of migrants was a huge issue and discussed in a positive way. In Italy, migrants were a big topic, but with more negative rhetoric. At EU level we see Steve Bannon targeting the European Parliament election as a key moment for spreading far-right issues. He concluded that social issues will be on the table, but not in the way we would like to see them.

**Fernanda Freitas** (Journalist and Social Entrepreneur) remarked on the need to teach children how to distinguish fake news from real news and how to make them engage in the European project.

**Marius Schlageter** (German Federal Youth Council) observed that young people are impacted by social policy as much as any other demographic – and in some instances more – which begs the question why they are not voting. Young people are the best educated generation the planet has ever seen, so where are they? Are young people seen as equal partners in conversations? The labour market is European but we do not have European social protection. Why is there no visionary idea on how to make a social Europe possible?

Ms Golubeva said that if we just focus on what Europe does and communicate it, this will not reap results. We also need to make it matter to people. It should be based on the values the EU was built on.

Mr Schlageter identified ‘politics’ as solving problems for people. Good politics means solving problems. How come when it comes to business innovation is good and when it comes to moving forward socially based on new trends, then it’s better to stick what we have and not be innovative? We have so many global problems, so how come there are national solutions?

**The power of networks**

In her opening and closing remarks, Ms Hainsworth highlighted the important role of networks. Participatory democracy also featured heavily throughout the conference. The following is an overview of the key points:

- Engagement from all sides is needed to build a Social Europe.
- Umbrella platforms, such as Social Platform, have the strength to speak in one voice while promoting diversity.
- It is not about ‘us’ and ‘them’. The future of Europe is when we all need to be around the same table and speak about our future together.
- We have the Lisbon treaty, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the reinforced role of European Parliament, Citizens’ Initiatives and civil dialogue.
• The European Pillar of Social Rights is a political opportunity to shape our future. Without a high prioritisation of social issues we will not gain back people’s trust and are undermining our democracies.

• Civil society is vast and very diverse on the ground, and can deliver real results. We need support to engage people on the ground. So much of what is happening in the EU is not accessible to people on the ground. It is also about how the EU invests in civil society to make us equal partners.

• From our experiences as representatives of civil society organisations, we can affirm that thousands of Europeans are out there with solutions. They may be service providers, social economy enterprises, self-advocates or human rights defenders. They have a very comprehensive understanding of social realities on the ground. They embody the change we need. They make it possible on a daily basis.

• Someone has to think bigger. Based on this powerful source for change, our stake as civil society organisations is to define a strong and coherent vision of the world with values of inclusion, dignity and peace at its core. This vision should widely mobilise people and decision-makers towards a major political transformation. This vision needs to be global.

• As civil society organisations that promote participatory democracy, we believe that elections are important but not unique places to engage in. That’s why we engage on a daily basis at local, national and European level.

• The link between civil society and authorities will be essential in terms of the result. Civil society, NGOs and social partners play a decisive role to implement the Social Pillar. The voice of civil society in terms of such issues is decisive.

**Conference results**

Following discussions during the conference, on 18 December 2018 Social Platform members approved an Urgent Call for Action towards all EU institutions, Heads of State and Government, and relevant ministries of EU Member States, urging them to:

1. Turn the Social Pillar from Declaration into Action
2. Organise an annual Social Summit focused on making the economy work for people
3. Engage civil society in policy design, implementation and evaluation.

The full text of the call is available [here](#).

**Interactive workshops**

*Workshop 1: The new EU Investment Plan – what’s in it for the social sector?*

This workshop brought together key perspectives on the next EU Budget to discuss the proposed InvestEU programme, which brings a multitude of EU financial instruments under one umbrella. Following an opening on ambition, key elements and negotiation status of the future programme by Member of the European Parliament Jose Emmanuella Fernandes (rapporteur for InvestEU), Kim Kreilgaard from the European Investment Bank (EIB) presented what the EIB can do for lending in the social sector and in sectors with traditionally high market failures: social housing, education and health. Participants also learnt about key functions of the European Advisory Hub – an exchange platform and a single point to advisory and technical assistance offered
by the EIB. The workshop also focused on two practical examples from the social sector; one on employment and independent living services for people with intellectual disabilities presented by Almudena Martorell from the A LA PAR Foundation, and the other one dedicated to sustainable and inclusive social housing projects presented by Rui Franco from the Lisbon City Council.

During a vivid exchange with all participants, we discussed how to make the future InvestEU programme work better for social projects while making maximum use of the social investment and skills window in the size of €4 billion. It was concluded that Social Pillar should be a guiding framework for quality investments with the Pillar’s principles reflected in the investment guidelines of the future programme. In order to help small projects attract a critical level of investment, the question of scale was emphasised and various ideas of setting up regional and sectoral platforms to group together several projects was proposed. Finally, the need for capacity-building was mentioned as something that needs further strengthening, not only on the investor's side but also on the side of the social sector. This should also translate into more formal involvement of social and civil society actors in the implementation and monitoring of InvestEU, for instance via a dedicated steering or advisory board.

Workshop 2: A non-binding Pillar of Social Rights – how to use legal frameworks for its implementation?

Attendees started setting the scene and learned about the history of social rights: the Social Pillar is based on the Charter of Fundamental Rights that in turn is based on the European Social Charter. They learned about the characteristics of social rights: for example that they are subject to progressive realisation and subject to shared competence with member States. Following this, they looked at the right to housing and the similarities of the right under the European Charter of Fundamental Rights and the principle in the Social Pillar.

There was a case study from Social Platform member the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), using case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Charter of Human Rights, as well as the decisions of the Social Charter Committee to raise awareness of minimum standards for the right to housing. This was followed by strategic litigation as a tool for enforcing human rights. Workshop participants looked at how jurisprudence of lesbian, gay, bi- and trans-sexual (LGBT) rights has developed over time. Next was a representative of the Swedish Ombudsman on how they chose strategic litigation cases; when they realise national law is not implemented in accordance with EU law, a compelling case is needed to ensure that there is a precedent after the case.

Finally, attendees learnt about different ways not linked to strategic litigation on how individuals can get remedies for breaches of their human rights, such as alternative dispute resolutions and using national equality bodies, as well as pro bono lawyers.

In conclusion, speakers agreed that litigation together with activism can bring about real change and both aspects mutually reinforce each other. Once case law is established, civil society is needed to spread the message, but civil society is also needed to help identify the individuals needed for strategic litigation.

Workshop 3: Involving civil society in the EU semester process – challenges and opportunities

The aim of this workshop was to explore how civil society can be meaningfully involved – at national and EU level – in promoting the European Pillar of Social Rights within the framework of the European Semester, in a structured way.

The workshop kicked-off with a question on how meaningful participation of civil society can be ensured at all levels in the European Semester process. There was an example from Spain about
having a strong voice through the platform of the third sector, the importance of ‘structured dialogues’ with civil society for the European Commission, and a remark that the Semester process is not very democratic. When discussing the representativeness of the Semester process it was mentioned that more cooperation between civil society and social partners is needed, and that the Commission is aware of differences in national practices.

The workshop continued with a question on the opportunities and advantages for civil society actors of being involved in the European Semester process at national and EU level. An example from Belgium was shared on how a platform of social civil society organisations is working with the government, and the need for capacity and resources (human and financial). Speakers and attendees discussed how funding is crucial and subject to a very competitive process. The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and Eurodiacondia representatives shared examples of how they have designated staff to provide capacity to their members. A representative from the Commission added that it is necessary to shape input in the right way so it is useful, and that it is important to be mindful of the differences between the people who deal with real problems versus the need for numbers about real problems and the need to measure them.

Participants then looked at which challenges national and local stakeholders face. The Semester is seen as too general and a mainly Brussels-based process; people do not see the impact on their daily lives. Suggestions to counter this were also given, like organising thematic conferences or setting up a specific training academy. The possibility of collective bargaining has weakened as civil society space is getting smaller.

We then looked at what progress has been made and which obstacles remain. When it comes to the implementation of the Social Pillar, EAPN Spain explained how their team travels to different regions, talks about the Social Pillar, social rights, how it is measured, what implications there are for regional policies, and what needs to be done.

“Made in Social Europe” – Exhibition of inspiring practices from civil society organisations

During the conference, Social Platform organised an exhibition displaying projects that civil society organisations from across its membership are already delivering on the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The exhibition presented 26 social projects from Austria, Croatia, Finland, Slovenia, Sweden, Hungary, Italy, Germany, Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Spain, the Czech Republic, Greece, and Portugal, showing how our members, by putting people first, give life to the principles of the Social Pillar and have real positive impact on their lives.

Local project visits

Prior to the official conference programme, we offered participants an opportunity to visit five social projects carried out by Portuguese civil society organisations. During the visits, participants were able to meet both the people who carry out such projects and those who benefit from the projects, learn about challenges and successes of the local projects, and have lively exchanges and discussions.
1. **Instituto de Apoio à Criança (IAC)**, the Street Children Project created to protect children roaming and sleeping on Lisbon’s streets. Participants visited one of the communities where the Street Children Project team intervenes.

2. **Associação para o Estudo e Integração Psicossocial (AEIPS)**, the Casas Primeiro/Housing First programme which supports homeless people with mental ill health. Participants visited the Casas Primeiro/Housing First programme, including two of the supported apartments.

3. **Lisbon Community-Led Local Development Network**, a co-governance network, managing the Local Development Strategy for Lisbon Priority Territories (BIP-ZIP); providing training, empowering and funding local community projects. Participants met with several local stakeholders who presented and illustrated their own experiences. They also visited one of their projects.

4. **LARGO Residências** cooperative that showed how culture plays a fundamental role in the development and social cohesion of territory. Participants discovered GLUM, an artistic and educational project that gives workers a prominent place and encourages environmental awareness and education.

5. **REDE de Jovens para a Igualdade**, the Portuguese Network of Young People for Gender Equality, a non-profit association connecting gender equality and youth. Participants visited the EmPoderar project that aims to integrate young Roma women between 18 and 30 years of age in adult education programmes to improve their formal education levels.

**Gala Dinner**

In the evening of the first day of the conference, the Portuguese government kindly invited conference participants to a gala dinner in the Convento de Santos o Novo. The venue of the gala dinner, is used as a residence for elderly people and is owned by the Santa Casa da Misericórida de Lisboa, an association of charity and promotion of social responses with great relevance and notoriety throughout the country.

**José Antonio Vieira da Silva**, Minister of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security of the Republic of Portugal, welcomed the participants and we were greeted by a colourful performance by The Batukadeiras Orchestra, a project by the Association of Cape Verden Women in the Diaspora in Portugal and enjoyed emotional and engaging performance by traditional Fado singers and musicians.
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