

## **Areas for enhanced cooperation** **between the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) and** **the European Commission's Directorate-General for** **Employment and Social Affairs (DG EMPL)**

### **1. Introduction**

It is clear, not just since the COVID-19 crisis, that a "social Europe" is crucial to the EU's contribution to democratic, cohesive, culturally diverse and prosperous societies. It means economic and social progress, fighting against discrimination and social exclusion, making Europeans fit for the labour market and allowing them to live fulfilling lives<sup>1</sup>.

While the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) and the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) have cooperated in several areas in the past, it is evident, however, that the challenges ahead and the strong interest of the Commissioner in charge provide a window of opportunity to put the cooperation between the Commission and the CoR in this field on a new level.

- Commissioner Schmit has shown a remarkable interest in the CoR, having already participated in two plenaries and a meeting of the Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC) in less than a year.
- Joost Korte (Director General of DG EMPL) attended the SEDEC meeting in February 2020, where he delivered a speech encouraging CoR members to provide feedback as requested by the Commission Communication on a Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions (SEDEC is already in the process of drafting an opinion on that).

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/reflection-paper-social-dimension-europe\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/reflection-paper-social-dimension-europe_en.pdf)

- Both the Commissioner and the Director-General clearly stated that they expect the CoR to actively engage in the preparation of the Porto Social Summit (May 2021) and the Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).
- The spirit of mutual collaboration was further promoted during the meeting of the Commissioner and the CoR President (July 9), where it was confirmed that both institutions should find more opportunities for cooperation.

In the Protocol on cooperation between the European Commission and the Committee of the Regions (2012/C 102/02)<sup>2</sup>, the Commission and the CoR agreed to intensify their collaboration. This joint note of the CoR and DG EMPL sets out the policy areas for intensified collaboration and the main instruments.

## **2. Key themes for closer cooperation between the CoR and DG EMPL**

Given the wide scope of topics linked to the social dimension and taking into account the available resources, it is important to concentrate the intensified cooperation in areas where the CoR can provide a clear added value and where the territorial dimension is strongest. While not preventing cooperation in other areas, notably in promoting the social economy, the areas of enhanced cooperation are therefore the following:

### **2.1. The European Pillar of Social Rights**

The European Pillar of Social Rights is a consensual document reflecting what the Union stands for in the area of employment and social affairs. It was proclaimed at the highest political level and has already brought about far-reaching measures at EU, national, regional and local level reinforcing the EU social dimension. With its Communication of 27 May 2020, the Commission has also put the European Pillar of Social Rights at the heart of its roadmap to a fair and inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

The Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024, agreed by the European Council in June 2019, calls for the implementation of the Pillar at EU and Member State level, with due regard for respective competences.

President von der Leyen's political guidelines for the Commission commit to putting forward an Action Plan to fully implement the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Commission Communication of 14 January 2020 on a Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions put forward a number of key actions for 2020 and 2021 and launched a broad consultation and engagement process to feed into the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:102:0006:0010:EN:PDF>

preparations for the Action Plan. The need for social support and protection is even more acute during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as the social support systems of the Member States have been under tremendous pressure and the social fabric of the EU is in danger of breaking down.

The Commission's objective is to come forward with the Action Plan in early 2021, and to aim for its endorsement at the highest political level at the Social Summit to be organised by the Portuguese Council Presidency in May 2021.

It is evident that local and regional authorities (LRAs) have an important role in designing and implementing employment and social policies in the EU. Different regions have been affected in very different ways by the COVID-19 crisis, depending on their economic structure and health exposure. LRAs can help in developing and implementing a response to the crisis that will address pre- and post-crisis challenges to social and territorial cohesion. It is therefore necessary to involve the LRAs, notably, through:

- The CoR opinion on a Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions (rapporteur Anne Karjalainen (FI/PES) adoption at October 2020 plenary), which constitutes the CoR's overall response to the Commission's Communication;
- The CoR opinion on a Future plan for care workers and care services – local and regional opportunities in the context of a European challenge (rapporteur tbc);
- European Week of Regions and Cities 2020 session on "Social security for platform workers – challenges and opportunities" with the participation of DG EMPL;
- Together with the Portuguese Council Presidency, the Commission and the CoR will explore ways for the CoR to attend the Social Summit, in order to reflect the territorial dimension of the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

## **2.2. Preparation of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and REACT-EU to provide adequate funding for youth employment measures**

Many LRAs are currently heavily involved in preparing the future ESF+ programmes and developing projects to benefit from ESF+ funding. With the ESF+, the Commission proposed that funding for youth employment measures be stepped up in Member States in which the rate of young people not in employment, education or training is above the EU average<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the new REACT-EU can support youth employment measures. The need to fully reap the benefits of this additional support is

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<sup>3</sup> COM(2020) 447 final.

essential, in the light of the current pandemic and the likely impact it could have on youth employment.

The CoR could facilitate exchange of information and best practices when it comes to funding from REACT-EU and the ESF+ provided in support of youth employment measures. This financial help will contribute to the overall EU target of dedicating at least EUR 22 billion to this objective<sup>4</sup> and be the funding element of the reinforced Youth Guarantee<sup>5</sup>.

In the spirit of the partnership principle, the CoR could promote the dialogue between LRAs in developing concepts to fight youth unemployment in close collaboration with social partners, and become an exchange platform for ideas and policies between regions and cities.

By doing so, the CoR can provide meaningful follow up to the Commission communication on Youth Employment Support: A Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation<sup>6</sup> and further meetings with DG EMPL and the CoR can take place.

### **2.3. Skills agenda**

The pandemic's impact on the way we work and the twin-transition to a digital and green economy are strongly shifting the paradigm on skills in the EU. It is therefore essential to promote and to link the local perspective on skills as spelled out in the recent European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience<sup>7</sup>. Working at the local level can maximise the involvement of local partners, such as SMEs, while better understanding local labour market needs and exploring synergies with other local and regional strategies. Furthermore, the local and regional perspective could help the creation of qualitative foresights and quantitative skills forecasts, which in turn can develop into a skills anticipation model or method that can be used for future planning or policy formulation.

Further cooperation can be achieved through the following actions:

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<sup>4</sup> In the Communication on “Youth Employment Support: a Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation” (COM(2020) 276 final), the Commission urged Member States to step up youth employment support and increase the level dedicated to this objective compared to the 2014-2020 financing period, which is estimated to be EUR 22 billion.

<sup>5</sup> The Council Recommendation on A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee is agreed upon politically in the Council and will be adopted before end-2020.

<sup>6</sup> COM(2020) 276 final.

<sup>7</sup> COM(2020) 274 final.

- joint promotion of the Pact for Skills, as a way for the regions to build partnerships with industry and training providers on upskilling and reskilling of the local population;
- High-level Conference on apprenticeships co-organised with DG EMPL entitled The role of regions and cities in delivering high-quality apprenticeships, scheduled for spring 2021 due to COVID-19, with additional roadmap online events leading up to the main conference:

Date	Webinars/Conference	Topic
Tuesday 29 September 2020	1 <sup>st</sup> online webinar: <i>The impact of COVID-19 on apprenticeships. The role of regions and cities.</i>	Focus on COVID-19 response
January/February 2021	2 <sup>nd</sup> online webinar: <i>The twin transition: Role of the cities in delivering high quality apprenticeships</i>	Focus on the twin green and digital transition
March/April 2021	3 <sup>rd</sup> online webinar: <i>The twin transition: Role of the regions in delivering high quality apprenticeships</i>	Focus on the twin green and digital transition
3-4 June 2021 (TBC)	Main Conference	TBC
TBC	Follow-up (online) meetings	TBC

- further cooperation will be developed as part of the preparations of the opinion on the European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (rapporteur Csaba Borboly, RO/EPP);
- collaboration on the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA). The CoR and EAfA could further work on one of the priorities of the renewed EAfAs "Mobilising local and regional authorities as catalysts for apprenticeships within the local business environment". An example is the new Cities Network for Apprenticeships' participation in the joint EAfA/CoR webinars. One of the primary goals of the network will be to raise awareness of the potential that cities have to support apprenticeships. Ultimately, through the network, cities will be able to learn from each other, collaborate, develop tools, share good practices and provide and receive technical and policy assistance.

#### **2.4. A concept of EU supported "European Local Job Fairs" to support local employment**

To improve jobs and skills matching, it has been agreed to look into possibilities to co-organise "European Local Job Fairs" around Europe. Thessaloniki may volunteer to host such a "European Local Job Fair" at the earliest possible occasion. Such an event could become a model for similar

events in other EU regions. The CoR and DG EMPL will cooperate on the concept and implementation, including set-up, partners, financing, etc. to be agreed upon separately.

#### **2.4.1. What already exists**

- European Employment Services (EURES) already hosts "Europe Job Days" promoting labour mobility across the EU, matching skills of applicants with the needs of employers in other Member States (a replication of such mobility events would not bring added value).
- Several EU projects aim to combat unemployment; furthermore, there are also national programmes with the same aim.
- The ESF is and the ESF+ will be the major instrument for funding local employment strategies and promoting training and up- and re-skilling.
- The Employment and Social Innovation programme EaSI (2014-2020) has three axis (Progress for the modernisation of employment and social services, EURES for labour mobility and the Microfinance and Social Entrepreneurship axis that provides microloans and microcredit to vulnerable groups and enterprises and supports social entrepreneurship). InvestEU will provide similar opportunities as from 2021.

#### **2.4.2. The added value of "European Local Job Fairs"**

Given the already existing EU and other initiatives, the specific added value of a "European Local Job Fair" would be:

- to show-case existing EU services for job seekers at local, national and European level;
- to present new trends in skills and employment at local and European level;
- to present the EU schemes to support local and regional employment strategies in view of the ongoing programming activities of the future ESF programmes;
- to show the links between different EU policies and programmes from the perspective of young people;
- to provide a basis for a dialogue with the citizens about the social dimension of the EU and what it means for local and regional employment; and
- to support jobs- and skills-matching locally with support from EU funding for such local events.

At this point, it is important to organise such fairs as part of the recovery efforts from the COVID-19 pandemic. It is essential therefore, to initiate a policy dialogue with leading representatives of the social partners, hosting CoR members and EU representatives about concepts and strategies to address the current employment challenges.

### **2.4.3. Target group for the "European Local Job Fairs"**

The target group for "European Local Job Fairs" could include:

- job seekers, in particular students and recent graduates,
- local/regional public employment services,
- training, re-training and employment agencies,
- social partners, education facilities,
- local/regional authorities and politicians and
- local/regional media.

### **2.4.4. Possible partners and implementation**

A "European Local Job Fair" will be most successful when the right partners are involved from the beginning to ensure meaningful input. The following partners could be involved:

- At local level: public authorities, chambers of commerce and business associations, trade unions, civic society, schools, universities, etc.
- At regional level: ESF managing authority, employment services, regional ministries, regional business associations, universities, etc.
- At national level: national ministries, social sector associations, business associations, training associations, universities associations, etc.
- At EU level: European Commission (lead by DG EMPL; other DGs and services that could be invited DG EAC; DG REGIO, DG REFORM, JRC), EU agencies (ELA, CEDEFOP, EUROFOUND); CoR members; MEPs; Social Partners.

Since the current COVID-19 pandemic makes the organisation of on-site fairs impossible for the time being, organising events such as European Online Job Days could be considered, in agreement with and with the involvement of the respective national EURES national coordination office.

The roles and responsibilities of organisers and partners will be defined in separate agreements.

## **2.4.5. Financing and other support**

"European Local Job Fairs" hosted by CoR members could be supported by EU funding. The Committee of the Regions and DG EMPL will jointly explore the appropriate options for financial support to these events.

Other support could include:

- Commitment of the EU partners to actively participate in the fairs (sending experts and delegates);
- Commitment of the EU partners to prepare adequate information material for the event;
- Commitment, whenever feasible, of a high-level representation: of the Commissioner or a senior manager of DG EMPL at the fair.

## **3. Other policy areas and cooperation possibilities**

Currently there are several other initiatives on the agenda of DG EMPL such as:

- the Social Economy Action Plan, expected in 2021. Cooperation could explore activities in the areas of social inclusion, employment creation, the care sector (early childcare and care for older people), other social services as well as social innovation in the social economy at regional and inter-regional level;
- adequate minimum wages in the European Union, for which the Commission proposed a Directive on 28 October 2020;
- the working conditions of seasonal workers, for which the Commission has issued guidelines in 2020;
- aspects of demographic change falling under the remit of DG EMPL.

The CoR will aim to step up the consultation of LRAs to feed into these key areas of work. Moreover, the CoR and DG EMPL will aim to intensify exchanges on those topics.

To deliver enhanced cooperation between the CoR and DG EMPL the following additional measures can be envisaged:

- regular political dialogue – at the CoR plenary and SEDEC commission meetings;
- consider the participation of CoR members and rapporteurs in conferences and events organised by DG EMPL where the local and regional perspective brings value added;
- upon request, inform CoR members about available EU funding and policy support to show how the EU can help regions and cities in the green and digital transitions;
- explore joint communication measures, where appropriate;

- explore synergies with initiatives of other DGs, as the S3 Industrial Modernisation Thematic Platform partnership on Social Economy (<https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-economy>).

#### **4. Next steps:**

Both DG EMPL and the CoR will establish contact persons for defining details of the concept and the modalities of delivery of "European Local Job Fairs" and to ensure smooth cooperation and coordination of actions at administrative level.