EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND INCLUSION

Social Rights and Inclusion
Social Policies, Child Guarantee, SPC

**BACKGROUND NOTE FOR THE
CONSULTATION MEETING WITH SOCIAL PARTNERS ON
ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL SERVICES
12 MAY 2022**

1. BACKGROUND AND SCOPE OF THE CONSULTATION

Principle 20 of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) provides that everyone has the right to access essential services of good quality and that support for access to such services shall be available for those in need. The principle also provides a list of these essential services, which includes water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services, and digital communications.

As announced in the [European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan](#), the Commission will publish in 2022 the first **EU Report on Access to Essential Services**. The Action Plan also put forward EU 2030 headline targets, including the target of reducing by at least 15 million the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by the end of this decade.

Having access to **water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications** is essential to meet basic needs. The ability to access them is a critical aspect of social and labour market inclusion and an important determinant of well-being, including for disadvantaged groups. Moreover, these facilitate access to other services that fulfil an enabling function, such as education, long-term care, housing, labour market, and social services.

For example, access to water and sanitation, adequate warmth, cooling, lighting, and energy to power appliances is key to ensure a decent standard of living and citizens' health in everyday life. Public transport affects access to various services, such as education and training, healthcare, social services, as well as leisure activities. Having a payment account is often necessary to purchase goods and services as well as to receive benefits and support.

Access to essential services has been key during the most acute phases of the COVID-19 pandemic and will be increasingly important in the framework of the green and digital transitions. For instance, rises in the price of energy services and products may affect low-income households disproportionally; access to digital communications will become more and more instrumental to access information, goods and services.

Work on supporting access to essential services for people in vulnerable situations will therefore contribute to addressing poverty and material deprivation.

In this context, the Commission would like to gather the views of social partners through a targeted consultation. The view of social partners will be valuable in several respects: on the broader relevance of work on essential services to advance the EU social agenda, for their perspective on key aspects of services provision (financing, workforce, infrastructures), as well as for their knowledge of national experiences and good practices. The purpose of this document is to facilitate the discussion.

2. CHALLENGES

Despite their importance, significant barriers, such as income, age, territorial inequalities and spatial segregation still make it difficult for some people in the EU to access essential services. For instance, persons with disabilities face difficulties in physically accessing services, due to a lack of accessible vehicles and transport infrastructure, poor quality pedestrian environments and inadequate transport information systems. Some marginalised communities, such as Roma, do not always have access to clean water and sanitation. Inadequate housing and the uneven spatial distribution of energy services may hinder households' ability to access sufficient energy services. The lack of relevant skills can make it harder to access financial services and digital communications, especially for the elderly. In addition, price increases can make essential services difficult to afford.

This affects in particular people in the most vulnerable situations, who often have to rely on income support to afford these services. The green and digital transitions are posing additional challenges, making access to these services even more important to ensure a fair transition and an acceptable distributional impact of both the gains and costs of the upcoming transformations.

Member States are primarily responsible for organising essential services at national, regional or local level and the EU competences in these fields are limited and varied. At the EU level, access to essential services is partly addressed through sectorial legislation and initiatives in the field of electricity and telecommunication, which include provisions on 'Universal Service Obligation' (USO) and in favour of vulnerable consumers. The Accessibility Act - a Directive that aims at removing barriers and enhancing access to products and services in the internal market – also covers relevant goods and services, in particular related to transport, digital communications and financial services.

Moreover, information on access to essential services at EU level is available only for some specific areas. For example, in order to help Member States in their efforts to combat energy poverty, the Commission has launched the Energy Poverty Observatory – now replaced by the Energy Poverty Advisory Hub – which provides some data on energy affordability. Member States are also requested to address energy poverty, when relevant, in their national energy and climate plans (NECPs). Some reporting is also undertaken in the context of the monitoring of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, and Eurostat indicators have been developed on access to clean water and sanitation, and connection to at least secondary wastewater treatment.

The 2020 report on "Access to essential services for people on low incomes in Europe" from the European Social Policy Network[1] analysed the measures, policy frameworks

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[1] ESPN (2020), Access to essential services for people on low incomes in Europe. An analysis of policies in 35 countries, Brussels: European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1135&intPageId=3588.

and reforms that countries have put in place to help people on low incomes to access essential services, providing a first mapping of the situation on the ground.

In some Member States targeted measures are in place for low-income households which include reduced tariffs, minimum provisions and protection from disconnection, counselling, as well as social protection measures. The latter are often linked to minimum income schemes or housing benefits, with restrictive eligibility requirements. Improving the quality of the infrastructures (e.g. in terms of energy efficiency, building renovation, physical accessibility) is another important factor to improve access to essential services.

3. PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE REPORT

The report will take the form of a Staff Working Document[2] and will aim at bringing together in a comprehensive and structured way all available evidence and information in relation to access to essential services to those is vulnerable situations, while pointing to existing knowledge gaps to inform future work.

The report will aim to present the state of play for each of the six essential services listed in principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, providing available quantitative and qualitative information on the main barriers to access each service at Member State level, and describing existing national and local measures supporting access, with a specific focus on social policy measures. This information will be complemented by an analysis of EU trends, measures and actions.

In line with the approach indicated in the European Pillar of Social Rights, the focus will be on the access and support for people in need, understood mainly as people at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Other aspects, such as the design, quality, financing and provision of essential services will likely be included only to the extent they provide valuable and additional information to better understand the context.

Access, which generally encompasses availability of services (within a reasonable distance), affordability and accessibility (physical or through information and communication technologies) is envisaged to be addressed in the report particularly with the view of affordability, which represent a cross-cutting issue for all six essential services listed in the Pillar principle 20. Information concerning availability and accessibility, as well as territorial inequalities and other aspects, will be included when relevant to provide complementary elements to the main analysis.

4. STEERING QUESTIONS FOR THE DISCUSSION

1. *What are in your view the most important barriers impeding access to essential services at national and local level, and what are the most affected groups?*

2. *What are in your views the most effective measures to support access to essential services at EU level? What are concrete examples of good practices from the national and local level?*

3. *In what way can the social partners contribute to improving the access to essential services?*

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[2] The preparation of the report is ongoing and the information presented is indicative at this stage.