

► ILO key messages

Contribution to the consultation on the second Action Plan
for the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)

September 2025

► ILO key messages for the second EPSR Action Plan

- Promote the ratification and effective implementation of international labour standards to safeguard rights at work and ensure a level playing field in the global economy. Focus on the ratification and effective implementation of all fundamental Conventions, with particular emphasis on the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining. These rights are essential not only for protecting and empowering workers but also for strengthening democratic governance and ensuring the consistent application of EPSR principles to all workers, in line with international standards — especially in sectors characterised by informality or acute labour shortages.
- Apply the EPSR as a compass for socially inclusive and just transitions to a green and digital economy, in line with international commitments and in light of the demographic transition and labour shortages in the EU. This includes promoting inclusive skills development and lifelong learning, strengthening social protection systems, improving working conditions and implementing active labour market policies that support the participation of underrepresented groups. More efforts to promote fair labour migration and mobility also form an integral part of these transitions.
- Reinforce social dialogue at EU and national levels by supporting the meaningful involvement of employers' and workers' organisations in the design, implementation, and monitoring of social, economic and employment policies and emerging labour market issues as well as in the digital and green transition, in line with international labour standards and the principles of the EPSR.
- Ensure robust monitoring of the commitments made in the second EPSR Action Plan and structurally involve social partners at EU and national level in the monitoring and the implementation. Where appropriate draw on ILO knowledge, technical assistance and tools to implement relevant actions.
- Maintain and expand the external dimension of the EPSR. The Action Plan should reaffirm the EPSR as a reference point in the EU's external relations. This includes continuing to support social progress in candidate and partner countries, reinforcing global commitments to decent work, and continuing to draw on ILO knowledge, technical assistance and tools where relevant.

The **ILO has supported the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) since its inception**. The Director-General of the ILO was invited to the Social Summit in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 2017, when the Pillar was officially proclaimed. He had [welcomed](#) the EPSR as *“a framework for building a world of work that is fair and inclusive, guided by principles that resonate with the ILO’s own founding values: the conviction that prosperity must be shared, that human and labour rights underpin human dignity, and that social dialogue is an indispensable ingredient for social justice and fairness at work”* and the Office contributed to the first action plan (2021) to implement the EPSR.

The political and economic context has changed significantly since the first Action Plan. At the time, the priority was a sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, to which the EU responded collectively and effectively - mobilising financial mechanisms and enterprise support that helped prevent widespread job losses. Today, the EU faces the ongoing economic and political consequences of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which has triggered geopolitical tensions, disrupted global supply chains, and contributed to inflation and surging energy prices. More recently, shifts and uncertainties in the transatlantic partnership have added to these challenges. The escalating conflict in the Middle East and the humanitarian tragedy in Gaza have further strained international relations and risk deepening societal polarisation within the EU.

These developments have placed considerable strain on enterprises, workers, the social partners and societies across the EU, raising urgent questions about Europe’s economic resilience, assuring workers’ rights and decent working conditions, competitiveness, defence capacity, and preparedness for future challenges. At the same time, rapid technological change—including advances in artificial intelligence—alongside demographic shifts and the escalating impacts of climate change, continue to transform the world of work. These trends call for forward-looking and inclusive policy responses that strengthen the EU’s position globally in the world today.

In this context, **the EPSR remains highly relevant today**. The ILO welcomes the European Commission (EC)’s renewed commitment to the EPSR and its initiative to develop a second Action Plan for its implementation. In line with the [2022 EC-ILO High Level Conclusions](#) between both organizations which reaffirmed both organizations’ commitment to supporting each other’s initiatives, the ILO is pleased to contribute to this important endeavour and shares the following key messages to inform the preparation of the second Action Plan.

1. Promote ratification and implementation of international labour standards to ensure a level-playing field in the global economy

The [twenty principles and rights](#) enshrined in **the EPSR are closely aligned with international labour standards and broader human rights frameworks**. In today’s challenging environment—marked by geopolitical tensions, backsliding on human, labour and civil rights and gender equality, economic uncertainty and pressures on competitiveness—it is **important to recall that international labour standards aim to establish a global level playing field by setting minimum standards** that ensure competitive advantage is built on decent work, social justice, innovation, productivity, and sustainable enterprise development. In this context, the ILO global tripartite agreement on the living wage¹ is noteworthy in ensuring efforts on an adequate wage in particular outside the EU (see section 5).

The EU region continues to lead globally in the ratification of ILO Conventions. **EU institutions have also consistently expressed their commitment to promoting international labour standards and decent work, both within the EU and in their external policies**².

¹ https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_norm/%40relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_918126.pdf

² EU Communication (2022) [Promoting Decent Work World Wide for a global just transition and a sustainable recovery](#)

However, **not all EU Member States ratified the Forced Labour Protocol³. While the EU has an extensive normative framework on occupational safety and health, several EU member states have yet to ratify ILO Conventions Nos. 155 and 187 on occupational safety and health⁴.** The latter two were designated as Fundamental Conventions by consensus of governments, employers, and workers from 187 countries, including from the EU-27, at the ILO in 2022. Their ratification is not only in line with Principle 10 of the EPSR but **also reinforces the EU's capacity to promote international standards globally and in third countries.**

Respect for the ILO's enabling rights, Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining (FACB), is a cornerstone of democracy, critically important amid rising democratic backsliding, where FACB, as measured by SDG indicator 8.8.2, faces growing threats.

The ILO's Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations regularly reviews how international labour standards are applied by ILO Member States, including those in the EU. In doing so, it has commented on the interaction between EU-driven policies and legislation—such as the National Reform Programmes, Recovery and Resilience Plans, the Youth Guarantee, and public procurement legislation—and obligations under ratified international labour standards⁵. **These interactions underline the need to ensure consistency between EU policies and international standards.**

Importantly, **both the EPSR and international labour standards apply to all workers⁶**, including migrant workers, who often face a heightened risk of exploitation⁷. It is essential that **national labour laws, including those reflecting EPSR principles, are effectively enforced across all sectors**—particularly those often associated with poor working conditions, such as construction, domestic work, care, cleaning, transport, agriculture, tourism and hospitality. These sectors, which are also facing acute labour shortages⁸ and frequently employ migrant workers, also tend to have a higher incidence of informal or undeclared work⁹. **Ensuring that EPSR principles are applied equally to these workers is crucial for advancing fair labour migration to the EU and labour mobility within the region** — an issue that has received renewed political attention at the highest level¹⁰. **Supporting the transition from informal to formal employment**, in line with the ILO's [Resolution on Addressing Informality and Promoting the Transition to Formality for Decent Work \(2025\)](#), while safeguarding the rights of workers in the informal economy, is also essential.

The implementation of EPSR principles, especially in sectors at risk of informality or labour exploitation, depends on the effective enforcement of labour legislation, which requires professional, independent, and adequately resourced labour administration and inspection systems¹¹.

³ The Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1939 (P29) is part of the fundamental Forced Labour Convention 29. P29 has not been ratified by 8 MS: BG, HR, GR, HU, IT, RO, SK, SI

⁴ Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No 155), Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No 187). 9 MS have not ratified C155 (AT, EE, FR, GR, DE, LT, MT, PL, RO), 9 MS have not ratified C187 (HR, EE, HU, IE, LV, LT, MT, PL, RO)

⁵ See for instance [Direct Request Greece \(2024\)](#), [Direct Request Luxembourg \(2024\)](#), [Direct Request Portugal \(2024\)](#), [Observation Poland \(2023\)](#), [Direct Request Belgium \(2022\)](#), [Direct Request Slovenia \(2022\)](#), [Observation France \(2017\)](#)

⁶ All fundamental ILO Conventions and many technical conventions apply also to self-employed workers

⁷ ILO, IOM, Walk Free Foundation (2022) [Global Estimates on Modern Slavery](#), see p4

⁸ See [Annex to the Proposal for the Talent Pool Regulation](#), which identifies 42 occupations that experience labour shortages across the EU, [2023 OECD labour shortages in agrifood](#)

⁹ See e.g. ELA report 2024 https://www.ela.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-03/PLD_UDW_among_EU_workers_and_TCNs.pdf, or here https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/eu-employment-policies/undeclared-work_en

¹⁰ Informal EPSCO, 7-8 July 2025 [discussion of EU labour ministers on fair mobility](#)

¹¹ in line with ILO Conventions Nos. 150 on Labour Administration and No. 81 on Labour Inspection, a governance Convention ratified by all EU Member States

The second EPSR action plan should therefore:

- Promote the ratification and effective implementation of ILO Conventions Nos. 155 and 187 on occupational safety and health within the EU.
- Include measures that support the effective application of EPSR principles to all workers, including migrant workers, in line with international labour standards and resolutions
- Include a commitment to ensure findings of ILO supervisory mechanisms and UN human rights bodies are taken into account in the development of EU policy and legislation.

2. Apply the EPSR as a compass for a socially- inclusive and just transition for a green and digital economy

The ILO Director-General's recent report¹² examining the nexus between jobs, rights and economic growth identifies key structural forces driving transformative changes in the world of work, impacting jobs, rights, and growth, which include technological innovations, including artificial intelligence; and climate change. The **EU has set ambitious targets for the green and digital transitions**, notably through policies and legislation included in the European Green Deal, the Clean Industrial Deal, and more recently through initiatives such as the AI Continent Action Plan and its related AI factory, the Artificial Intelligence Act, the “Apply AI” initiative, and the EU Start-up and Scale-up Strategy to name a few¹³. In light of the broader political and economic context—already marked by significant pressures on the EU's economy, energy systems, and global partnerships—**recent policy discussions have increasingly focused on strengthening Europe's economic resilience, competitiveness and defence capacities**. This shift is reflected in the Competitiveness Compass and alignment with increased NATO-related spending commitments¹⁴.

In this context, the success of the green and digital transitions, as drivers of inclusive growth, decent work creation and social justice will depend more than ever on whether they are managed in a socially inclusive and fair manner. Transitions that fail to support those most affected — industries, workers, and regions at risk of disruption and displacement—may face public resistance. A fair transition must also **ensure a level playing field for enterprises and be accompanied by an enabling legal and policy framework that facilitates innovation, sustainable investment, and decent work**.

The EPSR should remain a central compass for navigating these transitions. It enshrines several very relevant principles and rights¹⁵ that should guide these transitions and that are mirrored by international commitments negotiated and adopted by governments, employers' and worker's organizations, including the EU-27, at the ILO. They include the [Resolution concerning a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all \(2023\)](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/ILC113-2025-I%28B%29-%5BCABINET-250407-001%5D-Web-EN.pdf) and the [Resolution concerning Skills and Lifelong Learning \(2021\)](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf). Both resolutions reaffirm the need **to invest in inclusive and effective skills and lifelong-learning systems, underpinned by national social protection systems, including floors, and active labour market policies, while maintaining a human-centred approach to technological innovations in the world of work**¹⁶.

¹² <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/ILC113-2025-I%28B%29-%5BCABINET-250407-001%5D-Web-EN.pdf>

¹³ https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/06/26/european-council-conclusions-on-european-defence-and-security/>

¹⁵ See e.g. principles 1. Education, training and life-long learning, Principle 2 on Gender Equality, 3. Equal opportunities, 4 Active support to employment, 5 Secure and adaptive Employment, 6 wages, 8 social dialogue, 10 health and safety, 12-18 social protection

¹⁶ [ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work \(2019\)](https://www.ilo.org/public/centenary/declaration-for-the-future-of-work-2019)

The EU has already taken significant steps **to promote lifelong learning and improve opportunities for re- and upskilling**, notably through initiatives such as the Union of Skills, with its commitments (amongst others) to expand micro-credentials, rolling out skills support schemes, pilot a Skills Guarantee, as well as the upcoming Skills Portability Initiative; and the [ILO Quality Apprenticeship Recommendation, 2023 \(No. 208\)](#) may provide useful guidance in the implementation of some of the measures proposed. These initiatives are important efforts to foster the skills development and adaptability of Europe's current and future workforce. However, persistent barriers remain. For instance, **the recognition of third-country qualifications continues to be limited**, despite its potential to support the alleviation of labour shortages and enhance the labour market integration of migrant workers.

Furthermore, **social protection remains a cornerstone of a just transition**. The ILO [Social Security \(Minimum Standards\) Convention, 1952 \(No 102\)](#), the ILO [Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 \(No 202\)](#) and the [Resolution concerning the second recurrent discussion on social protection \(social security \(2021\)\)](#) call for universal and adequate coverage that supports individuals throughout the life cycle and during transitions, including for self-employed workers. At EU level, the [Council Recommendation on access to Social Protection for all workers and the self-employed \(2019\)](#), and the [Council Recommendation on ensuring fair a fair transition towards climate neutrality \(2022\)](#), along with funding tools such as the [Just Transition Mechanism](#), the [Social Climate Fund](#), provide important policy foundations. **Nonetheless, the sustainability and adequacy of social protection systems, particularly pension adequacy remain a concern in the EU especially for older persons, women, and other vulnerable groups** (ILO WSPR, 2024).

It is **crucial that the EU's fiscal and economic coordination frameworks continue to allow Member States the necessary space to maintain and expand national social protection systems, including floors**, in line with international commitments, especially in light of the green and digital transitions. The **integration of the EPSR into the European Semester and the recent introduction of the Social Convergence Framework to monitor progress towards EU social objectives are important developments in this respect as is the forthcoming EU anti-poverty strategy to reduce the number of persons in the EU at risk of poverty and social exclusion**.

Moreover, the EU's working age population is reduced through the demographic transition and **labour shortages severely affect key sectors** such as healthcare, construction, IT, tourism, hospitality, and agriculture. Addressing the labour market impacts of the demographic change requires an evidence-based and negotiated policy mix that facilitates activation and retention on the labour market of workers; investments in productivity linked to better working conditions and job quality; labour mobility and migration. While employment rates remain high in the EU¹⁷, **significant gaps persist in the labour market participation of women, young people, persons with disabilities, minorities, older workers, and refugees**. At the same time, **efforts to improve job quality complement investments in activation and retention of workers and can contribute to increased productivity**. Fair and well-regulated labour migration, as well as mobility within the EU, are amongst those tools that could help address current and future labour and skill shortages¹⁸.

Finally, the ILO recognises **the many challenges faced by workers and enterprises in adapting to the green and digital transitions**. To succeed, these transitions must be supported by a policy and legal framework that **fosters decent work, sustainable enterprise environment, enables innovation, and ensures that all businesses — particularly small and medium-sized enterprises — can compete on a level playing field** shaped by clear and simple rules, respect for rights, and international labour standards.

¹⁷ Eurostat (June 2025) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250613-1>

¹⁸ De Gobbi, M., Kühn, S., Heins, G., Malikova, Z. 2025. Demographic change in Europe and Central Asia: Addressing the issue of a shrinking and ageing labour force, ILO Working Paper 139 (Geneva, ILO). <https://doi.org/10.54394/UTFG0314>

The second EPSR action plan should therefore:

- Support inclusive skills development by promoting equal opportunities for all to reskill and upskill, in line with ILO resolutions on just transition and skills. Facilitate Member States' and social partners' efforts to strengthen skills systems—particularly in sectors affected by the green and digital transitions—through guidance, funding, and mutual learning and encourage facilitation of recognition of third-country nationals qualifications by working with Member States, including by reducing administrative and financial barriers to recognising skills and qualifications of third-country nationals, building on initiatives like the Union of Skills.
- Encourage the strengthening of social protection systems by inviting EU Member States to extend social protection based on a two-dimensional strategy in line with ILO Recommendation No. 202 and Convention No. 102, drawing on EU-level coordination and available funding tools. Foster mutual learning and monitoring of progress through the European Semester and Social Protection Committee.
- Continue EU-level financial support for just transitions and maintain and enhance EU financial instruments such as the Just Transition Fund, the Social Climate Fund, ESF+, and future allocations in the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework to support Member States in implementing fair and inclusive transitions and international cooperation with most vulnerable countries.
- Facilitate inclusive labour market participation by encouraging Member States to design and implement labour market policies that encourage the participation of underrepresented groups—such as women, persons with disabilities, older workers, youth and refugees— and promote the use of individual and timely activation measures, early intervention, and integrated services that link social protection, training, and employment while ensuring decent working conditions and effective enforcement of labour law. Facilitate knowledge-sharing among Member States on good practices.
- Promote fair recruitment and well-regulated labour migration and mobility by supporting Member States in developing policies for fair recruitment, recognition of qualifications, and the portability of social protection rights.
- Ensure enabling legal and policy frameworks as well as access to financial and technical support to enterprises, especially SMEs to increase their capacity to innovate and to participate in global markets, while strengthening decent work and social justice.

3. Reinforce social dialogue in the EU and its member states

Social dialogue is an essential tool for developing forward-looking sustainable labour, economic and social policies and to manage inclusive transitions. The ILO has welcomed the European Pact for Social Dialogue which is an essential tool to further social dialogue in the EU.

Social dialogue does not occur in a vacuum. Certain basic conditions must be met if it is to lead to effective and fair outcomes for all. In line with international labour standards, governments must ensure an enabling environment for social dialogue. In particular, **collective bargaining has proven critical to reducing inequality and ensuring the extension of labour protection to a broad cross-section of the labour market, including vulnerable groups and those traditionally less represented by the social partners.**

It has also proven effective in designing adaptable and well-targeted solutions, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond¹⁹.

In this context, **it is essential to preserve the distinct role of the social partners in labour market governance**. Consultation on policies related to labour market governance should remain firmly anchored in the framework of social dialogue, involving employers' and workers' organisations as the key representative bodies. While civil society plays an important role in other areas of policymaking, the space for structured dialogue on labour market matters should be reserved for social partners, as the legitimate representatives from the world of work.

Equally important is the need **to support and strengthen the technical and organisational capacity of the social partners to represent their members effectively and contribute meaningfully to policy development**. This will be vital to the successful implementation of the principles of the EPSR.

The second EPSR action plan should therefore:

- Strengthen the implementation of the Pact for Social Dialogue by promoting robust tripartite and bipartite social dialogue mechanisms at national, cross-border, and EU levels.
- Call on Member States to ensure that legal frameworks and administrative practices fully uphold the principles of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, in line with international labour standards and findings of the ILO supervisory bodies.
- Provide targeted support to strengthen the technical and organizational capacities of social partners to engage effectively in policymaking and improve service delivery to their members, e.g. through access to training, resources, and capacity building.

4. Monitoring the commitments in the second EPSR Action Plan

Social dialogue is an essential tool for developing forward-looking sustainable labour, economic and social policies and to manage inclusive transitions. The ILO has welcomed the European Pact for Social Dialogue which is an essential tool to further social dialogue in the EU.

As with the current EPSR Action Plan, the **second Action Plan should include a robust mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the commitments** undertaken by the European Commission and the recommendations that the EPSR Action plan addresses to Member States. **Social partners must be meaningfully involved in this process:** EU-level social partners in the monitoring of EU-level commitments, and national social partners in the follow-up to national measures.

The **ILO stands ready to support both the European Commission and EU Member States**— which as ILO Member States can benefit from ILO technical assistance—where relevant and upon request. Recent examples of such cooperation include support to Portugal (gender equality), Greece (labour dispute prevention and resolution, undeclared work, actuarial support), Cyprus (actuarial review), Italy (labour exploitation), Lithuania (pension reform), and Romania (social dialogue law).

¹⁹ ILO, 2022 [Social Dialogue Report. Collective Bargaining for an inclusive, sustainable and resilient recovery](#)

The second EPSR action plan should therefore:

- Ensure structured consultation with EU-level social partners in the implementation and monitoring of the Action Plan.
- Encourage Member States to involve national social partners in the design, implementation and evaluation of national commitments.
- Where appropriate, draw on ILO expertise to support the implementation of relevant actions and reforms at both EU and national levels.

5. Maintain and expand the external dimension of the EPSR

The **EU has long affirmed its commitment to global leadership in the promotion of human rights, including international labour standards, multilateralism, and sustainable development.** This commitment is reflected in its strong support— both political and financial — for the United Nations system, including the ILO. The EU and its Member States currently provide a significant share of funding to multilateral institutions, underscoring the importance they attach to the multilateral system and a rules-based international order.

In [its first EPSR Action Plan](#) the EC noted that the *“Pillar is a guiding tool for our bilateral relations with external partners, including the neighbourhood and enlargement partners, defining the high level of social standards for which the EU stands”* and included a commitment of the European Commission to *“works towards the creation of a level playing field worldwide, where competitive advantages are not to the detriment of the most vulnerable”*.

Shortly after the publication of the first EPSR Action Plan the EC adopted its strategy to Promote Decent Work Worldwide and which sets out a comprehensive approach to advancing international labour standards and promoting decent work at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels and includes specific references to encourage implementation of the EPSR in the candidate countries of the Western Balkans. The **commitments cited above, and the priorities included in the Communication on promoting decent work worldwide²⁰** remain vitally important in today's world and should be maintained in the second EPSR Action Plan.

²⁰ EU Communication (2022) [Promoting Decent Work World Wide for a global just transition and a sustainable recovery](#)

The second EPSR action plan should therefore:

- Include an external dimension that reflects a clear commitment to promoting human rights, including international labour standards, decent work, and social inclusion worldwide, in line with the EC's 2022 Communication on Promoting Decent Work Worldwide and extend to global policy fora, including the upcoming second World Summit for Sustainable Development.
- As in the first Action Plan, continue to support the implementation of the EPSR in the Western Balkan countries by ensuring their participation in relevant actions, platforms, working groups and meetings. The second Action Plan should also explore ways to expand the reach of the EPSR to other regions, including through the Global Gateway initiative, and ensure that sufficient resources are allocated under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to support these efforts.
- Where relevant and appropriate continue to draw on ILO expertise to implement actions committed under the second EPSR Action Plan.

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