



**European Committee  
of the Regions**

**SEDEC-VII/004**

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## **OPINION**

### **A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions**

#### THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- underlines the importance of a strong European social agenda, in which competitiveness and social justice complement each other. There is a close link between the social agenda, the Green Deal, and the digital agenda, given that the green and digital transitions must be based on social justice, equality and environmental sustainability;
- stresses that the COVID-19 pandemic must not be used as a pretext for postponing or withdrawing the proposals to improve social justice referred to in the European Commission's communication;
- points out that public services provided by local and regional authorities have played a key role during the pandemic. A fair transition means recognising the key role of the local and regional level in delivering high-quality public services. The provision of such services by local and regional authorities must not be restricted by rules under public procurement or state aid law;
- observes that labour market changes mean there are an increasing number of people at risk of losing their jobs due to outdated skills or robotics. Given the importance of further training and re-training of people of working age in terms of employability as well as overall workforce competitiveness, and considering the financial implications of such training, the Committee of the Regions would welcome a relevant agreement by the European social partners;
- points to the urgent need to safeguard the right to education and training of all learners by strengthening the crisis resilience of education and training systems, including through the digitalisation of education and appropriate teacher training;
- notes that ever-growing digitalisation of work patterns requires an update of European rules governing working conditions and working time, including provisions to establish the right to disconnect;
- shares the Commission's view about the importance of continuing to actively combat poverty. Key aspects of this are support for job-seeking, quality and affordable health care, access to education and training, housing, and addressing basic needs. Ensuring access to affordable and quality long-term care is essential to sustain a decent life in old age. Pensioner poverty must be prevented, and the best way of doing this is to ensure adequate pensions, guaranteeing everyone's right to have in old age the resources that ensure living in dignity, while also taking into account the significant gender pension gap.

Rapporteur

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Reference document

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – "A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions"  
COM(2020) 14 final

## **Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – A strong social Europe for just transitions**

### **I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

##### *Introduction*

1. welcomes the proposal for a roadmap on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in order to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and implement the European Green Deal in a way that is socially just;
2. welcomes the European Commission's decision to launch an open consultation on implementation of the Pillar of Social Rights, given the wide variations in social policy across Europe. The situation of cities and regions has also changed significantly with the COVID-19 pandemic;
3. underlines the importance of a strong European social agenda, in which competitiveness and social justice complement each other. There is a close link between the social agenda, the Green Deal, and the digital agenda, given that the green and digital transitions must be based on social justice, equality and environmental sustainability. The CoR considers it important for the Just Transition Fund (JTF) to be in line with the EU's social pillar, which is intended to reduce regional disparities and to tackle structural changes in EU regions. Particular attention should be paid to rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps, and the outermost regions, whose disadvantaged situation has been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic;
4. reiterates its call for better coordination of economic and social policies between European and national government levels in the context of the European semester, and calls for local and regional authority involvement in this coordination to be guaranteed, through shared management based on the subsidiarity principle. Under this principle, strategic planning and implementation tasks must be delegated not just to the Member States but also to local and regional authorities, which are best placed to effectively respond to local needs and challenges;
5. stresses the importance of a clear, coordinated and ambitious roadmap for implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights. The subsidiarity and proportionality principles will determine the level at which the EU and the Member States deploy the proposed policy instruments and legislative measures when it comes to implementation;
6. calls on the European Commission to take account of the relevant recommendations drawn up by the urban partnerships under the EU Urban Agenda, such as those on housing, urban poverty, and jobs and skills in the local economy, and to use participatory working methods to bring about a social Europe too;
7. stresses that the COVID-19 pandemic must not be used as a pretext for postponing or withdrawing the proposals to improve social justice referred to in the European Commission's

communication. On the contrary, the crisis must accelerate and intensify our efforts to achieve structural change for a fairer and greener EU. We need to build more sustainable economic and social systems for the future;

8. notes that in the near future recovery efforts must have a strong social dimension in order to maintain strong social security networks, safeguard workers' jobs and avoid wrongful dismissals. People in temporary and atypical forms of employment, women, immigrants, young people and people with disabilities are the most vulnerable in the world of work. People who have become redundant because of the COVID-19 pandemic may not necessarily be able to return to their former jobs. EU programmes must support the upskilling of those at risk of unemployment, the unemployed and the inactive, especially those for whom it is harder to enter the labour market (people at risk of poverty and social exclusion, families with single mothers and single parents where it is difficult to reconcile work and home life, etc.). All this must be achieved with due respect for equal opportunities and the need to avoid discrimination on grounds of sex, gender, birth, ethnicity, political and religious ideas, age, disability, sexual orientation or identity, illness, language or any other personal or social condition or circumstance;
9. points out that in a context such as the current one, the digital transition has accelerated, which means that many jobs have had to adapt to digitalisation and teleworking. Recommends building on the momentum of recent months to regulate teleworking and recognise the contribution it has made to decarbonisation, thanks to the reduction in travel brought by this mode of work, which does not require being present in the workplace;
10. notes that in the medium and long term, recovery measures need to address the social dimension of the ecological and digital transitions. We need a fair labour market in the carbon-neutral economy of the future, based on decent jobs, strong social protection, and job opportunities where people live;
11. points out that public services provided by local and regional authorities have played a key role during the pandemic. Without the system of public services, the impact on people would have been more dramatic. A fair transition means recognising the key role of the local and regional level in delivering high-quality public services. The provision of such services by local and regional authorities must not be restricted by rules under public procurement or state aid law;
12. notes that the EU is at a turning point where new thinking is possible, and also necessary. It is more important than ever to invest in people's well-being and to count the benefits of the economy of well-being, which emphasises the balance between the three dimensions of sustainable development – social, economic and environmental. Those dimensions reinforce each other and lay the foundations for a socially just, sustainable and climate-friendly society. Local and regional actors are well-placed to implement the well-being economy in their own activities, but there is also a need for EU-level guidance;
13. considers public procurement to be another area for contributing towards fair transitions and seeking new innovative solutions, as procurement procedures can help prevent environmental and social dumping through the inclusion in the contract award criteria of qualitative,

environmental and/or social aspects. However, as such inclusion remains optional, more needs to be done to encourage economic operators involved in public procurement to offer better overall working conditions as well as jobs that integrate people with complex labour market integration needs or people at risk of social exclusion and poverty, and promote their employability;

14. emphasises the need for companies, including those involved in public procurement, to explicitly take human rights into account, both in their own activities and in their subcontracting chains; proposes to this effect that corporate liability provisions based on the UN's principle of human rights due diligence be adopted at EU level;

*Equal opportunities and jobs for all*

15. agrees with the Commission's objective of increasing employment and creating more quality jobs across Europe. A multidisciplinary and proactive approach is needed to remove skills and job imbalances. In the future, demand for skills will increase in the labour market, especially for jobs involving application and development of artificial intelligence (AI), as well as climate change mitigation, adaptation and exploitation. The new EU industrial strategy must support the creation of quality jobs and industrial competitiveness. The strategy must also strengthen Europe's resilience, for example by increasing the production of key healthcare appliances and protective equipment in the EU. Now that the Europe 2020 strategy is coming to a close, a new EU long-term strategy for growth and employment, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, is needed in order to tie together the various objectives for inclusive growth, employment, reducing poverty and industrial competitiveness;
16. observes that particular employment sectors were disproportionately affected by an exposure to the risks of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the first place the health care sector and services. Stresses the importance of properly identifying coronavirus-related occupational risks across sectors of activity and underlines that all workers exposed to such risks not only deserve strong societal appreciation, but also need above all safe working conditions;
17. points out that the virulence of the pandemic has revealed the shortcomings of the health systems in a large proportion of the countries of the European Union, and that it is therefore necessary to strengthen European healthcare by encouraging and promoting science studies in all sectors, in particular those concerning assistance, care and research;
18. points out that demographic change in Europe will lead to labour shortages in many Member States and regions. It is therefore important to safeguard cross-border labour mobility and workers' rights. The problem of skills shortages, especially for small local and regional rural communities, should be rectified through education and new technologies, and by increasing teleworking. Long-term action by the EU is also needed for rural areas;
19. observes that labour market changes mean there are an increasing number of people at risk of losing their jobs due to outdated skills or robotics. Up-to-date skills and access to lifelong learning are more important than ever. A holistic view must be taken of skills updating over a career by people in different life situations and different employment relationships, and with

different educational needs. Given the importance of further training and re-training of people of working age in terms of employability as well as overall workforce competitiveness, and considering the financial implications of such training, the Committee of the Regions would welcome a relevant agreement by the European social partners. Such an agreement could examine how to make it easier for people in employment to access training within the framework of the implementation of the right to quality training and lifelong learning in order to manage successfully transitions in the labour market, as enshrined in the European Pillar;

20. supports a Youth Guarantee that is remodelled to combat youth unemployment more effectively, by making it permanent and extending the age limit to 30. The guarantee should cover vulnerable groups (such as NEETs, unaccompanied migrant youth and young people raised in difficult circumstances), and there should be a particular focus on measures at the transition from education to work. Funding for the guarantee should be increased under the ESF+, and Member States with youth unemployment above the EU average should allocate at least 15% of the ESF+ resources under shared management to support young people. Young people should be taught skills relevant to the green and digital transitions in particular. National implementation of the Youth Guarantee should be monitored in the framework of the European semester to ensure that it is accessible to all young people in all the Member States;
21. believes that high quality, inclusive and mutually recognised education, as well as citizenship education, strengthen European identity and facilitate moving, working and residing freely within the EU, which is a cornerstone of European citizenship. Raising education and skills levels can reduce inequalities. Action is therefore needed to improve equality in education so that educational pathways are not determined by family background, ethnicity, disability or gender;
22. points to the urgent need to safeguard the right to education and training of all learners by strengthening the crisis resilience of education and training systems, including through the digitalisation of education and appropriate teacher training. Equipment and connectivity for distance learning and e-learning should be considered part of a just transition, and equal access thereto should be ensured with the aim of eradicating the existing digital divide and its complexity and substantial impact on social rights, as lack of access to new technologies and the information society place people at even more of a disadvantage and create new forms of social exclusion;
23. notes that education will have to be of sufficient quality and duration to guarantee employment in the future. This will call for an increase in resources for, and intensive systematic work on, education in pre-school establishments and pre-primary, primary and basic secondary schools in order to ensure that everybody can acquire adequate basic skills and go on to upper secondary education. People without upper secondary education are very difficult to employ and at high risk of marginalisation. Those needing special support and people with disabilities should have the same opportunities to acquire adequate basic skills and at least an upper secondary education; in order to move towards an inclusive society, people with learning disabilities should be able to acquire soft skills so that they can engage successfully in society and have a higher quality of life;

24. welcomes the updating of the Skills Agenda for Europe and development of vocational education and training to meet the skills requirements of new professions, in particular those relevant to the green and digital transitions and AI. In addition to occupation-specific skills, employers increasingly need "transversal" or "soft" skills. An individual learning plan must be developed for each student, and they must be given access to quality work placements and support for career planning and performance management. Calls on the Skills Agenda to address concerns regarding the potential loss of jobs that will take place due to the increased robotisation of the labour market, as well as training and employment opportunities for vulnerable groups and groups which are harder to integrate into the labour market, while respecting the principles of equal opportunities and non-discrimination;
25. recommends that knowledge, skills and competences acquired in employment, as well as those acquired through non-formal education and volunteering, including knowledge and skills acquired abroad, should be identified and recognised at EU level. Skills acquired in the workplace and elsewhere can be shown in a Europass portfolio or digital badges (Open Badge), for example;
26. is in favour of speeding up the creation of a European Education Area in order to guarantee high-quality education for all and access to the labour market across the European single market. The EU should increase cooperation between education systems and different curricula and further strengthen cooperation within the Bologna Process. Since it is crucial to successful implementation of the Green Deal, a greening of Erasmus+ will also be needed in the post-pandemic period;
27. believes that the Digital Education Action Plan should focus on strengthening critical thinking and media literacy among adults as well as children and young people, so that they can fend off the deluge of fake news and understand the importance of algorithms and machine-based decision-making in everyday life. Uniform quality criteria should be established for distance learning. Educational platforms commissioned by local authorities for their own needs should be routinely produced under a software licence that allows the commissioning body to develop and distribute the product in accordance with their own needs. This will encourage European digital education ecosystems to develop properly, and the fees paid under the projects will go mainly to regional and local actors and not to operators outside the EU;
28. considers it important to improve Europe's competitiveness by promoting a diversity of business models, and therefore supports the Commission's proposed Action Plan for the Social Economy, whose purpose should be to build confidence after the crisis by involving the public, increase social investment and innovation, and create jobs for people who are more difficult to employ. The European Commission, the Member States, and local and regional authorities should mainstream the social economy dimension in key policies, programmes and practices so that social enterprises are eligible for all major Union funding programmes and have better access to public calls for tender. A sense of local ownership will make social enterprises less inclined to relocate their business operations, since they will also have other local environmental or civic objectives;

29. considers it important to mainstream the promotion of equality between women and men in all EU policies in order to achieve fair transitions, with particular focus on the inclusion of women in situations of vulnerability (victims of gender-based violence, families with single mothers, etc.). Men and women have also been affected differently by the coronavirus crisis, and this needs to be taken into account in post-crisis action.

*Fair working conditions*

30. agrees with the Commission view that fair working conditions require robust social dialogue in which workers and employers can jointly find solutions that best meet their needs. Inclusion of workers is important in maintaining working conditions, and the social partners must therefore be involved in all major EU initiatives, including the European Green Deal. There is a need for dialogue in the workplace about how to reduce the carbon footprint through changes in everyday working and operating practices;
31. follows closely advances in the Commission's European minimum wage initiative to promote fair wages and improve minimum wages in low-wage EU countries. Underlines at the same time that any European initiative on minimum wage must not be one-size-fits-all, while wage-setting through collective agreements must be safeguarded in those countries where such a system exists, and the autonomy of the social partners must be respected. Well-functioning collective bargaining and comprehensive collective agreements are the primary method of achieving fair wages and setting other working conditions, as workers and employers know their sector and region best;
32. awaits the forthcoming Commission proposal on pay transparency measures, which will be an important means of closing the gender pay gap. Equal pay should be promoted through developing legislation and collective agreements, as well as through concrete measures in the workplace. On average, women in the EU earn 16% less than men, which is reflected in an even greater difference in women's pensions, and the European Commission's gender equality strategy is therefore important;
33. advocates updating the health and safety at work strategy and some directives in respect of issues such as psychosocial stress and ergonomic risks. Well-being at work and meaningful work for employees are also competitive assets in the public sector in terms of securing staff and managing employers' reputation, and they are factors that allow longer working lives. Particular attention needs to be paid to the prevention of work-related fatal accidents, occupational diseases (including work-related cancer), musculoskeletal disorders, work-induced stress and any kind of harassment because of gender, race, worldview, disabilities or sexual orientation, as well as adequate resources for monitoring. Other matters for consideration are prevention of the health risks posed by cross-border pandemics, as well as new technologies and working patterns. The CoR calls for measures to promote occupational safety, also with respect to cross-border work and new types of jobs and equality between women and men. The impact of climate change on working conditions and on measures to protect workers needs to be taken into account;



34. notes that new working patterns, such as constant connectivity, teleworking, mobile work, and algorithm-based recruitment and management can increase productivity and flexibility in the workforce, but that joint solutions and agreements between workers and employers on occupational safety are needed here to improve well-being at work and prevent new types of stress triggers. Ever-growing digitalisation of work patterns requires an update of European rules governing working conditions and working time, including provisions to establish the right to disconnect. It also requires positive measures to help groups that are particularly vulnerable to the digital divide (immigrants, people in situations of poverty and social exclusion, ethnic minorities, also addressing the digital divide caused by gender, generational and geographical factors). Alongside technology-driven product development, there should be a focus on developing people-centred methods, services and products that are designed with input from the end-users of systems in the workplace. Principles for the ethical use of AI in the workplace must be agreed and retraining organised in workplaces where activities are transformed or taken over by AI. To this effect, the Committee welcomes the shared commitment of major European cross-sectoral social partners – BusinessEurope, SMEunited, CEEP and the ETUC – to optimise the benefits and deal with the challenges of digitalisation in the world of work, through an Autonomous Framework Agreement on Digitalisation<sup>1</sup>;
35. reiterates that "a comprehensive framework is needed to ensure the social protection and social rights of all workers (from health and safety to life-long learning), in order to create a level playing-field for the platform economy and the 'traditional' off-line economy"<sup>2</sup>. The CoR calls for measures to promote social dialogue, including on cross-border aspects of platform work;
36. believes that responsibility for reconciling work and family life should remain with the social partners. Work-life balance measures, such as family leave and childcare schemes for families with single mothers or single parents, can help to increase the employment rate of women as well as the birth rate, and to raise the level of safety, health and well-being, also giving women equal opportunities with regard to labour market access;

#### *Social protection and inclusion*

37. notes the importance of the new SURE instrument, which provides temporary support to Member States to reduce unemployment risks in emergencies. Experience with SURE from the national to the local level must be drawn on when the European Commission develops its proposal for a European Unemployment Benefits Reinsurance Scheme to help reduce the impact of unemployment on Member States' public finances. Local and regional authorities should play a key role in implementing that initiative;
38. very much welcomes the focus on promoting children's welfare and supporting children into adulthood. The Child Guarantee should ensure children's access to basic services, healthcare, early years education and school until they reach adulthood, and provide them with decent housing and nutrition. It is particularly important that the Child Guarantee protect the rights of

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.busseurope.eu/sites/buseur/files/media/reports\\_and\\_studies/2020-06-22\\_agreement\\_on\\_digitalisation\\_-\\_with\\_signatures.pdf](https://www.busseurope.eu/sites/buseur/files/media/reports_and_studies/2020-06-22_agreement_on_digitalisation_-_with_signatures.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> CoR Opinion on "Platform work – local and regional regulatory challenges" (COR-2019-02655).

the most vulnerable children. The proposal to use at least 5% of total ESF+ expenditure to help children out of poverty is especially commendable. Safeguarding the rights of the child and investing in children is not only a moral obligation, but also the most critical investment in a sustainable future;

39. is convinced the European Union has the capacity to positively affect working and environmental conditions in third countries, first and foremost by means of concluding ambitious trade agreements on these aspects. In that context, supports the idea of tasking the new Chief Trade Enforcement Officer (CTEO) to enforce labour and environmental standards in trade agreements. The CTEO should therefore consult regularly with trade unions and employers on violations of labour rights;
40. shares the Commission's view about the importance of continuing to actively combat poverty. Key aspects of this are support for job-seeking, quality and affordable health care, access to education and training, housing, and addressing basic needs. Indebtedness may also lead to persistent poverty and exclusion. Rules should therefore be tightened around marketing and unfair terms associated with short-term high-risk consumer credit. Good practices in the Member States, e.g. on social lending, should also be implemented. Prevention of in-work poverty is a particular issue which can be addressed through adequate wages and other labour standards, and also by controlling cost of living increases, above all of the cost of housing, in cities and growth centres. National income schemes and related support services for inactive people provide the final resource for ensuring decent living conditions. The Commission also importantly highlights the new challenges relating to distribution of income posed by the transition to a carbon-neutral economy. The CoR agrees with looking at the causes of poverty and policies to address it, and encourages effective measures and a strategy to significantly reduce poverty;
41. recognises that ageing challenges the sustainability of systems, but points out that it also opens up opportunities for new economic activities. Older people can make a significant contribution to economic growth as independent and active consumers of services and as members of society. In the context of extending people's working lives, it is important to make use of older workers' knowledge and also to enhance their professional skills. Healthy ageing must be supported by actions to promote health, prevent disease and fight loneliness; well-being at work, general health, and resilience at work must also be improved to ensure that longer lifespans also lead to longer working lives. Ensuring access to affordable and quality long-term care is essential to sustain a decent life in old age. To delay the need for long-term care and shorten its duration, older people's functional capacity must be improved and preventive services, as well as active ageing measures, made available. Pensioner poverty must be prevented, and the best way of doing this is to ensure adequate pensions, guaranteeing everyone's right to have in old age the resources that ensure living in dignity, while also taking into account the significant gender pension gap. The Commission's report on the impact of demographic change, as well as the Green Paper on ageing, will be welcome here;
42. stresses the importance of access to affordable healthcare. Investing in preventive measures and timely healthcare can contain healthcare spending. The development of digital services, as well as new and integrated health and social service models, will also allow cost-effective and

patient/customer-centred processes. One area where social and health services come together is mental health, where providing a service as early as possible generally prevents problems from worsening and costs from increasing. The Commission's proposal for a European cancer plan is welcome. It should also be noted that antimicrobial drug resistance (AMR) is a major cross-border health threat, and that the EU must therefore continue taking action to reduce antibiotic resistance in the Member States;

43. emphasises that biodiversity and the environment should be supported and protected, as they have a particular impact on local development in areas whose economies are more dependent on agricultural activities and the value and resources of the biocultural environment and biodiversity. This is very important from a social point of view, as it has a direct impact on living standards, employment, migration and the level of education, vocational training and opportunities for young people in these areas;
44. points out that promoting well-being goes hand-in-hand with strengthening the local and regional identity of municipalities, the empowerment of both individuals and communities, and the promotion of active inclusion. For transitions to be truly fair, people should have equal opportunities to participate and influence the decisions that affect them.

Brussels, 14 October 2020

The President  
of the European Committee of the Regions

Apostolos Tzitzikostas

The Secretary-General  
of the European Committee of the Regions

Petr Blížkovský

## II. PROCEDURE

<b>Title</b>	A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions
<b>Reference document</b>	COM(2020) 14 final
<b>Legal basis</b>	Own-initiative opinion
<b>Procedural basis</b>	Rule 41(b)(1)
<b>Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter</b>	
<b>Date of Bureau/President's decision</b>	
<b>Commission responsible</b>	Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC)
<b>Rapporteur</b>	Anne Karjalainen (FI/PES)
<b>Analysis</b>	
<b>Discussed in commission</b>	9 July 2020
<b>Date adopted by commission</b>	9 July 2020
<b>Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)</b>	Majority
<b>Adopted in plenary</b>	14 October 2020
<b>Previous Committee opinions</b>	The European Pillar of Social Rights <sup>3</sup> A New Skills Agenda for Europe <sup>4</sup> The European Pillar of Social Rights and reflection paper on the social dimension of Europe <sup>5</sup> Work-life balance for parents and carers <sup>6</sup> Transparent and predictable working conditions in the European Union <sup>7</sup> Digital education action plan <sup>8</sup> Artificial Intelligence for Europe <sup>9</sup> Platform work – local and regional regulatory challenges <sup>10</sup> Digital Europe for all: delivering smart and inclusive solutions on the ground <sup>11</sup>
<b>Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation</b>	

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<sup>3</sup> CRD 2868/2016.

<sup>4</sup> CRD 4094/2016.

<sup>5</sup> CRD 3141/2017.

<sup>6</sup> CRD 3138/2017.

<sup>7</sup> CRD 1129/2018.

<sup>8</sup> CRD 2710/2018.

<sup>9</sup> CRD 3953/2018.

<sup>10</sup> CRD 2655/2019.

<sup>11</sup> CRD 3332/2019.