Position Paper on the Future of Europe

The European Union is a wealthy region which is motivated by the experience of two world wars to working across national boundaries to create a more inclusive society with respect for diversity and with higher social standards and quality of life for all. This is clearly stated in the values the EU has agreed in its Treaties:

> "*The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.*"

Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union

While the EU can point to some important successes it continues to fall well short of realising these values. There are persistent high levels of inequality and poverty, with many in the EU feeling that their dignity and human rights are not being respected, and that the EU is benefiting those who have the greatest power, influence and wealth over those who do not. This includes the 92 million people, or one in five of the EU population, who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

The causes of poverty are driven through incomes that are not adequate to provide people with a decent living, inadequate access to services such as housing, health, care or education and training and poor-quality jobs. Poverty is deepened for many because of the barriers they face due to their ethnic background, gender, family status, disability, class, migration status etc.

Connected to this is how the EU is addressing ongoing challenges such as migration and climate change and new opportunities including digital innovation.

Covid-19 has exposed and deepened the inequalities which exist in the EU. It has shown us that if we want to achieve the ambition outlined in the agreed EU values, then returning to the pre-pandemic status quo is not an option.

Failure to address these challenges, opportunities and inequalities in an inclusive manner, and to implement agreed positive commitments, builds dissatisfaction with the EU and its aims and creates social divisions rather than solidarity. This is exploited by those seeking to gain power and influence by undermining the rule of law, increasing intolerance, hatred and division and resisting the upward social progress that is inclusive and leaves no-one behind.

The EU is currently undertaking a process called the Conference on the Future of Europe. The Conference is a process to engage EU citizens in debating EU challenges, priorities and to propose changes for its future.

This EAPN Ireland position paper puts forward our priorities for the Future of Europe, outlining a way forward to address its challenges and opportunities so that the EU can live up to its own values.

1. Build back better and put the creation of a more Social Europe at the heart of all EU policy

In the wake of the lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic, which highlighted existing inequalities the EU needs to build back better. This includes:

- **Putting people and the creation of a more Social Europe at the heart of all EU policy** including its recovery plans and the European Semester with no return to austerity.

- **Ensuring economic, employment, environmental policies are balanced** and mutually reinforcing to build a fairer, more inclusive and more sustainable European economy and society. The UN 2030 **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs) provide a framework for this integrated approach.

- **Ensuring that Europe's economy is at the service of people's well-being** and delivering on EU values of human rights and dignity, solidarity, social justice, intergenerational cooperation, equality and of a just green and digital transitions.

- **Putting in place stronger governance, monitoring and reporting to** ensure that member states' policies are consistent with the goal of creating a more Social Europe through upward social convergence.

- **Developing policies to ensure the effective redistribution of wealth**, including through progressive taxation, to reduce inequality and support investment in public services and effective social protection systems.

- **Using a strengthened Social Scoreboard** linked to the European Pillar of Social Rights to **monitor implementation of all policy**.

2. Put social rights at the centre of an integrated plan to combat poverty, social exclusion and inequality and achieve upwards social progress across the EU

The 2017 European Pillar of Social Rights, and its Action Plan agreed in 2021, with the target to lift at least 15 million people out of poverty or social exclusion by 2030, provide the basis for a more integrated strategy to address the structural causes of poverty, social exclusion and inequality. This is based on recognising the multidimensional and interconnected nature of poverty. An integrated strategy includes:

- **Proofing all EU policy, including the climate and digital transitions, to ensure it is consistent with the delivery of the European Pillar of Social Rights**.

- **Introducing a stronger legislation for social rights** to ensure at least a floor of minimum standards are in place across the EU.

- **Ensuring access to an adequate income for all** through:
  - Introducing a **Minimum Income** framework directive for adequate, accessible and enabling welfare supports
  - Ensuring that the proposal for an EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages results in **decent wages** for all workers.

- **Ensuring decent employment** for all through quality standards for all jobs and an end to precarious working conditions.

- **Providing access to affordable high-quality universal public services for all** including health and social care, education and training, childcare, housing, transport, energy, water and sanitation and internet.

- **Ensuring basic needs are met first across the population and no-one is left behind.**

- Ensuring everyone can achieve their right to access **the education and training needed for full social and economic participation** including life-long learning, literacy and numeracy and digital skills.

3. Strengthen the focus on those groups most at risk of poverty and social exclusion

Some groups and communities in society are at higher risk of poverty and social exclusion. In order to move forward in creating a more Social Europe that is fair and inclusive we have to ensure that no-one is left behind. This includes:

- **Migrants and Asylum seekers**
    - Implementing a common migration and asylum policy based on respect for rights and equal treatment.
    - Ensuring a fair redistribution on asylum seekers across the EU.
    - Ensuring effective implementation of the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion supported by adequate funding & well-designed integration initiatives.
    - Achieving better integration into society and workplace and building welcoming, vibrant and cohesive societies that celebrate diversity.

- **People living in areas of social disadvantage:** Giving recognition to and addressing the underlying causes of the issues impacting on those families and individuals living in disadvantaged areas or in precarious tenure experiencing cumulative disadvantage by being separated from satisfying employment, from an adequate income, from social networks and from decision making processes and structures.

- **Roma and Travellers:** Implementing and building on the European Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation.

- **Homelessness and housing exclusion:** Building on the European Platform on Combating Homelessness and committing to end homelessness by 2030. Enabling the greater use of EU Funds to develop social housing.

- **Children in vulnerable situations:** Actively implementing the European Child Guarantee.

- **People with disabilities:** Active implementation of new EU Strategy on the rights of persons with disabilities for the period 2021-2030.

4. Ensure greater protection of human rights and equality

The EU Treaties include respect for human rights, the combating of social exclusion and discrimination and the promotion of equality. These are detailed in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the European Pillar of Social Rights. However, EU law which backs up these commitments is weak. EU Equality Directives focused on the workplace cover the grounds of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, race and ethnic origin, and equality between women and men, while outside the workplace this is limited to race and ethnic origin, and equality between women and men. Many across the EU feel the impact of discrimination, racism and inequality. This includes under grounds not covered by EU or supporting national legislation, particularly because of someone's class or disadvantaged socio-economic background. Failure to protect people and to create a more inclusive society based on equality and respect for diversity leaves fertile ground for greater division, for far-right populism and for anti-EU sentiment. Addressing this includes:

- **Strengthening the enforcement of human rights and equality instruments** to counter discrimination and racism and promote diversity, inclusion and equality.

- **Amending the EU Employment Equality Directive** to include discrimination on the ground of socio-economic disadvantage.

- **Including socio-economic disadvantage as a ground in the proposed 2008 equality Directive** on non-employment areas and completing the passing of this Directive into legislation.

- **Actively implementing the EU's gender equality strategy** and putting equality between men and women at heart of all policy areas.

- **Enhancing family friendly working and affordable and accessible childcare**.

- **Strengthening measures against domestic violence**.

5. Ensure a sustainable future for all

The climate crisis is a global threat and needs immediate and urgent action to ensure a sustainable future for people and planet. Those in poverty are at greatest risk from the effects of climate change and must be protected. Action includes:

- **Introducing a transition to a low carbon economy and society** to achieve the goal of climate neutrality with net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

- **Ensuring that the transition to a low carbon economy is just and inclusive** and measures are poverty proofed.

- Introducing measures to **prevent the causes of energy and fuel poverty.**

- **Ensuring the homes of those on low incomes are adequate insulated and warm**.

6. Strengthen Europe's role in developing a fairer world

As one of the wealthiest and most powerful political blocs in the world the EU has an obligation to ensure it actively supports the creation of a fairer world, with the realisation of human rights and the elimination of poverty. This includes:

- Delivering on global commitments of the UN **2030 Sustainable Development Goals.**

- **Living up to obligations under the UN Convention and Protocol relating to the status of Refugees** to protect the human rights of all asylum seekers and refugees.

7. Promote more inclusive and participative democracy

The most effective decisions are made when those most impacted are involved. This includes those experiencing poverty and social exclusion and their organisations. However, more powerful elites and interests are controlling the democratic process and social dialogue is not resulting in the change needed to bring about fair and inclusive societies with civil society organisations not recognised as equal social partners. Across the EU autonomous community organisations are under-valued, under- resourced and at times actively undermined, threatened and silenced in their attempts to act as independent advocates for those who are the most marginalised and least powerful in society. There is a need to refocus on building more effective democracy and social dialogue that benefits all in society. This includes:

- Making **participation and empowerment** of all people, especially those at risk of poverty and social exclusion, a key goal of all policies.

- **Resourcing and respecting the autonomous advocacy role of civil society organisations** representing those experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

- Recognising **civil society as equal social partners in social dialogue** reflecting their role as guardians of the common good.

- Strengthening **trade union rights.**