Contribution to the Call for Evidence on the EU Civil Society Strategy

Samaritan International (SAM.I.) is a European network of 22 non-profit non-governmental organisations from 20 European countries (full list of members organisations at the end of the document). We are politically and religiously unaffiliated and cooperate across borders within our network, on a regional, bilateral, and multilateral basis. Our members are active in the areas of social services, first aid and rescue services, disaster prevention and response, civil protection, humanitarian aid, youth work, and volunteer management. Our work is conducted with the support of about three million individual members and almost 150.000 volunteers.

Introduction

Samaritan International welcomes the possibility to give feedback to the European Commission's call for evidence and public consultation for the new Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights. With its member organisations working predominantly in the social services sector, Samaritan International considers itself a key stakeholder in promoting and advancing a stronger social Europe. The call for evidence rightly mentions, that on the EU-level the Commission has delivered its initiatives under the first Action Plan as planned, however that implementation on the ground is often only beginning, and a real impact thus lagging behind. The future monitoring and evaluation efforts should focus on the impact on the ground and include indicators beyond the Pillar's three main targets, which are evaluated through the monitoring process of the European Semester.

The implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights will be a key component for the preparedness of the social services sector. Already under "normal" circumstances, the sector is facing many conventional threats, such as underfinancing, demographic change and labour shortage, which will only be exacerbated in times of crises and shifting policy priorities. Preparedness efforts need to focus on its ability to continue functioning, to protect vulnerable groups and to safeguard social cohesion under any circumstance.

The main activities of Samaritan International's member organisations comprise various social services and civil protection activities, all supported by a significant number of structurally engaged and qualified volunteers. In that capacity, SAM.I. is raising the following points for consideration:

- **The ESF+ is a crucial funding source for CSOs in the social sector and must be safeguarded in the next MFF rather than merged into National and Regional Partnership Plans;**
- **A strong social Europe and social cohesion must be recognised as a precondition for preparedness and resilience and thus strongly safeguarded against competing policy priorities;**
- **Skills need to be defined in a broader way to comprise civic and social skills beyond labour market relevance;**
- **The root causes of the persisting labour shortage in the social service sector need to be addressed as a priority by the new Action Plan;**
- **Swift implementation of the Council Recommendations on Long-Term Care and additional measures are needed to make accessible, affordable and high-quality long-term care a reality.**

Safeguard the ESF+ in the next MFF and strengthen the social economy

Since its establishment, the European Social Fund (ESF) has been a cornerstone of EU social investment, effectively addressing territorial disparities, targeting local needs, promoting inclusion, and supporting social innovation and reforms in partnership with local stakeholders, social partners, civil society and the social economy. The ESF has driven advancement in employment, training and social support services, creating opportunities for millions of Europe's most excluded individuals.

The European Commission's proposal suggests discontinuing the ESF+ programme as such and instead to earmark 14% of the proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans for social expenditure. Considering the many persisting social challenges, including inequality, poverty and a substantial lack of staff in social services, **the ESF+, including its operating grants for European CSO networks, must be strengthened and reinforced in next MFF** rather than to be weakened and merged. To that end Samaritan International has joined the coalition of CSOs[1] demanding the safeguarding of the ESF+.

With the fast and drastic increase of other policy priorities, namely competitiveness and security, social policy risks to take a backstage and social programmes are prone to funding cuts. However, the Niinistö report[2] highlights the importance of social cohesion for resilience to crises and recommends minimising the disruption of protracted crises on social cohesion, stating that "better protecting and engaging with people with specific vulnerabilities and bringing focus to regions at risk of being left behind should be a core dimension of building societal resilience." It is therefore crucial that the **new Action Plan for the implementation of the EPSR is supported by a strong EU budget.**

Socially responsible public procurement has a lot of potential to advance the principles of the EPSR. The **revision of the Public Procurement Directive** will be an important opportunity to implement and promote more socially responsible public procurement (SRPP). While SRPP is already a possibility under the current directive, which allows public authorities to leverage their purchasing power to promote fairness, inclusion, sustainability, and innovation, the European Parliament's study "The social impact of public procurement "[3] and the Council Recommendations for Social Economy Framework Conditions[4] acknowledge that most tenders are still awarded solely on the basis of price.

More social **public procurement will be one of the tools to strengthen the social economy** and its stakeholders across Europe. In its Social Economy Action Plan, the European Commission notes that public authorities do not fully use the existing possibilities to facilitate the access of social enterprises to public procurement and calls on Member States and other competent public authorities to foster and monitor the uptake of socially responsible public procurement in their territory in cooperation with social economy stakeholders.

---

[1] https://easpd.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Joint_Statement_Keep_What_Works_final.pdf
[2] https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/5bb2881f-9e29-42f2-8b77-8739b19d047c_en?filename=2024_Niinisto-report_Book_VF.pdf
[3] [3] Caimi, V., Sansonetti, S., 2023, *The social impact of public procurement*, publication for the Committee on Employment and Social affairs, Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, European Parliament, Luxembourg
[4] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C_202301344

- ⇒ **Continue the ESF+ as a separate programme, including its operating grants and project support to EU-level networks;**
- ⇒ **Recognise the importance of social policy and social cohesion for societal resilience and preparedness and safeguard the social budget against competing policy objectives;**
- ⇒ **Use the upcoming Public Procurement Revision and existing Social Economy Action Plan to strengthen socially responsible public procurement.**

Principle 1: Education, training and life-long learning for civic and social skills

Samaritan International fully supports principle 1 of the Pillar, which states that „Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market". However, SAM.I. considers that the **definition of skills** and their exclusive link to the labour market need to be revised or expanded.

The Union of Skills should shift away from a paradigm which prioritises exclusively a labour market-oriented approach to skills development towards an approach that includes transversal skills and competences for active citizenship and personal development. The members of Samaritan International work with a significant number of volunteers to enable their service provision. Not only does **volunteering** have a unique potential to bring together different generations, people from different social, economic, religious, ethnic backgrounds and thus plays an important role for inclusion and social cohesion, but it is also a **vehicle to acquire many skills** – not only the skills necessary to perform their task, but more importantly civic and social skills: being a part of a democratic organisation, engaging in active citizenship and donating time to support the community.

In the **social services sector**, volunteers cannot be seen as cheap labour, or staff replacement, but rather have to be considered as a complementing element to the social services staff, necessary to offer the width and/or depth of services.

- ⇒ **Broaden the definition of skills, to include civic and social skills;**
- ⇒ **Qualified volunteers, complementary to the staff, are indispensable to provide the width and depth of social services;**
- ⇒ **Recognise the value of volunteering for skill development.**

Urgently address Labour Shortage to increase preparedness

Labour shortage is not only a persisting threat to the adequate delivery of health and care services, but across the wide spectrum of the social service sector. Initiatives so far, have been insufficient to mitigate the problem and not effective in addressing root causes.

Samaritan International calls for a **prioritisation of addressing labour shortage** in the new Action Plan to implement the EPSR, which will be a key component of achieving preparedness of the social service

sector. The European Commission and the Member States should **dedicate resources to improve working conditions in the sector** and to attract more people to social service professions. Sustainable solutions, focusing first on the present talent and unutilised workforce should be at the heart of these efforts, in order to avoid brain drain in third countries.

Part of these efforts should be a strong support of continuous training, offering attractive career perspectives, raising the profile of social and care service professions, the promotion of high occupational health and safety standard, an inclusive digital transition and the modernisation of infrastructure, and support for community-based service provision.

Not addressing the problem in peaceful times, would have an even higher cost if a crisis hits. The Niinistö report warns about emerging skill gaps during an armed conflict or another pandemic due to mobilisation, conscription or free movement restrictions: "**Better preparedness therefore also means deliberately widening the labour force in critical sectors**, including by reskilling and up-skilling citizens, trained volunteers, and by putting in place mechanisms to ensure the sufficient availability of skilled labour in the most critical sectors." The report underlines the necessity to urgently address the issue of staff shortages, which is especially in the long-term care sector already today a pressing issue.

- ⇒ **Addressing labour shortage needs to be a top priority in the new Action Plan to implement the EPSR;**
- ⇒ **The European Commission and Member States need to dedicate resources to improve working conditions and actively attract people to the social services sector;**
- ⇒ **Concrete initiatives need to be proposed to make the sector more attractive.**

Targets for Long-term Care

Samaritan International welcomed the attention to the long-term care sector resulting in a Commission Communication and Council Recommendations on access to affordable, high-quality long-term care. The **swift implementation of the Council Recommendations** should be encouraged and closely monitored by the European Commission.

Samaritan International considers that **additional measures** will be necessary to improve accessibility to and affordability of, as well as quality standards of long-term care services. The European Commission should use the new Action Plan as an opportunity to **set EU-wide targets and an indicator framework for the long-term care sector**.

Civil society organisations providing long-term care services have **public benefit considerations**, in contrast to profit maximisation, at the heart of their services. Notwithstanding the adherence to high quality standards, such CSOs should be increasingly supported through enabling policies and access to public procurement contracts or funding sources, as such organisations do not just pick and choose profitable sub-services or geographical areas, but **aim at making services universally accessible** and at providing a broad coverage.

In order exchange best practices, and develop innovative solutions to the many challenges, the European Commission should closely engage with and **support European networks**, which bring

together long-term care service providers. The large-scale skills partnership for long-term care is a positive example, but further support is needed beyond the focus on skills.

- ⇒ **The European Commission should set EU-wide targets and an indicator framework for the long-term care sector;**
- ⇒ **CSOs having public benefit considerations at the core of service provision should be strengthened and better supported;**
- ⇒ **European level networks should be supported to enable and promote best-practice exchange and innovative solutions.**

Member organisations of Samaritan International:

- *Alfar Centar (Ac), Montenegro*
- *Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund Deutschland (ASB), Germany*
- *Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund Österreichs (ASBÖ), Austria*
- *Asociace Samaritànú Ceské Republiky (ASCR), Czech Republic*
- *Asociácia Samaritánov Slovenskej Republiky (ASSR), Slovakia*
- *Associazione Nazionale Pubbliche Assistenze (ANPAS), Italy*
- *Secouristes Français-Croix Blanche (CB), France*
- *Community Development Institute (CDI), North Macedonia*
- *Dansk Folkehjælp (DPA), Denmark*
- *Federatia Samaritenilor Romani (FSR), Romania*
- *Inicijativa Za Razvoj I Saradnju (IDC), Serbia*
- *Landesrettungsverein Weisses Kreuz (WK), Italy*
- *Latvijas Samariesu Apvieniba (LSA), Latvia*
- *Lietuvos Samarieciu Bendrija (LSB), Lithuania*
- *Malta Rescue Corps (MRC), Malta*
- *Országos Szamaritánus Társaság Szövetsége (USB), Hungary*
- *Pompiers Humanitaires Français (PHF) (France)*
- *Sakartvelos Samariteta Kavshiri (SSK), Georgia*
- *Samarytanska Federacja Organizacja Pozarzadowych (SFOP), Poland*
- *Spilka Samaritian Ukraini (SSU), Ukraine*
- *Udruga Djece S Teškoćama U Razvoju, Osoba S Invaliditetom I Njihovihobitelji (SRCE), Croatia*
- *Žene Sa Une (ZSU), Bosnia And Herzegovina*