

A families-sensitive approach in European and national measures to tackle energy poverty

SEPTEMBER 2023



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I. Introduction

As European societies recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and cope with the impacts of war in Ukraine, the situation has put center stage the role of families as safety nets while magnifying the shortcomings of our systems which have been ignored for too long. This situation is unacceptable and now is the time to build back better using national and EU policy and legislative tools to achieve greater well-being of children and their families, as well as access to high quality, inclusive and community-based services.

COFACE Families Europe believes the best way to achieve a reconciliation economy and society must include a mix of legislative and non-legislative measures, based on three main pillars: access to **resources** (decent wages, income support), access to **time** (leave systems, flexible work arrangements and employment rights) and access to **services** (early childhood education and care, community-based care, and strong family supports).¹ These three pillars were complemented by extraordinary measures during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to prevent unnecessary suffering and ensure a smooth transition towards life after the pandemic.²

A well-known framework including the concept of sustainable economy is the Doughnut economics model by Kate Raworth.³ The doughnut model is a holistic approach ensuring the economic system works for social and environmental sustainability. In essence, the doughnut approach takes the metaphor of a cookie with a hole in the middle, whereby the ring constitutes a 'safe and just space for humanity' with an economy functioning in balance. This safe zone includes, among others, equality, social protection, education, energy, and health. Outside the safe zone is social shortfall and environmental overshoot.⁴ This approach together with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and European Pillar of Social Rights, helps to frame the work of COFACE in a global context where different world regions are increasingly connected and working together.

Moreover, the European Green Deal, proposed by the European Commission in 2019, sets the goal of transforming the economy and society. To get there, the European Commission pledged to reduce emissions by at least 55% by 2030, create jobs and growth, address energy poverty, reduce external energy dependency, improve health and wellbeing. At the same time, it aims to support vulnerable citizens by tackling inequality and energy poverty and strengthening the competitiveness of European companies.⁵ Hence, the Green Deal serves as a crucial framework for the advocacy work of COFACE when it comes to support families with special emphasis on vulnerable groups in the context of energy poverty.

COFACE is a member of the Right to Energy Coalition.⁶ With the Coalition, COFACE has been advocating for the right to clean affordable energy for all for the past five years by broadening the movement for energy justice and working towards concrete policy demands that ensure the right to energy. For instance,

¹ [Families on the Edge – Building a Comprehensive European Work-life Balance Reality](#) (COFACE, 2017)

² [The changing face of work and family life under COVID-19](#) (COFACE, 2020)

³ [Doughnut economics | Kate Raworth](#)

⁴ [From growth to 'beyond growth': Concepts and challenges | Think Tank | European Parliament \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁵ [Delivering the European Green Deal \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁶ <https://righttoenergy.org/>

through bans on disconnections, the monitoring of different EU legislative files, such as the Energy Performance of Buildings and the Energy Efficiency Directives and the adoption of joint positions on “Upholding the right to clean, affordable energy for all in the EU” and “A Just Energy Transition”. Together the coalition has been building further on our strong, shared narrative on the right to energy to share with our wider networks. This includes a long-term strategy and vision for the coalition that proposes an alternative model for energy distribution and calls for holding governments and polluters accountable.

Energy poverty is also a key concern of the Clean Energy for All Europeans legislative package, designed to facilitate a fair energy transition, in particular in the 10-year integrated national energy and climate plans (NECPs), which must, in cases of a significant number of households in energy poverty, include national objectives, indicators and related measures, including social policy measures, to address energy poverty. In 2023, Member States will report progress on the implementation of their NECPs and prepare the draft updates of their NECPs, which is a key opportunity to strengthen their planning and actions to address energy poverty.⁷

Furthermore, energy poverty and access to essential services was discussed at the event organised by the European Commission on the European Semester in 2023 to exchange views with civil society. The report of the event sets out recommendations for Member States and EU institutions highlighting, inter alia, the importance of targeted measures to better address vulnerable groups to benefit from dedicated support. For instance, energy vouchers should be dedicated to those in need in order to help mitigate inequalities and redistribute income. It also draws attention to the fact that funding to address energy poverty including for renovating buildings and targeting specifically most vulnerable groups is often insufficient. Access to funding should be simplified and better promoted to vulnerable groups who often lack the knowledge or capacity to apply to the programmes they could benefit from.⁸

Recently, COFACE members have reported worrying impacts of energy poverty on families. Given the negative effects of the current energy crisis⁹, they are at increased risk of poverty and social exclusion. This policy brief builds on inputs from COFACE members to highlight the family dimension of energy poverty often overlooked by policy makers. This especially applies to families which may be in more vulnerable situations, such as single parent households, women-headed households, families with disabled family members, as well as larger families and intergenerational households. The brief examines what factors contribute to supporting a more families-sensitive approach to energy policy and programming for the effective implementation of social rights, namely factoring in the impact of energy poverty on children and their rights, on women and on persons with disabilities. In the light of the current energy crisis, this brief also considers what further policy adjustments are needed to address new emerging challenges. For instance, due to the inflation resulting from the economic crisis, the increase of child benefits or subsidies for low-income households to help them afford rising energy costs, through energy vouchers or through affordable basic energy packages.

The COFACE secretariat relied on the expertise and feedback of COFACE Members in Hungary, Lithuania, France, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Germany and Czechia, with continuous exchanges on the state of play

⁷ [Access to essential services: key challenges for the most vulnerable – report - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁸ Exchange of views of the European Commission with civil society organisations on priorities for the European Semester 2023 against the background of the energy crisis, February 2023

⁹ [JRC Publications Repository - Energy poverty and gender in the EU: the missing debate \(europa.eu\)](#)

of energy poverty from a national and EU perspective with the following organisations: Association of German Family organisations, Gezinsbond (BE), UNAF France, Isadora Duncan (ES), KMOP (EL), NAMS Lithuania, NOE (HU) and Women 4 Women (CZ). Additionally, the brief makes use of different reports on energy poverty and access to essential services from the European Commission, the European Social Policy Network, the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, Eurostat, the European Institute for Gender Equality, Eurofound and from civil society organisations like the European Anti-Poverty Network, FEANTSA and BEUC.

This policy brief stresses the challenge of energy poverty focusing on families formulated together with the COFACE members mentioned above. The second part highlights the challenges of different types of families in terms of energy poverty. The third part provides a general overview of EU policies tackling energy poverty, highlighting their social aspects and impacts on families. The fourth part of the brief brings in the national perspective and presents some national measures to help energy poor citizens. For this part, the brief is based on inputs from COFACE members. Finally, the concluding section highlights some COFACE messages and priorities for future EU policy and legislation, providing recommendations in this regard.

II. Facts and figures on energy poor families in the EU

Energy poverty is a complex, multifaceted problem globally and in the EU. It is generally understood as the inability of households to heat or cool their homes or to pay their energy bills on time. A combination of low-income levels, low household energy efficiency and high energy prices are the main causes of energy poverty.¹⁰ It is however important to note that even though energy poverty is now at the centre of political debate, no unified and shared definition of energy poverty was available until recently at EU level. It was left to Member States to develop their own criteria according to their national context. However, recently adopted legislative packages provide useful general principles and insights into the possible causes and consequences of energy poverty. For instance, the recently agreed European Energy Efficiency Directive published in August 2023 includes the definition of energy poverty.¹¹ According to Eurostat, in 2020 about 35 million EU citizens (approximately 8% of the EU population) were unable to keep their homes adequately warm.¹² The increase and volatility in energy prices that started in 2021 became worse with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and related sanctions in February 2022, along with the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, have aggravated an already difficult situation for many Europeans.¹³ Based on the recently published report of the European Commission on access to essential services in the EU, in 2022, the share of people who struggled to keep their homes adequately warm across the EU increased to 9.3%, showing the initial impact of the energy crisis.¹⁴

Thus, energy poverty has become a key issue for Europe, concerning everyone but some people are in more vulnerable situations than others: **single parent households**, estimated to total 7.8 million in the EU in 2020, according to Eurostat, are considered vulnerable to energy poverty when this is linked to income

¹⁰ [JRC Publications Repository - Energy poverty and gender in the EU: the missing debate \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹¹ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/PE-15-2023-INIT/en/pdf>

¹² [8% of EU population unable to keep home adequately warm - Products Eurostat News - Eurostat \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹³ [JRC Publications Repository - Energy poverty and gender in the EU: the missing debate \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹⁴ [Access to essential services: key challenges for the most vulnerable – report - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

poverty. The income of single mothers is influenced by them either not working or, when they are at work, it is often part-time.¹⁵

In October 2022, COFACE organised an expert meeting in Prague on ‘Building Effective Policies to Support Single Parenthood’ to explore the reality of single parents across different EU countries, using a multi-generation lens and to discuss existing challenges and solutions in policy and practice. Many challenges were highlighted during this expert meeting, which are exacerbated by the energy crisis and rising energy prices: inadequate access to childcare, lack of child support enforcement, lack of work-life reconciliation measures, lack of adequate housing for single parents, stigmatisation of single parent families, lack of clear definitions of single parenthood, poorly designed policies for family diversity, the disproportionate number of single mothers, to mention some.¹⁶

Besides, the recent increase in energy prices has a direct impact on the daily struggle of families that include **persons with disabilities** against poverty and social exclusion. In a resolution published last November, the European Disability Forum (EDF), representing approximately 100 million people with disabilities across the European Union, asserted that about 24% of this 100 million is at risk of experiencing energy poverty.¹⁷

People with disabilities are twice as likely to be living in poverty as a non-disabled person¹⁸ which affects them as individuals and their families. They may have a greater demand for energy because of the longer periods of time spent at home, the use of assistive technologies, and their increased needs for cooling and heating due to specific health conditions. They are also at a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion as they face significant barriers to quality education and accessing the labour market.¹⁹ Moreover, according to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), women with disabilities experience increased vulnerability to income poverty because of the challenges faced in finding employment and being able to pay energy bills.²⁰

In addition, both the right to an adequate standard of living as well as access to social protection for persons with disabilities are enshrined in Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).²¹

While lower-income families generally suffer more in case of rising costs for basic services such as energy, energy poverty also increasingly affects the **middle-income families**, according to the research of the German Economic Institute (IW). Citizens from the “lower middle class”, which is defined by having a net household income between 60 and 80 percent of the median income, are now twice as likely to become “energy poor” than they were one year ago, with the share now at over 40 percent, the research says.²² This tendency is underlined by the abovementioned report on access to essential services of the European

¹⁵ [International Women’s Day 2023: gender aspects of energy poverty \(European Parliament, FEMM Committee\)](#)

¹⁶ [COFACE Key Findings on Building Effective Policies to Support Single Parenthood \(2022\)](#)

¹⁷ [In Europe’s energy price crisis those with disabilities must be considered \(theparliamentmagazine.eu\)](#)

¹⁸ [Why are disabled people more vulnerable to rising energy costs and what should be done about it? \(Regen 2022\)](#)

¹⁹ [Tackling Energy Poverty in Households with Disabled People and Supporting Social Integration - Fedarene](#)

²⁰ [International Women’s Day 2023: gender aspects of energy poverty \(European Parliament, FEMM Committee\)](#)

²¹ [In Europe’s energy price crisis those with disabilities must be considered \(theparliamentmagazine.eu\)](#)

²² [Energy poverty increasingly affecting Germany’s middle class – analysis | Clean Energy Wire](#)

Commission (published in June 2023): around half (46%) of the EU population who could not keep their homes adequately warm in 2021 were in the middle-income deciles.²³

Energy poverty has also a distinct impact on **children**, primarily on their physical health. Children are known to spend more time at home than adults so housing conditions are likely to affect them more. Findings point to poor families reducing their expenditure on food in response to cold weather, an association between living in cold houses and hospital visits and poorer respiratory health.²⁴ According to the findings from the recent study of Research Square (based on a study of EU-SILC data and the analysis of policy documents across 28 countries), households with dependent children seem to have a higher tendency to accumulate utility debt, while the percentages of families reporting inability to keep their homes warm appears to be lower.²⁵ The study also shows that there is a higher risk of energy poverty among **large families** (i.e., children in households with three or more siblings) and in **intergenerational households** (three or more adults with dependent children).²⁶

Moreover, as a recent Eurofound study has shown, due to their lower average income, **women** are at a greater risk of energy poverty than men. Women are usually more affected by the negative health effects of energy poverty, as well as normally assume more care work related to members of the family who have chronic disease or are dependents. Moreover, women-headed single parent households were the worst hit by energy poverty and its effects aggravated by their existing situation of vulnerability. For instance, throughout the pandemic, a higher share of women was in arrears on their energy bills, with a surge in Spring 2022, following the spike in the cost of energy after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.²⁷

Existing gender inequalities in the economic, social and decision-making spheres can influence women's likelihood of experiencing energy poverty. For instance, women's lower incomes as well as their disproportionate share of care work and other household duties make them more likely to be "energy poor". Moreover, women's underrepresentation in policy positions can limit the application of a gender lens to decision-making processes also related to energy poverty.²⁸

Furthermore, while both men and women in the same household could be considered energy poor, the gendered division of labour within the household, often assigns women the mental burden for the management of household energy, most notably cooling and heating. More generally, often women represent the main managers and users of energy within the household. Energy poverty thus may create an extra burden on women, who already carry out more unpaid work compared to men, as they need to seek for alternative and cheaper solutions to traditional energy sources.²⁹

These tendencies are proven by the findings of Eurostat as well. According to their data, 17.4% of women are at-risk of poverty and social exclusion (AROPE), against 16% of men. Furthermore, in 2021 the average EU-27 percentage of single parent households who are AROPE is 44%. Given that in 2021 the largest proportion of single parents in the EU-27 was composed of single mothers (83%), the burden of being at-

²³ [Access to essential services: key challenges for the most vulnerable – report - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

²⁴ [Overcoming energy poverty in childhood from a policy perspective1606 \(ResearchSquare, 2022\)](#)

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ [The cost-of-living crisis and energy poverty in the EU: Social impact \(Eurofound 2022\)](#)

²⁸ [JRC Publications Repository - Energy poverty and gender in the EU: the missing debate \(europa.eu\)](#)

²⁹ Ibid.

risk of poverty and social exclusion associated with single parent status falls more heavily on women.³⁰ **Older women** are also more likely to become energy poor due to a higher life expectancy and lower pensions than men.³¹

III. EU Policy and funding instruments to tackle energy poverty

The European Union has taken a number of measures to tackle energy poverty at EU level, ranging from policy and legal frameworks to transformative funding programmes. These include comprehensive legislative frameworks encompassing key initiatives such as the European Pillar of Social Rights by integrating energy into essential services; the Fit for 55 package by setting up legislative initiatives addressing energy poverty such as the Social Climate Fund; the revised energy directives; the REPowerEU aiming to decarbonise the European energy market and decrease energy price and the Clean Energy Package. The European Commission has also formulated recommendations on energy poverty for Member States and set up the Energy Poverty and Vulnerable Consumers Coordination Group to facilitate exchanges on the European and national level. Moreover, it launched the Energy Poverty Advisory Hub to accelerate the just transition on the local level. In terms of social policies, the Council recommendation on establishing the European Child Guarantee also includes measures addressing energy poverty aimed specifically at children and their families. This section provides an overview of these policy measures to tackle energy poverty from multiple angles, ensuring access to affordable, clean energy, while also aiming to address the social and economic dimensions of the problem.

European Commission Recommendation on Energy Poverty

In October 2020, to support EU countries' efforts to tackle energy poverty, the Commission published a **Recommendation on energy poverty**, issued as part of the Renovation wave strategy. The recommendation provides guidance on adequate indicators to measure energy poverty, promotes sharing best practices between EU countries and identifies the potential to access to EU funding programmes that prioritise measures targeting vulnerable groups.³²

The Recommendation was introduced to address the issue of energy poverty in the EU and aimed to provide guidelines to Member States on how to tackle this problem, based on the notion that energy poverty is a situation in which households are unable to access essential energy services, and therefore to ensure adequate heating, cooling, and electricity in one's home. The Recommendation acknowledges that energy poverty is a complex issue, with many factors contributing to its existence, including low-income, high-energy prices, poor quality housing, and energy-inefficient appliances. It outlines several measures that Member States can take to tackle energy poverty, among which improving the energy efficiency of housing stock, promoting the use of renewable energy sources, and providing financial support to low-income households to help them pay their energy bills. Finally, it declares that access to energy services is essential for social inclusion.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ [#EnergyPoverty – Women more likely to be affected than men - Latest EU News - News - European Law Monitor CIC](#)

³² [Recommendation on Energy Poverty \(European Commission, 2020\)](#)

Linked to this Recommendation, at the request of the European Parliament, the European Commission launched in 2021 the **Energy Poverty Advisory Hub (EPAH)**³³, the leading EU initiative aiming to eradicate energy poverty and accelerate the just energy transition in Europe. Building upon the work of the EU Energy Poverty Observatory, launched in 2018, the EPAH offers a space for collaboration and exchange for local and regional authorities to tackle energy poverty in the pursuit of a just and fair energy transition. The Observatory and its national energy poverty indicators are now an integrated part of the EPAH. It provides several resources to guide stakeholders in the implementation of concrete actions to tackle energy poverty, such as publications; the EPAH ATLAS, an online interactive database that allows stakeholders to discover local and international projects and measures addressing energy poverty worldwide; online courses to increase knowledge and build capacity on energy poverty and mitigation actions; and calls for technical assistance to directly assist local governments in their steps to initiate local actions to tackle energy poverty.

In April 2022, the European Commission set up the **Energy Poverty and Vulnerable Consumers Coordination Group** as the main platform for the European Commission and Member States to share information and best practice on the subject of energy poverty, coordinate EU legislation and help to design programmes and policy initiatives in the context of energy affordability, targeted renovation and energy efficiency measures and financing schemes at the national level. To tackle the issue of energy poverty and those affected by it, including vulnerable consumers and financially weak households, the Coordination Group also provides analysis, and reviewing reports from the Energy Poverty Advisory Hub and the Commission; aims to improve the quality and range of data and statistics so that action is based on an informed and up-to-date understanding of the key issues, in cooperation with the Social Protection Committee and Eurostat and encourages information sharing, coordinated action and prevention measures in the event of an emergency within the EU. The group is composed of authorities from all Member States competent for energy matters.³⁴

Clean energy for all Europeans package

As part of the Clean energy for all Europeans package adopted in 2019, a number of energy directives were proposed, as well as key requirements for Member States to establish integrated 10-year **national energy and climate plans (NECPs)** for 2021-30.³⁵ The national plans outline how the EU countries intend to address the 5 dimensions of the energy union including a longer-term view towards 2050: decarbonisation; energy efficiency; energy security; internal energy market; research, innovation and competitiveness. Recital (6) of the 2020 Commission Recommendation on energy poverty sets out that in their NECP, **Member States have to assess the number of households in energy poverty**. In the event that a Member State finds that it has a significant number of households in energy poverty, it shall include in its plan a national objective as well as policies and measures to reduce energy poverty.

In the Commission Notice for Member States for the update of the 2021-2030 national energy and climate plans, the Commission formulated their principles and good practices for updating the NECPs. In terms of fair transition, these measures include, among others, to promote **energy efficiency** improvements,

³³ https://energy-poverty.ec.europa.eu/index_en

³⁴ [EUR-Lex - 4593463 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

³⁵ [National energy and climate plans \(europa.eu\)](#)

provide **tailored information** and advice to all consumers, and especially vulnerable households, to **empower energy consumers** and **job creation** and entrepreneurship in **green activities**.³⁶

Member States had to submit their draft NECPs for the period 2021-2030 to the Commission by 31 December 2018.³⁷ These were analysed by the Commission with an overall assessment and country-specific recommendations published in June 2019. Taking these recommendations into account, Member States were then required to submit their final NECPs by 31 December 2019.³⁸ On 17 September 2020, the Commission published a detailed EU-wide assessment of the final NECPs.³⁹ As a follow-up, and as part of the 2020 Energy Union report, the Commission published individual assessments of each of the national plans for further guidance. Each country must submit a progress report every 2 years and by 30 June 2023, Member States will submit to the Commission draft updated NECPs.⁴⁰

European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan

In 2017 the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission proclaimed the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) at the Gothenburg Summit. The Pillar sets out 20 key principles and rights essential for fair and well-functioning labour markets and social protection systems as well as good welfare systems for the benefit of all Europeans. With the **European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan**, the Commission has set out concrete initiatives to achieve just that. Delivering on the Pillar is a joint effort by EU institutions, national, regional and local authorities, social partners and civil society.⁴¹

Principle 20 of the Pillar declares everyone has the right to access essential services of good quality, including water, sanitation, **energy**, transport, financial services and digital communications. Support for access to such services shall be available for people in more vulnerable situations. Hence, principle 20 sets out the requirement of providing quality essential services for all, emphasising the importance of accessibility, affordability, and availability of such services.⁴²

Reaffirming the right to access essential services is a critical aspect of social inclusion and a vital component of social justice across the EU, especially for disadvantaged groups. The statement that essential services should be available to all confirms the importance that the EU attaches to services which are vital to citizens' daily lives as a precondition for achieving social inclusion.

Moreover, the concept of "essential services" as illustrated in Principle 20 of the EPSR by a non-exhaustive list of services – water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications – is well established in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), proposed by the UN and endorsed by the EU. The concept of essential services

³⁶ [Publications Office \(europa.eu\)](#)

³⁷ [National energy and climate plans \(NECPs\) \(europa.eu\)](#)

³⁸ [EUR-Lex - 52019DC0285 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

³⁹ [EUR-Lex - 52020DC0564 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁴⁰ [Individual assessments \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁴¹ [European Pillar of Social Rights - Building a fairer and more inclusive European Union - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁴² [The European Pillar of Social Rights in 20 principles - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

used herein covers some of the essential services listed in Principle 20 (e.g. water, sanitation and energy) but also other key principles of the EPSR (e.g. access to healthcare, inclusive education and life-long learning).⁴³

The SDGs and their targets seek to guarantee the human rights of all, by promoting an integrated notion of sustainable development aimed at creating synergies between economic, environmental and social policies and objectives. The links between the SDGs and Principle 20 of the EPSR are clear, as at least seven SDGs are related to rights enshrined in this principle: end poverty (SDG1), ensure available and sustainable management of water and sanitation (SDG6), ensure access to affordable energy (SDG7), build resilient infrastructures (SDG9), make cities and human settlements inclusive (SDG11), and strengthen and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development (SDG17).⁴⁴

By paving the way for implementing the EPSR, the Action Plan sets a new EU poverty target: the reduction of the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030 – including at least 5 million children – compared to 2019. All Member States have set national targets to contribute to this ambition of the EU, and 19 Member States also set a complementary target on reducing child poverty. Furthermore, the Commission has launched several comprehensive policy initiatives to address the drivers of poverty – including child poverty – such as the EU Work-life balance directive (2019), a Council Recommendation on Adequate Minimum Income (2023), the Minimum Wage Directive (2022), up- and re-skilling programmes, as well as the Council Recommendation on Early Childhood Education and Care (2022).⁴⁵

European Child Guarantee

As for the impact on children, energy poverty is also mentioned in the Council Recommendation on establishing the European Child Guarantee. The Child Guarantee aims to support children in vulnerable situations in the EU, helping them to access key services for their health and well-being. Recital 24 of the Child Guarantee sets out that children from low-income families, with a migrant background or with a minority ethnic origin are at a higher risk of severe housing deprivation, overcrowding and energy poverty, and are more exposed to homelessness. In terms of children's right to adequate housing it recommends Member States assess and revise national, regional and local housing policies and take action to ensure that the interests of families with children in need are duly taken into account, including addressing energy poverty.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ The European Semester 2023 – exchange of views with civil society: summary report

⁴⁶ [EUR-Lex - 32021H1004 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

European Green Deal

The **European Green Deal** is a set of policy initiatives proposed by the European Commission in December 2019 by President Ursula von der Leyen among her political guidelines. It aims to make Europe climate neutral by 2050 and make the EU's economy sustainable, turning climate and environmental challenges into opportunities and ensuring a **fair and inclusive energy transition**. The declaration of the Green Deal highlights the role of circular economy and the importance of just transition as part of the Just Transition Fund to leave no one behind.⁴⁷ It also aims to improve the well-being and health of citizens and future generations by providing actions concerning climate, energy, transport, agriculture, finance and regional development, industry, research and innovation and environment and oceans.⁴⁸

Renovation Wave

A centrepiece of the Green Deal is the **Renovation Wave**, a major initiative designed to boost the structural renovation of private and public buildings, thereby reducing emissions, boosting recovery and addressing energy poverty. Such structural renovation will help boost EU efforts in climate change mitigation.

To pursue this dual ambition of energy gains and economic growth, in 2020 the Commission published the strategy "A Renovation Wave for Europe – Greening our buildings, creating jobs, improving lives" to boost renovation in the EU. It aims to double annual energy renovation rates in the next 10 years. As well as reducing emissions, these renovations will enhance quality of life for people living in and using the buildings and should create many additional green jobs in the construction sector.⁴⁹

The Renovation Wave has three priorities: **tackling energy poverty and the worst performing buildings**, improving public buildings and social infrastructure, and decarbonising heating and cooling technologies.

It is in the framework of the Renovation Wave that the Commission published the Recommendation on energy poverty to support EU countries' efforts to tackle energy poverty. As stated above, the recommendation provides guidance on adequate indicators to measure energy poverty, promotes sharing best practices between EU countries and identifies the potential to access to EU funding programmes that prioritise measures targeting vulnerable groups. The Recommendation recognises the prevalence of energy poverty, accentuated by the COVID-19. Overall, it assesses that **quality housing and thermal comfort are deemed critical to good health and, overall, a decent life**.⁵⁰

For this reason, it has been considered vital that the Renovation Wave and this Recommendation be jointly adopted in order to mutually strengthen the calls to tackle energy poverty and worst-performing buildings.

⁴⁷ [Just Transition funding sources \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu)

⁴⁸ [A European Green Deal \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu)

⁴⁹ [Renovation wave \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu)

⁵⁰ How to avoid a Renovation Wave – Report on the social impacts of the Renovation Wave (FEANTSA, December 2022)

Lastly, **household energy efficiency/poverty** is one of the focus areas of Eurostat in 2023 alongside labour and housing, intergenerational transmission of disadvantages and housing difficulties. More specifically, key new variables will be tested via EU-SILC adhoc modules such as what heating systems are used by households, their main energy source, renovation measures taken, ability to keep dwelling warm, ability to keep dwelling cool, type of windows, year of construction of the dwelling. Some of these variables may be integrated more structurally in European statistical tools (including the European social scoreboard) which would support improved energy poverty monitoring at EU level and across countries under the Renovation Wave.⁵¹

Fit for 55

Building on the 2020 Commission Recommendation on energy poverty, the Fit for 55 package was proposed by the Commission in 2021 as part of the European Green Deal. It includes specific measures to identify key drivers of energy-poverty risks for consumers, such as too high energy prices, low household income and poor energy-efficient buildings and appliances, taking into account structural solutions to vulnerabilities and underlying inequalities.

The package aims to support the European Union to reduce its net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels and to achieve climate neutrality in 2050. It consists of a set of inter-connected proposals, which all drive towards the same goal of ensuring a fair, competitive and green transition by 2030 and beyond.

The Fit for 55 package also put forward a proposal for the revision of the energy directives included in the Clean energy for all Europeans package.

The **revision of the Energy Efficiency Directive (EED)**, proposed in 2021 by the Commission and adopted in July 2023, puts a stronger focus on alleviating energy poverty and empowering consumers.⁵² The revised EED introduces an obligation for EU countries to implement energy efficiency improvement measures as a priority among vulnerable customers, people affected by energy poverty and, where applicable, people living in social housing, to alleviate energy poverty.⁵³ According to the new rules, Member states will collectively ensure a reduction of final energy consumption of at least 11.7% in 2030, compared with the energy consumption forecasts for 2030 made in 2020.⁵⁴ The recast Energy Efficiency Directive contains a new provision (article 2(52)) that defines energy poverty as 'a household's lack of access to essential energy services, where such services provide basic levels and decent standards of living and health, including adequate heating, hot water, cooling, lighting, and energy to power appliances, in the relevant national context, existing national social policy and other relevant national policies, caused by a combination of factors, including at least non-affordability, insufficient disposable income, high energy expenditure and poor energy efficiency of homes'. The Social Climate Fund will use the definition agreed in the EED recast. This refers to energy as an essential service, and energy poverty as lack of access to it. While energy poverty is mentioned within the Fit for 55 initiatives, only the proposal for a recast Energy Efficiency Directive disaggregates the social categories of citizens experiencing energy poverty.

⁵¹ [Legislation - Income and living conditions - Eurostat \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁵² <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/PE-15-2023-INIT/en/pdf>

⁵³ [Energy efficiency directive \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁵⁴ [Council adopts energy efficiency directive - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](#)

The **Energy Performance of Buildings Directive** to be adopted by the Parliament and the Council - aims to make buildings more energy efficient and decarbonising building stock by 2050. Since buildings are responsible for approximately 40% of the energy consumption and 36% of the CO₂ emission in the EU, the directive is aiming to help address these issues, create economic opportunities in the construction industry and alleviate energy poverty. Its objectives include creating paths towards a low and zero-emission building stock in the EU by 2050 by implementing national roadmaps to decarbonise buildings, allocating more money and support to renovate – by mobilising public and private financing and investment for renovation activities, and strengthening long-term building renovation strategies, combating energy poverty and reduce household energy bills through renovation and improved energy performance of older buildings.⁵⁵

The **Renewable Energy Directive**⁵⁶ - to be adopted by the Parliament and the Council this Autumn - has set an ambitious binding target of 32% for renewable energy sources in the EU's energy mix by 2030, allowing households, communities and business to become clean energy producers, putting the consumer at the centre of the energy transition with a clear right to produce own renewable energy and accelerating the uptake of renewables in the heating/cooling and transport sectors.⁵⁷

Additionally, as part of the Fit for 55 package, the Commission proposed a **Social Climate Fund**⁵⁸ a dedicated funding to Member States to support European citizens most affected or at risk of energy or mobility poverty, to accompany the introduction of the Emissions Trading to road transport and buildings. The Fund aims to promote fairness and solidarity between and within Member States while mitigating the risk of energy and mobility poverty. For this, the Commission proposed €72.2 billion for the period 2025-2032 in the EU budget from the new Emissions Trading System. It will enable Member States to support vulnerable low and middle-income households, transport users, and micro-enterprises affected by the impact of the extension of emission trading to building and transport.⁵⁹

In April 2023, the Social Climate Fund was adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of the EU and entered into force on 5th June 2023.⁶⁰ The text foresees that the Fund will run from 2026 to 2032 and will provide a maximum of 65 billion euros of funding to Member States to use to finance measures and investments to support vulnerable groups impacted by higher carbon pricing. Each Member State will be required to contribute up to 25% of the total estimated costs of their national Social Climate Plan. The Fund's spending rules strike the right balance between financing structural investments and providing temporary direct income support to households in need. The investments will enable vulnerable citizens to renovate their homes, to adopt energy-efficient technologies, and to access renewable energy and sustainable transport modes. This should reduce their dependence on fossil fuels in the medium to long term, while direct income support will mitigate potential adverse effects in the short term. The text includes the requirement for governments to consult sub-national administrations and civil society organisations when developing their Social Climate Plans (SCPs) and the definition of transport poverty.⁶¹

⁵⁵ https://energy.ec.europa.eu/publications/factsheet-energy-performance-buildings-directive_en

⁵⁶ https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/renewable-energy/renewable-energy-directive-targets-and-rules/renewable-energy-directive_en

⁵⁷ [directive_renewable_factsheet_0.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁵⁸ [Social Climate Fund \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁵⁹ eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0550

⁶⁰ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021PC0568>

⁶¹ [Why adopting the Social Climate Fund is the right choice for the EU – EURACTIV.com](#)

REPowerEU

REPowerEU is the European Commission's plan as part of the Green Deal to make Europe independent from Russian fossil fuels well before 2030, in light of Russia's war against Ukraine. REPowerEU aims to achieve this through saving energy, producing clean energy by enhancing the use of renewables as well as faster electrification and replacement of fossil-based heat and fuel in industry, buildings and the transport sector. The clean energy transition will help lower energy prices over time and reduce import dependency and diversify our energy supplies.⁶²

Among the key objectives of REPowerEU will be increasing the resilience, security and sustainability of the Union energy system through the needed decrease of dependence on fossil fuels and diversification of energy supplies at Union level, including by increasing the uptake of renewables, energy efficiency and energy storage capacity.⁶³

In December 2022, a provisional agreement was reached between the Council and the Parliament regarding REPowerEU. In practical terms, Member States will be able to add a new REPowerEU chapter to their national recovery and resilience plans (RRPs) under NextGenerationEU, in order to finance key investments and reforms which will help achieve the REPowerEU objectives.⁶⁴

In the framework of RePowerEU, to combat the excessive gas price spikes, in November 2022, EU energy ministers reached a political agreement on a Council regulation to automatically intervene on the gas markets in case of extreme gas price hikes. The regulation aims to limit episodes of excessive gas prices in the EU that do not reflect world market prices, while ensuring security of energy supply and the stability of financial markets.⁶⁵

IV. Country spotlights: trends and measures

Energy poverty currently affects a significant number of European households and is a complex multi-dimensional challenge for European governance and policy strategy at different levels.⁶⁶ Hence, besides using EU funds and implementing different policy frameworks, Member States are applying various measures to address energy poverty.

As a protection against sudden energy increases, several European countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Romania, and Spain) have introduced **social energy tariffs**, offering reduced energy prices to certain vulnerable households. In this case, a regulator typically sets limits for energy prices paid by low-income groups and households with certain characteristics.⁶⁷

⁶² [REPowerEU: affordable, secure and sustainable energy for Europe \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁶³ [EU recovery plan: Provisional agreement reached on REPowerEU - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ [Council agrees on temporary mechanism to limit excessive gas prices - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁶⁶ [ESPN synthesis report: Access to essential services for people on low incomes in Europe - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁶⁷ [Europe must fight energy poverty more effectively \(epc.eu\)](#)

For instance, Belgium has a social tariff for both electricity and gas to protect citizens against sudden energy increases. In Belgium, the social rate has been granted automatically since July 2009. Until 2020, the right to the social rate depended on the social status of the beneficiaries. Recently, Belgium enlarged its social tariff's target group from households on benefits to include pensioners, single parents, and lower-middle income groups – now covering around 20% of households. As a consequence, rates for electricity and gas under the social tariff have only increased by 7.8% and 9.3% for first quarter of 2022, while they increased by 39% and 301% for households outside the social tariff, according to the Belgian regulator CREG.⁶⁸

To improve the **financial support** received by low-income households in Belgium, the Belgian organisation Gezinsbond advocates for a basic quantity of energy (“basic energy package”) to be provided for energy poor families for a reasonable price. The base quantity should be distinguished in terms of pricing from consumption above it. In this way, the tariff structure includes a form of solidarity whereby the affordability of the basic quantity is compensated via the tariffs above the basic quantity. Families thus have an incentive to use basic goods sparingly, which can reduce health and environmental impacts.⁶⁹

In Spain, a moratorium is available for vulnerable families from March 2020 until 31st December 2023 in the form of social tariffs. It means that if a family is recognised as vulnerable, there is a ban on water, gas and electricity disconnections. The social tariff is also available for pensioners (in cases of minimum pension), large families and all persons / households within an income limit. In Czechia, the eligibility to two social benefits, a child contribution and a so-called “existential minimum” were extended. As of 1st January 2022, more households will be eligible to receive these benefits.

Furthermore, there are measures to **ban disconnections**. In the Spanish region of Catalonia, the precautionary principle makes it mandatory for supply companies of energy and water to ask the social services of the corresponding City Council whether the person who has stopped paying a bill is in a situation of vulnerability before disconnecting them. If that is the case (the household or person who is in a vulnerable situation) supplies must be guaranteed and therefore the company cannot disconnect the family's energy or water supply.

In France, the gas and electricity tariff shield has been introduced to put a **cap on energy bills**. As a result, in 2022, the increased energy prices billed to consumers by energy suppliers cannot go beyond 4 % of total income. In 2023, it may not exceed 15% increase for the consumers. The amount that exceeds this level will be paid by the State to energy suppliers. Czechia also introduced price caps on electricity concerning not only households but also private enterprises and public institutions. In Czechia, electricity and gas providers are being given state support for each household – the highest sum is 3,500, CZK (EUR 143) and those who heat with electricity receive 2.000, - CZK (EUR 82).

In terms of measures concerning **taxation**, the Belgian federal government decided to reduce VAT on electricity and natural gas from 21% to 6% as of March 2022. This reduction in VAT, however, is offset from April 2023 by the introduction of a new excise duty. Moreover, when it comes to the taxation of energy companies, in Spain, energy companies are taxed up to 1.2% of their total income. In addition, VAT is reduced from 21% to 5% in electricity and gas markets, and other energy taxes were reduced close to zero. This income is reinvested in social tariffs and thus reduces consumers' energy bills. The fossil fuel

⁶⁸ [Europe must fight energy poverty more effectively \(epc.eu\)](https://www.epc.eu)

⁶⁹ Basishoeveelheid betaalbare energie (Gezinsbond, 15 september 2022) [Gezinsbond - Energie](#)

sector is also taxed and this amount represents 33% of the extraordinary benefits aimed to improve conditions of vulnerable households to afford their bills and reduce demand for fossil fuels (hence with positive social and environmental impacts).

Moreover, **housing policy** measures are being taken for families to support energy cost savings by encouraging **renovations and energy efficiency** through financial incentives. For instance, in France, the government has introduced energy efficiency programmes that aim to reduce energy consumption in households by promoting the use of energy-efficient appliances and improving the insulation of homes. In Czechia, the government organised a campaign to encourage citizens to apply for “housing contributions”. This benefit helps to cover the costs of rent and energy for households with incomes under a certain level, not only the poorest households. In many countries, housing measures are taken to encourage the use of renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and to lower energy costs, but such measures are sometimes mainly targeting institutions and companies rather than households and families. Similarly, in Greece, the government has implemented measures to reduce energy consumption in public buildings, such as schools and hospitals, but again, these measures are less applicable for families and more for communities. Differences of housing markets across Europe should be considered as well when making these housing measures accessible to families: there is a high home ownership in Eastern European countries like in Hungary, and high rental markets in Western countries such as Austria, Denmark, Germany, Sweden and in other countries markets with higher levels of public housing.

Energy vouchers and checks are applied in a number of countries including Belgium, France, Greece and Spain. Normally, energy vouchers are sent monthly to low-income households and can be deducted from their energy bill (gas, electricity, fuel oil, wood). While such vouchers can reduce energy bills and this is a useful generic measure for all households leading to faster implementation, more targeted measures are needed to address the specific energy-related challenges of families in vulnerable situations.

As for further measures, in Greece **energy auditing** is carried out in households and provides recommendations on how to reduce energy consumption. The Greek government also invests in **public transportation** to reduce the need for private transportation and thus reduce the energy consumption by households. They also provide support for electric vehicles and incentives for the purchase of electric vehicles, which intends to help reduce dependence on fossil fuels and decrease energy costs for households.

V. Conclusions

It is the task of COFACE Families Europe to mainstream the family dimension and to bring the whole-family lens to the wide range of EU policies that affect families. As concerns energy policy and planning at EU and national level, a families-sensitive approach is needed in order to ensure effective policy outcomes. In practice, this means ensuring that the selection criteria for energy-related supports and benefits include resources for the whole family considering for instance the number of people or children to support in the household.

Addressing the needs of different kinds of families, such as single-parent families, families with disabilities, large families, affected by energy poverty requires a comprehensive universal approach to support all families preventively, while adopted additional measures for families in more vulnerable situations as highlighted in this brief.

EU policies and Member States must recognise the unique challenges faced by these families in vulnerable situations and implement effective measures to alleviate their energy poverty. This includes developing tailored support programmes, by promoting energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy sources, investing in housing measures and public transport and targeted subsidies for low-income households. By prioritising the specific needs of these families, civil society is ready to work towards co-creating a more inclusive energy system that leaves no one behind.

Moreover, in order to effectively combat energy poverty, it is crucial for Member States to prioritise the implementation of national measures that are closely linked to the EU frameworks such as the European Green Deal, the Fit for 55 package and REPowerEU. These measures should not only address the immediate needs of families experiencing energy poverty but also prepare for the challenges that may arise during both the summer and winter seasons. The Commission Recommendation on energy poverty provides guidance in this regard, emphasising the importance of boosting indicators and clarifying definitions in statistical tools to enable better assessment and monitoring of energy poverty. Additionally, integrated policy solutions that combine energy and social policies are vital in addressing the multifaceted nature of energy poverty.

Furthermore, the recently adopted Social Climate Fund offers a significant opportunity for Member States to allocate resources towards addressing energy poverty within the broader context of climate action and social welfare. Governments are also required to consult sub-national administrations and civil society organisations when developing their Social Climate Plans (SCPs), ensuring a participatory approach. COFACE and its member organisations stand ready to support take-up of this funding in local communities.

In conclusion, the EU has made significant efforts in addressing energy poverty through various frameworks and initiatives. However, it is crucial to recognise the challenges faced by families to access essential services, especially to energy services. While existing EU policies provide a solid framework, it is crucial that the families dimension be fully integrated into these frameworks, taking into account the specific needs and vulnerabilities of households with children and dependents. Therefore, it is essential for Member States to proactively implement and adapt these measures, ensuring that no European family is left in the cold at home. By prioritising the family perspective and facilitating collaboration between EU institutions and national governments, a comprehensive and inclusive approach can be created to tackling energy poverty, where all families have access to affordable, reliable, and sufficient energy services. This

commitment to tackling energy poverty at the families level will contribute to a more inclusive, sustainable and socially just Europe.

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Co-funded by
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Co-funded by the EaSI strand of the ESF+ programme. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.