



8 key actions to help families & the economy bounce back

Lockdowns, school closure and teleworking have pushed society into a new reality in the family, working and social spheres of life, with clear consequences on work-life balance and mental health.

The European Union, its institutions and Member States need to look at both today and tomorrow, responding to short-term emergencies while starting long-term reflection and planning for post-pandemic life: what should change, how to address the structural problems which have emerged and which need to be addressed collectively. Are we trying to save lives or trying to save the economy? We must do both and avoid the mistakes made a decade ago where both social and health policy were sacrificed in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

This unprecedented global [COVID-19 pandemic](#) requires creative and sustainable solutions. This also goes through consulting civil society organisations (European and national) representing diverse interests in order to understand the needs of the population and be in a good position to respond to those needs. This global common challenge requires placing strong cooperation and partnership between governments and NGOs at the very core of our governance systems.

COFACE Families Europe recommends that EU leaders take the following actions:

1

Urgently assess and meet the diverse needs of families through universally designed measures

2

Rapidly implement EU response measures to COVID-19 ensuring health protection for all without discrimination

3

Reinforce capacity and expand funding opportunities for support services to risk groups

4

Adopt a strong action plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights with ambitious 2030 targets

5

Step up accessible technological innovations to ensure we have fully inclusive digital care services, schooling and workplaces

6

Strengthen European solidarity for a coordinated Exit and Recovery strategy

7

Use the current Economic Governance Review to launch a public debate on rethinking the European economic and monetary system

8

Redirect existing and future EU budget streams towards family support (social and care) to mitigate the impact of COVID-19.

Urgently assess and meet the diverse needs of families through universally designed measures

We ask for a swift and formal assessment of the needs of families so that effective responses can be developed in this transition towards a post-pandemic society. A brief first European mapping of family support services in the COFACE network points to different pressing needs.

Families with members with disabilities have been affected by the pandemic in a number of ways, due to the change and interruptions of the way support is provided in these new circumstances. In France, families of children with disabilities (UNAPEI and partners) asked and obtained to have lighter confinement regulations for persons with disabilities and their family carers as a way to ease pressure, and organisations like UNAF France provide specific advice for family carers. The combination of mental and financial stress, together with uneven sharing of the care between women and men while staying at home (EWL 2020), is creating tensions.

As more countries report infection and lockdown, more domestic violence helplines and shelters across the world are reporting rising calls for help, disproportionately affecting women with disabilities. Family organisations like UNAF Spain are providing advice and promote collaboration between divided families during the confinement, and Women4Women Czech Republic are providing different counselling and advice to help (single) mothers cope with a wide range of challenges from income loss to relationship tensions. As indicated in the UN Women 2020 report on COVID-19, the work of grassroots organisations must be boosted by police and justice services, as well as private sector organisations such as encouraging positive steps like sharing care responsibilities in the home.

Vulnerable families include persons who are unemployed and threatened with homelessness: many need housing solutions, access to food, free reproductive care, professional emotional and psychological support. CSF (France) issued a statement calling for measures to prevent evictions and for full support to families experiencing homelessness to be protected from COVID-19. Large families and one-parent families are suffering additional burden during the confinement due to the nature of their household (e.g. overcrowding and reduced access to goods for large families, as well as insufficient digital tools for all children in one family to continue their schooling adequately; one-parent families cannot leave home without their children for shopping or other needs, and key workers need childcare infrastructure).

For the families unable to telework or parents needed in key sectors to face the COVID-19 crisis like public health, manufacturing, transport, food systems, there is urgent need for basic quality childcare. This is essential both for well-being of the children concerned and to allow working parents help their country deal with the consequences of the pandemic and the lockdown. We have also received reports of parents (especially mothers) forced to leave their jobs in order to care for their children, so that labour market inclusion schemes will be even more essential post-pandemic.

The parents who can telework are confined at home, trying to balance work, parenting, care and schooling, are under increasing pressure with further consequences for the mental health of both children and adults - a petition was launched in Belgium by Gezinsbond and Ligue des Familles pushing for a special COVID-19 parental leave. Some governments like Italy and Luxembourg have already voted measures with extraordinary leaves, care vouchers, flexible work solutions, reflecting a mix of measures based on resources, services and flexible working. Many other social and employment policy responses are emerging, as recently highlighted in an OECD brief on COVID-19.

As for child well-being and education, we have received reports of mental health challenges, as well as unequal access to online schooling for poorer, vulnerable families (e.g. migrant families) who lack equipment - a petition was launched by the Isadora Duncan Foundation in Spain to make free wifi available to all.

Direct help to families is urgently needed through universally designed measures which support all types of families while targeting the most vulnerable, putting ethical considerations, equal treatment and human rights at the core. This should include a mix of resources, flexible work arrangements, and services, with extraordinary measures to prevent unnecessary suffering and ensure a smooth transition towards life after the pandemic.

Rapidly implement EU response measures to COVID-19 ensuring health protection for all without discrimination

The many initiatives of the EU are welcome, and must be only the first step in fostering coordination and common action with the aim of protecting the health and the life of all people living in Europe in the short term and of rethinking the political and economic architecture of the EU for the long term, putting at its heart solidarity, health, security and social cohesion.

Key precautions are to be taken urgently with special attention to the protection of risk groups such as children, migrant and undocumented people, homeless persons, persons with disabilities and older persons, in line with international treaties like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The spread of COVID-19 is being monitored closely by the World Health Organisation, and while figures are stabilising in some EU countries, they are still on the increase in other countries. Comprehensive healthcare for all must be restored fully to avoid further situations where ethical choices are made in saving lives (e.g. who gets access to a ventilator: young, elderly, able-bodied, with disabilities). Such choices are deeply troubling and have no place in our European societies where access to healthcare is a right.

Generally-speaking the health systems are under huge pressure, which is reducing access to regular and preventive health checks, and is compounded for persons with heavy support needs (who need regular health treatments). There are major difficulties in getting access to immediate care, but also long-term care for those who need it. Newly diagnosed patients (e.g. with hearing impairments) are not getting the follow-up support and aids needed (due to the general lockdown in many countries and the closure of specialist shops), which will have consequences on their health in the long term.

We welcome EU efforts to help secure vital equipment, from ventilators to personal protective equipment and help mobilise medical teams for assistance for the most vulnerable, including those in refugee camps. Key health and care workers must be trained to respond to the crisis, be equipped with adequate protective clothing and masks, and receive decent compensations for their tireless work. Financial sustainability of not-for-profit organisations providing care and support to families must be ensured, as they have the same needs as the health sector: payment of salaries to staff, increasing costs to buy protection materials, as well as retraining/re-organising. Finally, it is crucial to also secure production capacity for vaccines and drugs as well as large-scale testing to monitor spread of the virus and increased population immunity.

The full implementation of the EU public health protection measures needs to be accompanied by comprehensive information. Broad information on hygiene measures and binding specifications for the use of protective equipment must be provided in an objective, consistent, and accessible way.

Reinforce capacity and expand funding opportunities for support services to risk groups

The vulnerabilities of families have now been magnified significantly with the global pandemic bringing all inequalities to the fore. Reports from COFACE Families Europe member organisations indicate that family support services are shifting and reinventing themselves to continue delivering care in a contactless society and economy.

Families with key workers, or workers who cannot telework, are under huge pressure during this confinement and need basic support infrastructure. This means providing them with a range of community-based care services (social, health, education, food, transport), to ensure continuity in support/care provision in a contactless reality where social and physical distancing are the norm.

There are new rules and working methods being phased in for care services for persons with disabilities and older people, which are having a huge impact on working carers. [APF France Handicap](#) highlighted challenges in France and formulated clear recommendations. Parents of children with disabilities have had to make sometimes quick decisions about keeping their children with them at home full-time, without any care support or respite services possible, with huge potential consequences for their mental and physical health. They do not necessarily have adequate equipment or devices in their homes to help care for their children or adult family members. [45 Members of European Parliament](#) addressed a letter to the European Commission and European Council presidents demanding that the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative fund support and care services for persons with disabilities.

Organisations like [KMOP](#) (Greece), [Vaestoliitto](#) (Finland) and [Gezinsbond](#) (Belgium) are consolidating and expanding existing online service platforms they have used until now to increase outreach to families with support needs.

Many care and support services have closed (many care workers are scared and not fully equipped with protection), but are gradually phasing in use of phone lines, email or video conferences to offer a wide-range of distance services (mental health, medical, social support, rehabilitation) to families.

Organisations like [Irish CountryWomen's Association](#) (Ireland), [Fundação Liga](#) (Portugal), [Parents Association Step by Step](#) (Croatia), [Single Parents Association](#) (Hungary), [ProParents](#) (Netherlands), [Asociacio Salud y Familia](#) (Spain), [KFO](#) (Austria), [UNAF](#) (France), [FAMS](#) (Spain), [AIAS Monza](#) (Italy), and [Familles de France](#) (France) are tackling isolation by connecting people via online platforms and distance support methods (targeting isolated seniors, families of persons with disabilities, working families with small children/adolescents, families separated between two homes) to support interpersonal relationships, provide care support during the lockdowns, and support the health sector as well.

However, not all support and care can be adequately provided through online services. Parts of services e.g. speech therapy and personal assistance need physical encounters to happen and it is unclear when they will be able to restart, and in what form. Most are working on reorganisation during the pandemic and also thinking of how to address the psychological consequences on service users and staff. COFACE members and other not-for-profit organisations are likely to suffer in the next months with only a real picture of the impact emerging in 2021.

Family support services must be allowed to keep funding already approved (e.g. national funding commitments, European Social Fund, European Regional Development Fund), ensuring financial sustainability while they reorganise themselves and find new ways to stay close to families and communities. Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures to boost investment in social and healthcare services and systems, including protection equipment, accessible technology, and (re-)training.

ACTION 4

Adopt a strong action plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights with ambitious 2030 targets

The global COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of social and care policies as central. This unprecedented health crisis should prompt the European Union to rearrange its priorities and to understand that time and care - and not money - are our most precious goods. The EU is in the process of preparing an action plan to boost implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and we expect this action plan to have clear and ambitious 2030 targets.

The transposition of the [EU Work-life balance directive](#) must proceed swiftly ensuring adequate payment of leaves, regardless of the type of leave (paternity, parental, carers). This is key to ensure a decent income to all types of families, to prevent poverty, and to rebalance the gender uptake of leaves and care responsibilities. The transposition of the directive minimum standards on flexible work arrangements coupled with the global experiment in distance working should be an opportunity for a total rethink about workplace dynamics in close consultation with organisations representing employers, trade unions and family organisations.

Leave provisions must be dissociated from the employment status or type of employment. All workers, including self-employed, workers with atypical or temporary contracts must be entitled to the same rights as employees with standard contracts, to avoid leaving them behind. The [Council Recommendation on Access to Social Protection for workers and the self-employed](#), approved last November 2019, should be implemented and monitored closely through the Pillar action plan. The Recommendation covers social security schemes for unemployment, sickness and healthcare, maternity or paternity, accidents at work and occupational diseases, invalidity and old age.

The Pillar action plan should include a strong proposal for a European Child Guarantee to support children in vulnerable situations, breaking the cycle of disadvantage through a two-generation approach combining support to both children and their family or kinship carers. This should be set within a policy framework based on the 2013 Recommendation Investing in Children and the upcoming EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child to be launched in the first quarter of 2021. Key action areas could include a [guarantee to early childhood education and care](#), and a family support stream ranging from light to heavier forms of support (parental, work-life balance, services, access to energy, technology) at key moments and transitions along the lifecycle.

As social and care services are forced to transform and reinvent themselves, this is an opportunity for coordinated action to trigger a genuine shift from institutional to community-based care, not only closing down large-scale residential institutions but also and especially ensuring the accessibility of all public services and information, availability of quality needs-based support including housing, employment, community-based support services for persons with disabilities and family carers.

Countries around the world are reorganising themselves to shift to peer-to-peer/mutual support and health models, highlighting also the need for long-term planning to tackle the demographic challenges of an ageing population and a shrinking workforce. As the most severe gaps in conventional social safety nets are being exposed through the pandemic, there is an opportunity right now to consolidate the future resiliency in our healthcare and social systems to be fully prepared to tackle future crises.

A strong European Pillar of Social Rights action plan can be a game changer, based on a holistic approach to building universal welfare systems with specific targeted support for families and children in vulnerable situations. This action plan should include specific targets in the fields of poverty, child poverty, family and community-based care, inclusive early childhood education and care, uptake of family leaves by men, financial inclusion, and digital skills.

ACTION 5

Step up accessible technological innovations to ensure we have fully inclusive digital care services, schooling and workplaces

Collective technological solutions are sprouting everywhere in the webosphere. New times call for new solutions, and many are finding these solutions online. This is a great opportunity but which makes the need for inclusive digital citizenship more pressing than ever to avoid negative effects on society. We must become critical and informed digital citizens - our COFACE Digitalisation Principles are a good starting point for developing effective measures.

As many are forced to self-isolate, they take to social media platforms and other technological tools to stay connected to work, family and friends. It would be impossible to mitigate the social and economic impact of COVID19 *without* technology. Distance working and distance education has become mainstream in the context of full confinement measures. Business models are transitioning to meet the new reality of a contactless economy. Data on the social impact of digitalisation on families is much needed and currently being studied under various Horizon2020 research projects, such as through DigiGen researching the impact of digital transformations on children in their different core environments (the family, leisure, school, civic).

Digital exclusion is a reality for many - the digital tools used by many during the lockdown are vital but not accessible to all families. While many students and workers lack access to basic infrastructure to shift to online schooling working (e.g. no technological devices, difficult access to internet), others have many digital tools but with challenges, from over-use of screens to distract children to technology not being accessible to persons with disabilities or lack of knowledge of how use digital tools (e.g. by key social and health workers).

Accessible communication has always been a concern e.g. trying to communicate using Easy-to-Read methods, improving the accessibility of emergency numbers like the 112 number. Organisations like APEMH in Luxembourg are communicating through easy-to-read videos, and encourage official government channels to communicate in an accessible way. However, new good practices to address needs during the lockdown are still not fully accessible (as highlighted by FIAPAS in Spain), and we are seeing new research (TRIO-Teachers readiness online) emerge in the search for good practices on accessibility of digital learning for vulnerable groups in order to provide guidelines to teachers and education staff during the lockdown. While the inclusive education agenda is making some progress in different European countries, technology has seldom been part of the discussion. The same applies to teleworking which is not accessible to all persons with disabilities e.g. video conference software.

The confinement of family members in residential care, as many were called upon to make quick decisions, requires new and accessible communication channels. Furthermore, the confinement of family members in hospitals (e.g. COVID-19 patients within the same city or in other countries) also requires new digital communication methods to connect and be kept informed at all times, not to mention the need to support connection of family members who cannot spend time with their loved ones before passing away.

It is time for bold solutions to implement the lessons learned from this large-scale digital experiment: the EU must ensure that digitalisation and new technological developments serve the general interest of all European families. As dual citizenship in two separate but interconnected worlds (offline and online) becomes a reality post-pandemic, we urgently need basic access to internet for all, to harness technology for socio-digital well-being, to provide access to information but especially for collaboration and problem-solving. The recently published COFACE Digital Families Map highlights different actions, projects, advocacy to support families and children in the digital world.

ACTION 6

Strengthen European solidarity for a coordinated Exit and Recovery strategy

The EU took action, mobilising its key institutions, around four priorities: limiting the spread of the virus, providing medical equipment, promoting research, and tackling socio-economic consequences. We encourage EU leaders to continue in this direction in order to consolidate the EU's Exit and Recovery strategy, with the European Pillar of Social Rights and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals at the centre.

Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, urged countries to put health first, above all other considerations and to continue to implement a containment strategy while accelerating their efforts to control the disease. Nonetheless, in the first month EU Member States responded in very different ways and did not necessarily express trust in the EU, nor solidarity towards their neighbours.

The European Economic and Social Committee highlights the need for unprecedented solidarity between EU Member States to fight a common and existential threat that does not respect borders through shared answers. While the novel idea of "Eurobonds" is gaining neither traction nor consensus, many forms of solidarity are still possible and essential.

The EU has a role to play to contain this pandemic crisis as our social and economic systems are intrinsically connected and, within the limits set by the EU Treaties in health matters, the European added value is clearly achieved by facilitating synchronised responses, simplifying the response to safety issues, and reducing cross-border threats. The European Commission has a key technical role in ensuring that people, services, goods can freely move across borders in order to facilitate this European solidarity to tackle the pandemic.

The Exit and Recovery Strategy, announced for the end of April should include guidelines for a coordinated post-pandemic response, to support the differentiated gradual re-opening of public services and economic sectors across the EU Member States and neighbouring countries. It will be important to take into account the strong interconnectedness of social policy, healthcare, and the economy across EU countries, as well as the complementarity between sectors (e.g. education, health, manufacturing, food systems, employment) to ensure a smooth and coordinated transition towards a post-pandemic European Union.

The rapid global spread of COVID-19 as a result of our interconnectedness must drive home the need for not just European thinking, but also global thinking and solidarity. This was already achieved with the adoption of a common global vision, the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, by more than 150 world leaders. This vision has served as a guide to rethink policy directions and budgets towards achieving social and environmental sustainability, and must be further integrated into post-pandemic solutions issued by the EU.

Along the same lines, the holistic approach of economist Kate Raworth and her "doughnut economics" aims at balancing basic human needs (access to water, food, energy, housing...), with the limitations of our planet (climate change, air pollution, depletion of resources...), putting the economy and the financial sector at the service of society and the planet. This approach is now being used by the city of Amsterdam as the basis "to mend its post-coronavirus economy".

Use the current Economic Governance Review to launch a public debate on rethinking the European economic and monetary system

As governments take centre stage in managing this crisis both short term and long term, they need to show political leadership and learn from the lessons of the 2008 financial crisis. We need creative and collaborative minds to strategically discuss the financial implications of this crisis on society. The ongoing Economic Governance Review can be an important starting point for a global rethink.

COFACE-Families Europe's starting point for its reflections about financial inclusion stems from the triangle of basic family needs: all families require resources, services and time. This includes the access to basic financial services such as insurance products, mortgage credit, a basic bank account and more.

Legislation to promote consumer protection and education will remain key to prevent further negative impacts on family finances post-pandemic, by supporting financial inclusion and tackling over-indebtedness. Credit-worthiness and responsible lending can be strengthened by ensuring that the creditworthiness process helps prevent over-indebtedness and does not lead to discrimination. Toxic financial products should be banned through strong regulation preventing them from emerging in the first place. Preventing discrimination and fostering socialisation of risk in insurance can be achieved by restricting the data that insurers can use to assess risk. Finally, setting up personal insolvency schemes would allow for over-indebted families to have a fresh start.

Many of the measures to address the societal and economic impact of COVID-19 cannot be fully implemented without addressing some key roadblocks stemming from the way the financial and economic system functions.

One of the main roadblocks is the emergence of a plethora of "too big to fail" financial institutions, which lead to a focus by policy makers on prudential regulation (ensuring global financial stability) rather than on consumer and social protection. Thus financial institutions can more or less get away with abusive behaviours, arguing that any regulation would set off a financial crisis which would be detrimental to all. The list of abuses includes: tax avoidance/evasion, money laundering, abusive mortgage loans, abusive fees (especially overdraft fees).

Another roadblock is the dependence on economic growth due to the fact that this financial system is extensively based on debt money with interest. Without growth, the interest on outstanding loans cannot be serviced and results in an ever higher debt which will become unsustainable with the impact of the global lockdown. Many countries are already at risk of recession compounded by unsustainable debt levels, with potentially very harmful social consequences.

OECD Secretary General Angel Gurría, in preparation for the G20 Virtual Summit that took place on 25th March, unveiled the [OECD estimates](#) showing that the lockdown will directly affect sectors amounting to up to one third of GDP in the major economies. For each month of containment, there will be an estimated loss of 2 percentage points in annual GDP. And these estimates might be well under the real final impact. The tourism sector alone faces an output decrease as high as 70%. Many economies will fall (or are already falling) into recession.

In order to break out of the vicious cycle and avoid making the same mistakes as in 2008, we call on the EU and its Member States to use the review of economic governance to launch a debate on rethinking the economic and financial policy direction of the EU. This could include public discussions on notions such as basic income, wealth tax and alternative models to finance the necessary investments to transition towards a sustainable and socially oriented economy (with a strong supervisory role for democratically-elected parliaments), as well as discuss alternatives to the current debt-based monetary system.

ACTION 8

Redirect existing and future EU budget streams towards family support (social and care) to mitigate the impact of COVID-19

EU Member States need to have short-term and long-term financial instruments to mitigate the impact of COVID19 on society and the economy. This includes measures to boost family support systems under the current 2014-2020 EU budget, and COVID-19 proofing the future 2021-2027 EU budget.

Austerity measures following the 2008 crisis is part of the reason many countries are unprepared for the pandemic, and hence austerity cannot be part of the solution especially in a post-crisis period where thousands of jobs will be lost ([Eurofound 2020](#), [ILO 2020](#)). The COVID19 pandemic is expected to leave millions of Europeans unemployed or in low paid employment.

As well as adopting various financial rescue packages, and specific country packages like the SURE scheme to help the most affected EU countries like Italy and Spain, the EU has also made some key legislative changes to redirect existing funds towards fighting COVID-19. One of the changes extends the scope of the EU Solidarity Fund to include public health emergencies as well as natural disasters. The other is the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative which provides more flexibility in the use of unspent cohesion funds, accepting flexibility to the current European budget to reach most vulnerable, such as home deliveries and the use of electronic vouchers to reduce the risk of contamination, and the possibility to redirect funding between programmes and regions for corona-related actions. National governments must rapidly adopt and take up these new opportunities.

There are hundreds of thousands of NGO family support services in Europe which already address needs in their community on a daily basis providing early childhood education and care, respite care, mental health support, education, financial counselling and much more. The redirection of funds like the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived (FEAD), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) should also be used to to sustain, boost and upscale existing infrastructure to ensure effective outreach to families suffering both from COVID-19 and from the impact of quarantine measures.

We should also be open to experimentation and considering novel monetary options, in order to quickly address the financial difficulties vulnerable families are facing. While government spending via its many channels such as social security is welcome, there can be significant delay between the moment budgets are agreed to and the money reaches those in need.

We call on the EU and its Member States to go beyond emergency, and inject long-term thinking into the future EU budget 2021-2027 in the form of a paradigm shift towards an economy of well-being, as highlighted in the COFACE New Deal for Families of Today adopted end 2019. More specifically a strong European Social Fund Plus will be a key financial instrument under the new 2021-2027 EU budget, with clearly allocated funds to boost community-based social and health services. This also includes the earmarking of funds (as supported by the EU Alliance for Investing in Children) to implement the European Child Guarantee as an essential anti-poverty mechanism reaching out to vulnerable groups.



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