

Mitigating the employment and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic

European and international policy recommendations

KEY FINDINGS

The recommendations result from a review of selected policy papers and research by ILO, OECD, Eurofound, EU-OSHA and other European and international stakeholders in the field of employment and social affairs. The review reveals a widely shared consensus on key components of policy strategies, including recommendations to:

Establish and/or adapt robust **job retention schemes** such as **short-term work** measures in order to mitigate the effects of this and potential future crises on employment and incomes.

Widen **access to social protection systems** to offer a **basic, minimum level of protection** and income to all, regardless of their employment status, especially given the prospect of further outbreaks/pandemics. The situation of precarious workers requires special attention.

Provide extra support to **financially vulnerable groups**, who are often most affected by crises, to ensure that the crisis does not increase poverty and exacerbate existing inequalities or create new forms of inequality and social exclusion.

Restrict freedom of movement only to the extent that is necessary to tackle the health crisis, so that **cross-border, posted** and **seasonal workers** can access their workplaces.

Acknowledge the **vital role** played by **frontline and key workers** and improve their working conditions.

Implement **appropriate health and safety** rules to make all workplaces safe. Some crisis responses, such as teleworking, can be an opportunity to develop new, flexible ways of working but potentially negative long-term effects should be addressed.

Encourage **digitalisation, tackle the digital divide** and **adapt workers' skills** to future challenges in order to contribute to stronger preparedness for future upheavals and **increase the crisis immunity** of all countries, companies and workers.

Recognise the **value of social dialogue** as a tool for ensuring effective coordination and cooperation in developing responses to the crisis and policies for recovery.



Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis is affecting many different aspects of the world of work and its effects are likely to be long-lasting. The crisis is affecting how and where we work, it has led to a sharp drop in employment and hours worked and it affects workers' incomes, job security and job prospects for young people arriving on the labour market (ILO 2020i). The economic damage it causes is expected to increase levels of poverty and inequality.

National and global responses should aim to address both the short-term and long-term effects, bearing in mind that robust employment and social policies are key to swift and durable regeneration and to preparedness for similar crises in the future. This briefing seeks to set out the main employment and social policy recommendations from European and international organisations.

Maintaining jobs and supporting incomes

The International Labour Organization (ILO) points to the multidimensional impact of the current crisis on the world of work, affecting **quantity** of jobs (resulting in surging unemployment and underemployment), **quality** of jobs (plummeting wages and limited access to social protection) and negative consequences for most **vulnerable groups**. Both the ILO and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) agree that policy action is needed to protect **employment** and provide **income support** (ILO 2020, OECD 2020).

In its [resolution](#) of 17 April 2020, the European Parliament underlines, that “the crisis is dramatically affecting workers, employees, the self-employed and SMEs – the backbone of our societies”. The Parliament calls on both the Commission and the Member States to take all necessary measures to maintain as many jobs as possible, paying special attention to those in **precarious** forms of work. It also stresses the need for workers in Europe, including **self-employed** to be protected from loss of income.

Moreover, the ILO indicates that **young people** are ‘disproportionately affected’ by the crisis, which impacts their education, training and employment, leading to income losses and significant challenges in finding work. The ILO calls, therefore, for comprehensive policy action to address the problems currently faced by young people, which otherwise may have long-lasting effects (ILO 2020i).

1. Short time-work schemes

Short-time work schemes (STW schemes) are public programmes allowing companies to temporarily reduce the number of hours worked and ensure income support for workers in order to maintain the employment relationship and prevent permanent lay-offs. STW schemes offer compensation or financial relief for enterprises (wage subsidies) to compensate for the income lost during the crisis. At the end of April 2020 there were more than 42 million applications for STW schemes in the EU27 (ETUI 2020).

Dealing with loss of employment and income during the COVID-19 pandemic

Almost all EU countries introduced or extended measures aimed at supporting both companies and workers such as national short-time work schemes. These, however, vary in terms of coverage, level of wage compensation, duration and procedures for application. For example, the level of wage compensation varies from 50 per cent in Poland to 100 per cent in the Netherlands. The duration of support varies from a few weeks (Romania) to 13 months (Finland). Some countries offer the option of extending the initial 3-month coverage period (eg. Italy or the Netherlands).

While these measures are a positive response to the crisis, the ILO indicated that there is a need for a further action in order to increase **preparedness** for future crisis response.

Source: ILO 2020, EPRS 2020, ETUI 2020

A comprehensive study by the OECD (OECD, 2011) found that short-term work schemes had an 'economically important impact on preserving jobs' after the 2008 economic crisis. It also found, however, that the positive impact was limited to workers with permanent contracts. The ETUI, in a briefing (ETUI 2020) proposes inclusive STW schemes, covering all sectors, companies and workers, and beyond the period of direct confinement. It recommends that countries involve trade unions and employers in the process of implementation, that they design the schemes to protect workers from dismissal and that wage support should be more generous for low wage workers to allow for a decent standard of living. Moreover, the OECD points to the need for access to the schemes to be facilitated by relaxing conditions and providing clear and accessible information on how to participate (OECD 2020).

To support EU Member State efforts to adapt or extend their STW schemes, the Commission proposed the **SURE initiative** (Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency), which was welcomed by the European Parliament. The initiative offers financial support to Member States and their short-time work schemes, and extends coverage to **self-employed workers**.

Depending on how the national scheme supported by SURE is structured, there may still be groups of **precarious workers** who will not benefit. Therefore, [Eurofound](#) indicates that additional support such as supplementary **income support** may be needed.

2. Social protection

Social protection schemes are an indispensable part of a coordinated policy response to the crisis. They stabilize the economy by supporting jobs and incomes and thus increase resilience and the likelihood of a quick recovery (ILO 2020c).

Income support can be provided by extending existing social protections (giving wider access to unemployment benefits and social assistance) for all workers, including those vulnerable categories such as self-employed (ILO 2020, OECD 2020). **Ad-hoc payments** targeting **financially vulnerable groups**, such as single parents, young people, low-income families and parents who face care problems due to school closures, can be used to replace income and cover urgent needs and thus maintain the living standards of those most affected by the crisis (ILO 2020, OECD 2020a). Access to **paid sick leave** could be expanded as it contributes to reducing the transmission of the virus and ensures stability of income for workers infected with the virus and/or those that have to self-isolate and are not able to work from home. Countries could therefore extend the coverage and duration of paid sick leave, also to sick or in quarantine non-standard workers, whose protection in many countries is limited (OECD 2020, OECD 2020a). Also, **waiting periods** could be waived to align them with quarantine and medical recommendations. Moreover, reporting requirements for paid sick leave, e.g. the requirement for medical certification, can be adapted (OECD 2020).

The ILO and the OECD recommend prioritising and streamlining applications for **unemployment benefit** and **adapting procedures** for claiming benefits in public employment services (e.g. allowing remote applications) as well as adapting the application of activation criteria (e.g. requirement to seek work) to take account of the crisis. **Active labour market policies** (job counselling, skills development and job mediation) can be moved online whenever possible (OECD 2020, ILO 2020c).

A number of stakeholders have called for a minimum income guarantee, including the Spanish deputy Prime Minister, Pablo Iglesias ([The Guardian](#)) and some Members of the European Parliament ([letter](#) to Commissioner Schmit). The COVID-19 crisis has also intensified the debate around universal basic income, either a permanent system as advocated by the [World Economic Forum](#) or a temporary measure to respond to the coronavirus pandemic, proposed by a grouping of NGOs, academics and politicians in the UK ([letter](#) to *The Independent*).

The ILO describes the COVID-19 crisis as a wake-up call that has exposed serious gaps in social protection systems around the world. It recommends that governments, together with social partners and other

stakeholders, should take this opportunity to **strengthen their social protection systems**, including **social protection floors**, and points to the comparative advantages of universal social protection systems which can react more quickly and effectively in a crisis situation (ILO 2020c).

The OECD recommends that the content and/or timing of **reforms already scheduled** which aim to restrict access to unemployment benefits should be reviewed and that the focus should turn to increasing access to out-of-work benefits by extending entitlement to unemployment benefits to independent workers, strengthening the portability of earned entitlements across different jobs and forms of employment and facilitating access to means-tested safety-net benefits. Many countries had already started taking steps in this direction before the crisis (OECD 2020).

3. Coverage of non-standard workers

The coronavirus crisis has highlighted the problem of insufficient social protection coverage. This applies especially to workers in **non-standard employment** who are generally less well protected against job or income loss and have limited trade union representation. According to [Eurofound](#) the number of precarious workers in the EU has increased over the years and this trend, together with the emergence of new business models (such as platform work), is widening the gap between well-protected workers and non-standard workers. Non-standard workers are also among the most economically affected as they work in sectors hardest hit by the crisis (tourism, hospitality, construction and retail) (ILO 2020a).

Both ILO and OECD are calling for measures to protect the jobs and incomes of all workers impacted by the pandemic, and to address the precarious situation of **vulnerable and non-standard groups of workers**. They recommend widening access to **social protection** for independent workers and others in non-standard forms of employment, and offering them access to **paid sick cover, social assistance and unemployment benefits** (OECD 2020, 2020a).

Among the most affected by the crisis are workers with low job security to whom unemployment benefit could be extended even if they do not meet eligibility criteria (OECD 2020a). Self-employed, platform workers, temporary agency workers and informal workers are among the most vulnerable groups. Many **self-employed** in the EU do not have access to social protection and cannot access sickness benefits ([Eurofound](#)). Many also have a profession that **requires physical contact** with the client (such as hairdressers, beauticians or physiotherapists) which means they cannot work from home (EPRS 2020). Certain [platform workers](#) (such as Uber drivers) have suffered badly during the current crisis, due to a drop in demand for some platform services, the precarious characteristics of this type of employment, and the lack of **sick pay** ([Eurofound](#)). Some **temporary agency workers** and **casual workers** (employed on zero-hour contracts or on-call work) lack stability in employment and are generally less eligible for benefits than standard workers (OECD 2020).

Addressing the issue of precarious employment during the COVID-19 pandemic

Both governments and the private sector have been addressing the vulnerable situation of workers in non-standard forms of employment.

In some countries like Portugal the waiting period for self-employed workers sickness benefit has been waived. In Germany, income replacement was extended to self-employed who are sick and in quarantine for justified reasons.

Some platforms have addressed the lack of sickness protection for platform workers and decided to offer paid sick leave for their staff (for example: Deliveroo in Belgium). Social support and protection for platform workers was demanded also by trade unions in Italy and in Ireland.

Source: [Eurofound](#), ILO 2020, OECD 2020a

4. Globalisation Adjustment Fund

In its [resolution](#) of 17 April 2020, **the European Parliament** “calls for the use of all available means and unused money in the current EU budget, including (...) the **Globalisation Adjustment Fund**, so as to swiftly deploy financial assistance to the regions and businesses most affected, and allow for the greatest flexibility possible in the use of funds (...) and ensure that funding reaches those most in need.”

Safe workplaces and decent working conditions

The COVID-19 pandemic has significant implications for working conditions and the way people currently work and will work in the future. The crisis has thrown a spotlight on the importance of **health and safety** in the workplace and the need to **improve working conditions**, including **work-life balance**, all of which are important EU policy objectives. According to [Eurofound](#), the COVID-19 pandemic creates an incentive and an opportunity to adapt working conditions to the new reality while investing in people and fighting inequalities.

The Globalisation Adjustment Fund (EGF)

EGF provides assistance to those who lose their jobs as a result of structural changes caused by globalisation, or as a result of global financial and economic crisis. The EGF can support, for example, reskilling, job counselling, tailor-made training or support for starting a new business. According to the Regulation, “the aim of EGF is to contribute to sustainable employment in the Union and to ensure that the largest possible number of beneficiaries participating in actions funded by EGF find sustainable employment as soon as possible”. During the current crisis the Commission [proposed](#) to use the resources available under this Fund to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on the self-employed and workers who have been laid-off.

Source: Author's compilation

1. New health and safety protocols for all workplaces

A safe and healthy working environment should be provided for key workers, home-based teleworkers and those returning to their usual workplaces. Knowledge and awareness are essential: everyone should have clear information on how the virus is spread and be aware of preventive measures to avoid transmission. EU OSHA has issued [guidance](#) for workplaces continuing to operate during lockdowns and those that are returning to work as confinement measures are lifted. The ILO has presented an [action checklist](#): a tool that offers a simple and collaborative approach to assess COVID-19 risks in order to take measures to protect the safety and health of workers. The OECD and ILO both highlight the importance of **testing and tracing** as a means to lift confinement restrictions and safely return to normal economic and social activity. The ILO underlines that testing and tracing can help to limit labour market disruption and enable companies to organize and execute workplace activities more efficiently and safely (ILO 2020i).

2. Key workers

The crisis has highlighted the fact that many of our **front-line essential workers**, many of whom are women, migrants or from ethnic minorities, are in precarious and poorly-paid employment in sectors such as healthcare, care, household/domestic and retail services (EAPN 2020b). These workers are vital to responding to and eventually overcoming the crisis. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, mainly, but not only, **healthcare** workers have been confronted with increased workloads, increased working hours and less time to rest (EPRS 2020, ILO 2020f). The [World Economic Forum](#) stresses that the crisis is an opportunity to “revalue essential work and improve the quality of jobs”. This is echoed in the European Parliament [resolution](#) of 17 April 2020 which calls for “improving conditions for key workers: levelling up of wages and working conditions” and calls on Member States to ensure “**safe working conditions** for all workers at the front line of this epidemic”.

In terms of health and safety, this means the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) to all health and care workers, consistent application of environmental cleaning and disinfection procedures and training and support for health workers ([WHO](#)). Healthcare workers may also need psychological support and counselling to cope with higher workloads and the traumatic nature of their work during the pandemic ([WHO](#)). Apart from workers in the healthcare, residential and home care sectors, essential workers at increased risk include, for example, those involved in food supply and retail, waste collection, utilities, police and security, and public transport. Social partners representing [transport workers](#), [social services workers](#) and [care workers](#) have called for crisis responses that protect the health, incomes and jobs of front-line and essential workers.

3. Migrant and seasonal workers

The ILO and the ETUC draw attention to the situation of **migrant** and **seasonal workers**. They are often in precarious employment, with poor working conditions and housed in sub-standard accommodation. The [ILO](#) recommends, inter alia, that migrant workers have access to income support measures, social protection and health care and for policies based on social dialogue to be used to foster inclusion. The [ETUC](#) has issued a series of recommendations, including paid sick leave for all workers, including migrant workers, across Europe, financial support and free public healthcare and decent housing in case of redundancy, the right to safe and healthy working conditions, adequate information, PPE and testing, and the continuation of targeted inspections in sectors at high risk of labour exploitation and unsafe working conditions during the pandemic.

4. Flexible work arrangements and work-life balance

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on working arrangements, with a large proportion of the working population unable to access their normal workplaces. There is a need to implement properly designed **flexible work arrangements** to give workers more freedom to organise their work. Flexible work arrangements, if carefully designed and guided, can increase productivity, help

Examples of flexible work arrangements

FLEX TIME	FLEX TIME OFF	FLEX LOCATION/ROLES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Banking of working hours Compressed work week Flexible working hours Job sharing Switch shifts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paid sick leave Paid emergency care leave Extra or prolonged holiday or personal leave Long-term leave with employment protection Reduced hours (part-time) with the same hourly rate Paid lactation breaks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Telework or telecommuting Temporary remote work for caring purposes Change of responsibilities

Source: ILO 2020e

workers to meet personal or family needs and achieve a better work-life balance (ILO 2020e). Such arrangements are particularly important for working parents working from home as they are affected by lack of childcare options and often have to supervise their children’s education at home (Eurofound 2020b). Equally, there is a need for other **family-friendly policies** and practices such as access to emergency childcare or paid leave possibilities to care for a family member, public childcare options for parents working in essential sectors, financial support to cover costs of alternative care arrangements and financial subsidies for companies offering paid leave for carers (ILO 2020e, OECD 2020).

5. Well-being and mental health - the right to disconnect

The [World Economic Forum](#) points out that, while teleworking may indeed offer more flexibility and autonomy, it requires trust, appropriate digital infrastructure and skills (see digitalisation below). According to a [Eurofound](#) survey carried out in April 2020, the share of workers teleworking has risen to above 30 per

cent in most EU member states. Massive recourse to working from home presents new challenges in terms of health and safety. A lack of ergonomic suitability of home office equipment may lead to an increase in musculoskeletal disorders (EU-OSHA). Workers may also suffer from psychological stress as a result of isolation and anxiety due to the crisis situation. Teleworking can help workers achieve better **work-life balance** but there is also the risk that workers will be pressured or feel pressured to be online and available all the time (the “autonomy paradox”) and that telework will lead to work intensification (Eurofound 2020d). The European Parliament is currently working on an own-initiative report on the **right to disconnect**.

In a [briefing](#) on mental health issues, the ILO recommends that employers: be clear about performance objectives and expectations and discuss these on a regular basis; help workers set up and evaluate their home office environment; try to maintain contact with and between staff members through video conferencing in order to reduce isolation and the stress of working remotely, and provide support and training to workers on how to establish work/life balance and boundaries while working at home.

Working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic

The closure of workplaces has made teleworking a new standard way of working for many people. According to Eurofound, 37 per cent of current workers in the EU started teleworking because of the pandemic. Teleworking offers workers more flexibility and autonomy, but also involves certain risks, for example longer working hours, or loneliness and isolation. This, in turn, may pose risks to mental health. As the boundaries between working time and time off become blurred, it may result in burn-out or work-related stress.

Source: Eurofound 2020b

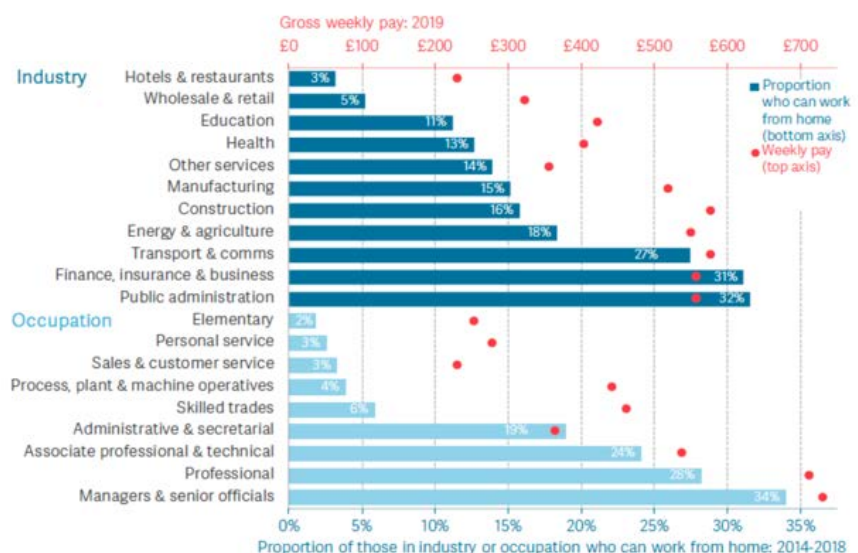
Digitalisation

In its [resolution](#) of 17 April 2020 **the European Parliament** stressed that recovery from this crisis “and the reconstruction package should have at its core the **digital transformation** in order to kick-start the economy, improve its resilience and create jobs”.

1. Encouraging digital innovation

The COVID-19 crisis has proven that **teleworking** is a necessary means to limit workers’ risk of exposure to the virus and to safeguard continuity of operations where possible (OECD 2020). The crisis has also shown that there is a need to support **digital innovation** and that investments in remote working equipment can deliver long-term benefits. Changes in working practices observed during the COVID-19 pandemic may lay the foundations for further changes in how people work in the future (OECD 2020a). As both households and enterprises have to invest in technical equipment, it undoubtedly requires support from governments and/or other institutions (OECD

Lower paid workers are less likely to be able to work from home



Source: OECD 2020a

2020). Therefore, timely, financial and non-financial assistance to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and self-employed is needed to support development of teleworking facilities and policies (OECD 2020, EPRS 2020). Rules on teleworking could be simplified and relaxed so that workers and employers can more easily develop teleworking options. (OECD 2020, EPRS 2020). Technology companies could be encouraged to support SMEs and the self-employed with free and timely access to necessary communication tools (OECD 2020). At the same time as encouraging digitalisation in employment, the ILO recommends maintaining social dialogue and providing upskilling and reskilling options (ILO 2020g).

Technology can be used also for care and monitoring purposes (e.g. fall detection) to ensure the continuation of protection and care of the most **vulnerable** in society, including the elderly and/or people with disabilities. Also, care provided with the aid of robots or telepresence can be particularly useful to reduce the risk of contagion (Eurofound 2020c). The most vulnerable can be provided with holistic (online) support which includes health advice, psychological counselling, learning options and support in legal and administrative matters (ILO 2020g). Increased digitalisation can contribute also to reducing risks and negative effects of social distancing and allows access to **online support**, e.g. remote psychological therapy or online medical consultations (OECD 2020a).

2. Addressing the digital divide

During the COVID-19 pandemic many companies moved their activities 'online' and 'went digital'. This brings with it, however, the danger of a **digital divide** on the labour market. Companies that lack well-developed ICT tools or teleworking options may lag behind. Equally, differences exist between workers as some may lack access to digital technologies and the skills required to use them or the nature of their job may not allow them to work from home. In general, **lower-skilled** and lower-paid occupations are less likely to be able to work from home. In practice, teleworking is possible only for a "lucky few", mostly office-based professionals (OECD 2020a). **Vulnerable groups**, including the elderly, are also less likely to use technological solutions to connect with others and for this reason social distancing can have severe implications for their physical and mental health. Therefore, overcoming the digital divide is crucial in order to reduce these risks, in combination with other policy measures such as regular check-ins by social services or volunteers (OECD 2020a).

A digital divide exists also in the educational sphere as extended school closures disproportionately impact the most **vulnerable students** who lack Internet access and/or the IT tools required. Therefore, young people, especially vulnerable ones, require appropriate assistance and policy responses (OECD 2020a) and programmes that quickly target students in need ([World Bank 2020](#)).

Policies should focus on tackling the digital divide by ensuring universal access to digital infrastructure, digital tools and learning technologies (ILO 2020g), as well as on **improvement of skills**, e.g. for workers. This could be supported by governments through specific training subsidies (OECD 2020). Improved internet infrastructure and more affordable internet access are needed together with digital platforms that are accessible for persons with disabilities to ensure continuation of education for all (ILO 2020g).

Skills

Keeping workers in work and improving their skills are important factors in ensuring a prompt economic upturn (Eurofound 2020). Already in 2017, it was [estimated](#) that 14 per cent of the global workforce would need to acquire new skills or train for a new occupation (reskill) due to the increased use of automation and artificial intelligence. The current pandemic has made clear that policy approaches with regard to skills (including upskilling, reskilling and enhancing skills) have to adapt to the changing situation. Upgrading skills (including digital skills) need to be made possible for various groups. Upskilling programs for **workers** to increase familiarity with digital tools and digital processes could be provided (ILO 2020g). Also, more generally, various online training courses could improve workers' skills during economic slowdown (OECD

2020). Upskilling as well as reskilling of workers should be promoted, especially among SME employees and **precarious workers** as well as people who have been made **redundant** (ILO 2020g). Training courses and skill development options could be made available also to **vulnerable groups** (ILO 2020g) and young people (ILO 2020i). There is also need for training on various digital tools for users including **teachers, pupils** and their **parents** (OECD 2020a).

Poverty and social inclusion

The crisis has dealt a severe blow to the economy and brought with it a heightened risk of poverty and social exclusion. In its [resolution](#) of 17 April, 2020, the European Parliament called for a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy, with a European Child Guarantee and drew attention to the need to take action to help vulnerable groups including those at risk of poverty, women and children exposed to domestic violence, the elderly, people with disabilities and the homeless.

1. Tackling the heightened risk of poverty

According to the OECD, more than one in three individuals are financially insecure, meaning that “while they are not poor based on conventional income thresholds, they do not have enough financial assets to keep their family above the poverty line for more than 3 months, should their income suddenly stop” (OECD 2020a). **Younger people, couples with children and people educated below tertiary level** are at greatest risk in this respect. (OECD 2020a). A [Eurofound](#) survey in April 2020 showed that “almost 40 per cent of people in Europe report their financial situation as worse than before the pandemic. Close to half indicate that their households cannot make ends meet and over half report they cannot maintain their standard of living for more than three months without an income”. **Poorer households** are at risk because they spend a large proportion of their disposable income on fixed costs like rents and utilities (OECD 2020). However, **middle-income households** are also at risk in the current crisis because they are unable to quickly adjust their outgoings and they already have high levels of indebtedness ([OECD 2019](#)). In conclusion, even taking into account public income support, incomes may be significantly below previous levels, so many households will need additional support to get through the crisis (Eurofound 2020a).

In addition to the measures discussed under the section above on maintaining jobs and supporting incomes, an OECD [briefing](#) recommends measures such as “deferral of mortgage repayments and utility bills, and suspension of foreclosures and evictions to allow people to stay in their homes throughout the crisis and into the recovery period” and the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) recommends support for payment of energy bills.

In a report on the Commission’s 2020 Country Reports, the EAPN urges the EU and its Member States to learn lessons from the 2008 crisis and ensure that any reductions of public debt/deficit do not lead to the imposition of austerity which will increase poverty and undermine a sustainable recovery. It underlines the need for a commitment to the Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to ensure that increased commitment to public services and welfare states are driven by fairer redistributive tax policies (EAPN 2020b).

2. Vulnerable children and their families

Financial support is needed for vulnerable children and their families who may not have the means to acquire the technical equipment required for remote learning (OECD 2020a). Equally, they may suffer from the discontinuation of services usually provided at school (free meals) and should be eligible for food vouchers and food parcels. Vulnerable children could also be included in emergency childcare provisions for children of essential workers in countries where such arrangements exist (OECD 2020a).

3. Supporting women

Women are potentially more exposed to material hardships as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, especially if they are heads of single-parent households (OECD 2020a). Women are more likely to work in one of the four sectors (accommodation/food services; real estate, business and administrative activities; manufacturing; and the wholesale/retail trade) the [ILO](#) rates as being at high risk in terms of job losses and reduced working hours. Moreover, they may be unable to work because of additional care needs with schools closed and elderly relatives requiring special assistance. The sharp rise in unemployment impacts young women more than young men and policy responses should factor in these additional difficulties (ILO 2020i).

4. Dealing with homelessness

UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, Leilani Farha, [says](#) that “housing has become the front line defence against the coronavirus. Home has rarely been more of a life or death situation” and has urged governments to take measures to secure the right to housing for all to protect against the pandemic. Increased capacity in emergency accommodation is needed (for example by using empty hotels or converted public buildings) in order to cope with increased demand, reduce over-crowding and allow for social-distancing. Outreach services for rough sleepers could be stepped up to compensate for the fact that informal means of support such as leftover food from shops and restaurants may no longer be available (OECD 2020, 2020a, ILO 2020c, EAPN 2020).

Equally, those living in overcrowded conditions (more than a quarter of all households in Latvia, Poland and the Slovak Republic) (OECD 2020) are more at risk of contagion. In its [position paper](#), Housing Europe, emphasises the need to “revive the production of social housing to accompany the unprecedented crisis we are facing” and calls for the flexibility under the Stability and Growth Pact authorised recently by the Eurogroup to apply to housing providers too.

5. Help for victims of domestic violence

Being confined at home can mean increased danger for those at risk of domestic violence. Social NGOs and local authorities providing support services such as accommodation and counselling, including through helplines, need extra financial support (EAPN 2020).

6. Rights of the disabled

The European Parliament [resolution](#) of 17 April 2020 emphasised the need for the interests and needs of people with disabilities to be taken into account at all times, for community-based services for people with disabilities to be continued, for people with disabilities to be included in income support measures, equal access to healthcare to be ensured and public information to be provided in forms accessible to people with different disabilities. The [European Disability Forum](#) has called for part of the funding under the European Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative to be earmarked specifically to support community-based disability support services and has insisted on the need for the authorities to consult people with disabilities through their representative organisations on the specific requirements and most appropriate solutions when providing accessible and inclusive services.

Freedom of movement

The closure of national borders and the temporary reintroduction of border controls between Member States have caused difficulties for **cross-border workers**, **frontier workers**, **posted** and **seasonal workers**, and placed a burden on many sectors such as the road transport and aviation sectors (EPRS 2020). As the ILO pointed out, **migrant workers** (many of whom are young people) are particularly affected by the crisis as they cannot access their workplaces and/or return to their families (ILO 2020, 2020i). Many migrant workers work in essential sectors in their host Member State, including healthcare or goods supply (EPRS

2020). On 30 March 2020, the Commission issued [guidelines](#) on the exercise of free movement by workers during the COVID-19 outbreak. The Commission called on Member States to facilitate border crossings for workers in **critical occupations**, to establish 'burden-free and fast procedures' for **frontier and posted workers**, and to allow **seasonal workers** to cross borders if their work continues in the host state. Moreover, due to **labour shortages** and the critical position of seasonal workers in agriculture, Member States should regard them as workers in critical occupations and facilitate their passage across borders.

In its [resolution](#) of 17 April 2020, **the European Parliament** strongly supported the Commission's call on the Member States "to allow frontier workers to continue crossing borders, in particular in sectors for which continued free movement in the EU is deemed essential". The EP calls, in that respect, "for the establishment of 'green lane' border crossings for land (road and rail), maritime, inland waterways and air transport".

The guidelines remain non-binding but they are clear guidance to the Member States to the effect that restrictions on the right to free movement of workers must be "**necessary, proportionate** and based on **objective** and **non-discriminatory criteria**". Moreover, border checks must remain an exception ([EU Commission](#)) and should be lifted in a coordinated manner ([EU Commission](#)).

Social dialogue

The European Parliament in its resolution of 17 April 2020 stressed the need to ensure that "the recovery is based on **upward social economic convergence, social dialogue** and **improved social rights and working conditions**" and "called on the Member States and the Commission to promote social dialogue and collective bargaining in the response to the COVID-19 crisis."

The importance of involving social partners in designing and implementing measures has been stressed by the [ETUC](#), the ITUC and the IOE (International Organisation of Employers) in a [joint statement](#), as well as the [ILO](#) and the [OECD](#). The OECD noted that "more co-ordinated and more centralised collective bargaining systems limit the short-term unemployment impact of economic downturns" ([OECD 2017](#)).

One of the key policy responses recommended by the ILO is to introduce "**employment retention schemes**, including short time-work/partial unemployment benefits" (ILO 2020). Social partners can use the trusted mechanisms of social dialogue to negotiate quickly so that employers keep workers on the payroll and trade unions accept to shorten working weeks and to moderate wages ([ILO](#)). The ETUI in a [briefing](#) sets out key criteria for fair short-term work schemes.

Social partners can also negotiate adaptations to existing agreements, like the extension of short-term work schemes in Germany ([DGB](#)) or the simplification of procedures for the approval of teleworking in Italy (OECD 2020). Eurofound has created a [database](#) to capture governments' and social partners' responses to the crisis. More than half of the measures are entirely new, the others are adaptations to existing measures.

The UN, ILO and the Council of Europe have all warned that the COVID-19 crisis should not be used, even temporarily, to dismantle human rights and trade unions rights. The [ETUC](#) says that EU Member States should refrain from any initiative aimed at reducing wages, rights and protections of workers, or which undermines social dialogue. This would run counter to fundamental rights and provisions of the EU Treaties.

The [ETUC](#) has also called on the EU level to give trade unions a greater voice and ensure the use of social dialogue as a tool for delivery of EU priorities. One specific proposal to guarantee trade union involvement in the implementation of EU measures at Member State level would be a rule that prevents companies that refuse to negotiate with unions from accessing EU funded recovery initiatives or public procurement.

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Administrator responsible: Aoife KENNEDY; Editorial assistant: Roberto BIANCHINI

Contact: Poldep-Economy-Science@ep.europa.eu

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