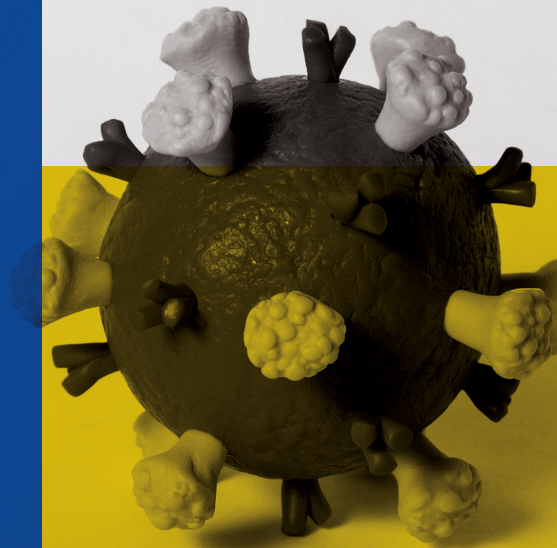
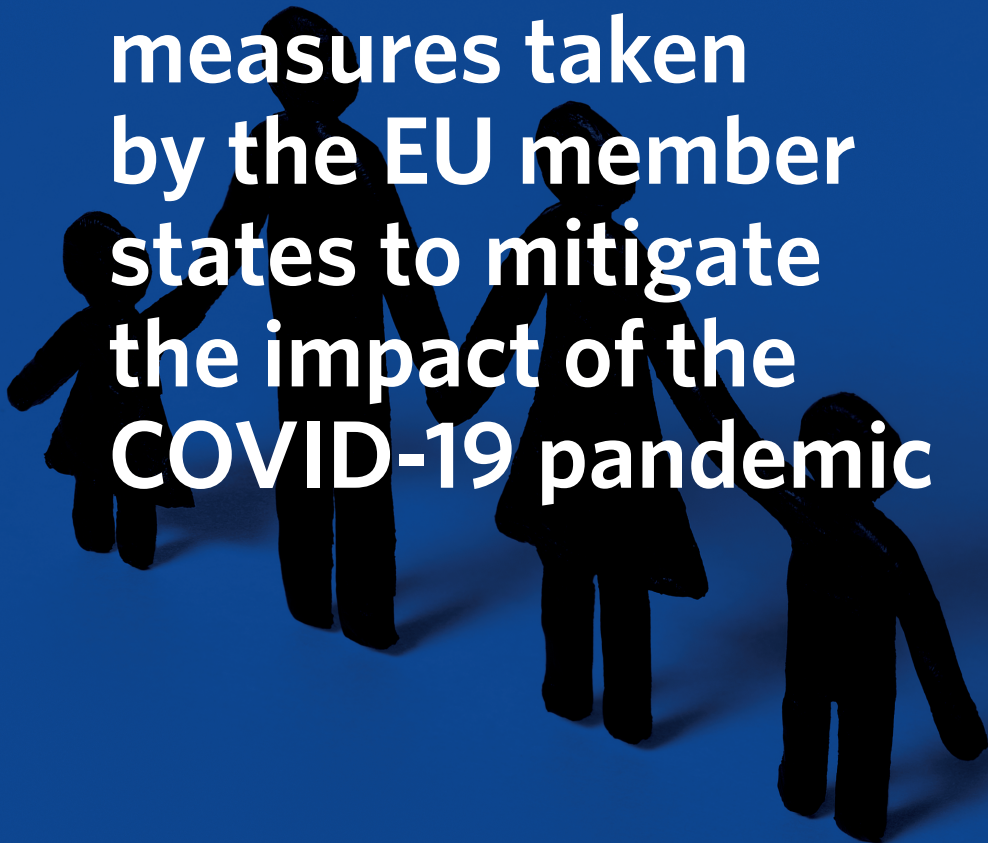


# Social Protection measures taken by the EU member states to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic



**SOCI***EU***X+**

EU expertise on social protection,  
labour and employment

Technical Reports  
Collection

07



PROGRAMME FUNDED BY  
THE EUROPEAN UNION

**Published by:**

**SOCIEUX+ Expertise on Social Protection,**

**Labour and Employment**

FPS Social Security

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The SOCIEUX+ team is committed to enable peer exchanges and cooperation between public professionals and social partners.

This publication was prepared with the assistance of the European Union.  
The content is the exclusive responsibility of the authors and in no case should be considered to reflect the views of the European Union.

Non-commercial edition.

**Graphic production:**

Cyan, Proyectos Editoriales, S.A.

Madrid, October, 2020



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# Presentation



SOCIEUX+ Expertise on Social Protection, Labour and Employment is a technical assistance facility set-up co-funded by the European Union, France, Spain and Belgium and implemented by a partnership composed of four partners: Expertise France, leader of the partnership, Fundación Internacional y para Iberoamérica de Administración y Políticas Públicas (FIIAPP), Belgian International Cooperation on Social Protection (BELINCOSOC), and Belgian Technical Cooperation Agency (Enabel).

SOCIEUX+ aims to expand and improve access to better employment opportunities and inclusive social protection systems in EU partner countries by drawing expertise by EU Member States. It also works on enhancing the capacities of partner countries to better design, manage and monitor inclusive, effective, and sustainable employment strategies and social protection systems through peer-to-peer short-term technical assistance and knowledge development.

The present report is part of the technical series of SOCIEUX+. This research series showcase and analyse the work done by the SOCIEUX+ on key themes for the development of the debate on social protection and decent employment. The technical reports express in a simple and concise way complex information collected throughout the work of SOCIEUX+. They also seek to analyse the outcomes and impacts of the interventions to draw good practices and general knowledge on the theme.

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## Overview

Countries around the world took measures in the field of social protection and basic services to mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study gives an overview of the measures taken by EU member States in order to learn lessons for Socieux+. The measures covered are taken mainly at national level during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (up to the end of July 2020). The study is based on literature review, written surveys (sent in French or English to social protection administrations, EU delegations and counsellors for social affairs in French embassies) and interviews by phone with these contacts. The study finds that guaranteeing quality health care, maintaining income and complementing social assistance benefits for vulnerable people of the population form the common denominator of the policies implemented by the Member States. Measures to maintain income were particularly targeted to self-employed workers, whereas guaranteeing access to basic services, such as food or electricity, and providing childcare were typically addressed at the most vulnerable people.

Despite similar goals, the proposed solutions differ among States. As this is an unexpected crisis, the implemented measures depend largely on the established governance, on the social protection system in place, on fiscal space and on the economic situation of each Member State. The diversity of experiences shows that SOCIEUX+, providing peer-to-peer assistance on demand, should not offer a ready-to-use model, but should provide rather a set of tools that can meet the needs of the member countries corresponding to their own economic and social situation. As the crisis responses need to be embedded into a long-term perspective, the COVID-19 crisis has confirmed the goals set for SOCIEUX+ regarding social protection. Moreover, it was a wake-up call to accelerate the building of adequate social protection floors and systems. Nevertheless, the Covid-19 pandemic shifted immediate priorities and revealed the need for a coherent approach and adequate governance in social protection and social aid.



# Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis represented multiple challenges for European countries and for low- and middle-income countries. The crisis encompasses different dimensions. The consequences of this crisis are sanitary, social, economic and societal. Therefore, it requires a multidimensional approach. If we consider the sanitary side, the conditions for the success of the fight against the pandemic are, of course, related to the medical capacities, but also to adequate and integrated governance structures and to appropriate social and economic measures.

The expected social and economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is huge. The World Bank estimates in its publication 'Reversals of Fortune' that the pandemic will cause a contraction in global per capita GDP growth of 5 to 8 percent (depending on the scenario). In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic is creating millions of new poor. In 2020 between 88 & 115 million are expected to become extremely poor due to the Covid-19 pandemic. For 2021, this would be an additional 23 up to 35 million. So the total number of extreme poor due to the pandemic is estimated by the World Bank to be 110 to 150 million. These new poor differ also in terms of profile. They are more urban, better educated and less likely to work in agriculture.

The description of the measures taken by EU member states to mitigate socio-economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic gives an (non-exhaustive) overview of the various tools that have been used. However, the adequacy of the response

depends on the coordination between the different levels of intervention and on the integration of the different dimensions. The COVID-19 crisis has a sanitary origin, but the lessons learnt from it concern the management of any crisis which leads to a significant reduction in economic and social activity.

From this point of view, social protection and social aid are not isolated issues; rather, they have broadly shown their relevance, not only for the treatment of a pandemic, but also for maintaining social cohesion and well-being among the population. If we consider the health aspect, it is important to integrate adequate access to health insurance, quality health care and social accompaniment of the diseased and their families, as well as appropriate rules on movement or accompaniment during recovery.

Furthermore, governance matters, namely the clear division of competences among national, regional and local entities and the coordination of these, as well as the diversity of the actors involved to create a broad base of support. Although the acquisition of accumulated experience is ongoing, adequate governance structures that allow to take quick decisions has been established as an essential factor in mitigating the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the Covid-19 crisis accelerated the digitisation of social services and benefit entitlement.

An overview of the measures taken and their main target groups underscores the vast variety in the



implemented combinations of national and local policies among countries.

As indicated in a report by France Stratégie on the French situation, whose conclusions can be extended to all European countries, the Covid crisis:

- ▶ Amplifies existing inequalities among already fragile groups, such as disabled people, the elderly and the homeless, but also among the self-employed, undeclared workers and workers in the gig economy;
- ▶ Acts as a mirror of social and territorial inequalities that are often intertwined and reinforce each other;
- ▶ Also risks reinforcing educational inequalities.

Social protection emerged as a powerful lever and an automatic social and economic stabilizer. However, even in states with a high level of social protection, it was necessary to quickly adapt and supplement existing benefits with ad hoc measures and schemes adapted to the social and economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis.



# 1. Various governance models

The design and the governance structures of social protection schemes mobilised to address the consequences of the COVID-19 were different across European countries. Acknowledging that the differences in design of social protection systems and their governance are constitutive elements of the national identity and respecting the subsidiarity principle, the European Union only coordinates social protection issues among the Member States through benchmarking and learning, not through harmonisation. Hence, European countries show a variety of path-dependent social protection schemes. In addition, countries vary in the set-up of the different entities of the state (e.g. federal state versus unitary state), the division of competences in the field of social protection and social aid among these entities, and the degree of cooperation versus conflict among entities. Furthermore, the set-up of the specific coordination instruments to face the Covid-19 crisis varies.

Historically, the social protection systems have contributed to the reinforcement of the Nation-states, whether they were Beveridgean or Bismarckian systems. The social protection regimes have stabilised the compensation rules for social and territorial inequalities. In general, the unemployment, old age and illness risks are compensated in an integrated national area, simultaneously more distributive, for the relative benefit or the poorer areas, but also more protective, for the benefit of all.

The COVID-19 crisis illustrates today a reorganisation of solidarity in benefit of the level of proximity,

particularly in the countries where local political communities are mobilised (e.g. Departments in France or municipalities in the Nordic countries), or also when the compensation of the differences in terms of wealth between regions by the social state is protested, as in the cases of Italy or Spain. On the other hand, as shown by the different pendulum movements between the national and local movements in the social organisation in Nordic countries, the territorial architecture of solidarities in a national setting is not immovable.

In this context, the responses to the COVID-19 crisis might seem more or less efficient depending on the coherence between the different levels: national, regional, local, and they might need a debate regarding the distribution of powers in terms of legislative power, financing and management.

It has been globally acknowledged that, faced with a relatively unpredictable crisis, it is important to allow a margin of manoeuvrability to the local levels. Local levels can identify fast local needs, may face very different situations and may have other preferences. Furthermore, also the implication of the different agents of civil society (e.g. charities, religious communities, NGO's, etc.) matters. If we consider the example of France, the unemployment insurance regime and the sick leave, have been subject to national adaptations, but the distribution of food aid modes were very different in the various territories, although the country is characterised by a strong tradition of equal treatment of its citizens. The decentralisation





movement continues, even now that the pandemic peak has passed.

Unlike work and employment, where the social agents traditionally play a complementary role to the public authorities in establishing work and employment rules, the question is establishing through laws or via de facto adaptations the modifications of the relationships between the public powers, in order to allow an adequate response to the crisis.

Regarding the governance issue, insisting on establishing a function of observation and inventory is relevant, regarding:

- ▶ the identification of vulnerable populations (e.g. risks regarding health, social isolation and psychological well-being affecting those living in nursing homes);
- ▶ the inventory of people that might be eligible for benefits;
- ▶ the observation of territories in a difficult situation.

Cross-referencing these three types of data will allow to design adequate measures focused on specific populations and territories, but also to define the adequate level of institutional organisation. The health impact has been different across Member States, even at regional or sub-regional levels. The fine observation has allowed, depending on the cases, a separate management.



## 2. Comparable goals, variation in policies

We review the major categories of action in terms of social protection and social aid. This broad scope of the study implies that we list a broad inventory of very different measures for the various Member States. As aforementioned, at the European level, social protection has a coordination mechanism that allows free movement not only for workers, but for European citizens in general, from the Erasmus student to the retired person, but it is not subject to harmonisation. A fortiori, so far, social support and social protection depends strictly on national policies.

The convergence in terms of social protection and support depends, thus, on the application of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). It covers many mechanisms in various fields mobilised during the COVID-19 crisis: employment (since 1997), social integration (since 2000), retirement pensions (since 2001), healthcare and, more broadly, the modernisation of social protection, as well as education and training (since 2002).

However, Member States have intervened with actions that are broadly comparable:

- ▶ Guaranteeing universal access to healthcare, water, hygiene, food and housing;
- ▶ Facilitating childcare;
- ▶ Maintaining resources in case of loss of income linked to the lack of work or to illness (special attention has been paid to self-employed workers in particular).

Despite the relatively high level of social protection in European member states (in terms of coverage and generosity), the risks induced by the violent reduction of economic activity have involved an important recourse to social aid measures.

### 2.1. Guaranteeing universal access to basic services

#### 2.1.1. Health care

Access to healthcare has rarely been subject to specific measures. Though, some countries have extended coverage to illegal residents. For example, France, has a universal protection system in case of illness aimed at all legal residents (PUMA), as well as a State healthcare aimed at illegal residents. Generally speaking, considering the preventative character, those suffering from COVID-19 have received assistance without taking into consideration their rights to health coverage. However, Ireland has opted to expressly grant rights to health coverage to all the uncovered categories, including migrants.

#### 2.1.2. Food aid

Food aid constitutes the main part of basic needs. In this situation of crisis, the traditional circuits of food aid (school canteens for children, distribution of food aid by charitable organizations, ...) have been interrupted. Public powers used, then, new circuits, with modes ranging from direct aid, such as food vouchers



that allow subsidizing food shopping (e.g. Denmark and Italy), or the distribution of food by institutions, or solutions combining the different modes.

The main recipient are children, particularly because the reception system (from nursery to secondary

school) is not in a situation to guarantee one daily meal to disadvantaged children due to the closure of those institutions (e.g. France and Ireland). Some countries are also focused on households in difficult situations (e.g. Spain and Italy).

Target population	Measures	Country	Details
	Food vouchers, food programmes in the reception structures	Austria	
Recipients of social aids	1000 Crowns aids	Denmark	
Poor or vulnerable population	Food aid in kind, such as food home delivery, measures (financial aids or direct benefit of the food distribution services), shopping vouchers	Spain	Social services, in coordination with schools and with the corresponding ministries of Education and with the autonomous communities, Ceuta and Melilla
Children	Right to food for children affected by the closing of schools, recipients of a grant or canteen allowance during the school year, granting financial aid or the direct distribution of food	Spain	
Students	School feeding programmes	France	Managed at a sub-national level, various modes have been implemented, transfers in cash or food vouchers, school meal home deliveries
Students	Home packages including fresh food	Ireland	Particularly bread, eggs, fruit and yoghurt
Priority households, non-recipient of other social aid programmes	Food vouchers to buy basic food products according to demographic and income criteria	Italy	The mayors of 7904 councils can freely decide how to buy products and how to select the recipients



## 2.1.3. Housing

The preservation of housing has been subject to very broad measures, ranging from the suspension of rents or partial payments (e.g. Greece) to housing credit deferrals (e.g. Spain, Hungary, Lithuania and Slovakia), or the extension of the non-eviction period

for non-payment of rent (e.g. Germany). The keeping of the main services is under this concept (maintaining access to the communication/water/electricity networks). In this area, the States have prohibited withdrawing the service (e.g. Belgium and Denmark), or stated deferments in the payments (e.g. Denmark and Lithuania).

Target population	Measures	Country	Details
	Prohibition of cutting off the gas and electricity service	Belgium	
	Postponement of deadlines for paying	Denmark	
	Deferment or fractioned payment for the electricity and gas invoices from UAB Ignitis, and recommendation for councils to defer or fraction the payment of public services and thermal energy	Lithuania	
	Eviction for non-payment of rent is prohibited between the 1st of April and the 30th of September. In the case of social aids applications Hartz IV, property audits and the revision of the amount of the rent paid need to be suspended for six months	Germany	
	Protection of the debtors from real state credits belonging to vulnerable categories	Spain	Mortgage deferment for the main housings of active workers losing their jobs
	Possibility of paying only 60% of the rent	Greece	
	Deferment in the credit reimbursement (main and interests) for individuals and companies until the end of the year	Hungary	
	State Guarantee	Lithuania	Deferred period of 3 to 6 months for mortgage payments (other than the interests) for those who lost their employment
<b>Individuals, autonomous workers, small and medium enterprises</b>	Deferment of the mortgage payment for 9 months	Slovakia	Banks are obliged to approve the applications when the conditions are fulfilled. The deferment will not be registered in the debtor's official records



## 2.1.4. Income

As we have seen, the COVID-19 crisis affects workers in an unequal way. Certain professions are totally protected by teleworking or temporary layoff schemes. Some others have kept their activity, taking the crisis into account (health workers, workers in logistics and commerce workers). The number of unemployed people increased, and some categories of self-employed workers were especially affected as certain businesses were forced to close and others were indirectly affected. In most Member States measures to secure the income of the self-employed workers were applied. In Belgium for instance a bridging-allowance was provided to those self-employed that had to close their business as a direct or indirect consequence of the Covid-19 crisis. Other priority recipients were families with children. In Belgium ad hoc parental leave schemes were provided to parents who could no longer send their children to day-care centres or kindergartens due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In direct relation to the health crisis, most of the Member States have also implemented substitution income aimed at people affected by COVID-19, if these were not already covered by normal social protection schemes:

- ▶ quarantined people,
- ▶ sick people.

These measures aim to limit under-declarations and continuing with an activity involving contamination risks, with the suspension, in particular, of the qualification period to be eligible to sick leave, and special measures targeted at self-employed workers.

- ▶ people who suspended their activity to take care of their children.

Hence, measures aimed at maintaining the resources in case of income loss related to the disease.

Target population	Measures	Country	Details
<b>Vulnerable homes not protected by any other social aid measure</b>	Temporary money transfer subject to resources	Italy	The two months benefit, and its amount is 400€ and 800€ monthly
	Extension of the minimum income to 1.2 million additional recipients	Germany	
<b>Families that receive the allowance per child, families who lose their income due to COVID-19</b>	Additional allowance	Germany	300 euros per child
	Temporary allowance		185 euros/child/month with simplified conditions
<b>Self-employed workers, such as artists and nurses</b>	Direct subsidies	Germany	Maximum of 15000 euros throughout 3 months
<b>Self-employed workers</b>	Labour incapacity benefit for more than 8 days	Cyprus	Compensation to be paid by the sickness insurance from the first day



# Social protection measures taken by the EU member states to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Target population	Measures	Country	Details
Self-employed workers, parents of children younger than 12	Financial aid	Portugal	438 euros for 6 months. About 2/3 of the average salary
Individuals not receiving any kind of income	Benefit	Slovakia	Maximum amount: 210 euros / month
Employees with parental responsibilities, with one or more children younger than 14	Parental leave	Austria	Up to 3 weeks of parental leave (with full substitution of the salary, 1/3 of the salary will be reimbursed to the employer by the Government)
Single-member companies and self-employed workers affected by the crisis	Aid in cash	Austria	Established by Austrian Economical Chamber. Maximum amount of the compensation for the net loss of income per period: 2000€ (maximum total: 12000€, minimum 500€)
Families with children younger than 14 with one or both parents who, being unemployed, are not eligible for the unemployment subsidy	Single allowance	Bulgaria	375 BGN allowance (about 190€)
People with a low-level income	Minimum income guaranteed (IMG), 5 million recipients	Spain	
Employees absent in order to prevent spreading a transmissible disease, like the coronavirus Parents of a child younger than 16 under quarantine, who cannot go on working during quarantine	Sickness benefit	Finland	There is no waiting period in order to be eligible for this sickness allowance, granting a complete compensation for the loss of income
Families receiving an active solidarity rent (RSA) or an allowance of specific solidarity (ASS)  Families not benefiting from RSA or ASS, but receiving a housing subsidy	“Emergency aid”	France	150 euros per child, plus 100 euros per child, paid afterwards  100 euros per child

# Social protection measures taken by the EU member states to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic



Target population	Measures	Country	Details
<p>Employees of companies stopped by the State</p> <p>Household with minor children, recipients of the minimum income</p> <p>Long-term unemployed people, registered</p> <p>Specific professionals</p> <p>Health and civil protection staff</p>	<p>Benefit</p> <p>Special financial aid</p> <p>Financial aid</p> <p>Easter extra pay</p>	Greece	<p>800 euros, including the payment of their contributions to social security</p> <p>534 euros + 100 euros for the first child + 50 euros for any of the other children up to a maximum of 300 euros</p> <p>400 euros under the condition of not benefiting from any other State aid</p> <p>600 euros financial aid</p>
<p>Workers with an income lower than 40000 € per year</p> <p>Vulnerable households without any other assistance measures</p> <p>Self-employed workers, including agricultural, tourism and culture workers</p>	<p>Non-taxable and unique allowance</p> <p>Additional allowance</p>	Italy	<p>100€ for March 2020 if, because of their work, the worker had to attend their usual workplace</p> <p>Between 400€ and 800€ per month for two months</p> <p>1000€ for self-employed workers proving a 30% decrease of their income between March and April, compared with the same period last year</p>
Self-employed workers	Additional allowance for livelihood expenses	The Netherlands	Implemented by the councils. Depending on the income and the structure of the household, the compensation for livelihood expenses will complement the income up to the maximum of the minimum guaranteed income, and it will not need to be reimbursed. In order to avoid delays in the allowance payment, the couple's income or the goods from the self-employed worker will not be taken into account
Parents who need to stay home in order to take care of their children	Daily allowance	Sweden	90% of the allowance amount for the parental permit
People sick from COVID	Minimum allowance in order to compensate the absence days from the sick leave	Sweden	700 Coronas for wage earners. 804 Coronas for self-employed workers. Suppression of the working day of sick leave due to coronavirus
Quarantined people	Sick leaves paid to workers who must be under quarantine in order to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus	Finland	



# Social protection measures taken by the EU member states to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Target population	Measures	Country	Details
Self-employed workers or employees affiliated to any of the social security regimes	The isolation periods due to COVID-19 will be assimilated to a work accident for the compensation of the special regime of the social security	Spain	From the date on which the worker is isolated or sick, this provision is extended to the special regimes staff
Self-employed workers	Specific allowance	Spain	Linked to the cessation of activities or to the suspension of the activity
Self-employed workers and other SME	Single cash transfers. A 1500 euros transfer will be granted in the framework of the 196 Solidarity Fund (new)	France	
Quarantined people Parents taking care of sick children	“sick leaves and daily compensations”	France	Up to 20 days without a “waiting period”
Employees and self-employed workers	Extension of sick pay in order to include the quarantine coverage and healthcare to members of the sick person’s family members	Ireland	Sick pay and additional benefits are designed in order to guarantee that self-employed workers follow medical advice to self-isolate, at the same time they protect their income in a more important way than in the social protection system
Self-employed workers who paid social security contributions	Assignment	Lithuania	257 euros monthly for a maximum period of 3 months when they can’t do their job due to quarantine
Self-employed persons with less than 10 employees	Non reimbursable and non-taxable aid	Luxemburg	Non-reimbursable and non-taxable aid of 2500 euros
Self-employed persons (whatever number of employees they have)	Direct aid		Direct aid of 3000, 3500 or 4000 euros according to the level of income of the affected worker
All insured workers	Sick leave		National Social Insurance Fund (CNS) is in charge of paying the sick workers from the first day they fall sick
Self-employed workers	Special benefit	Romania	75% of the national average gross salary (5429 RON)
Self-employed workers	Sick benefits for all the workers during the pandemic, from the first day	Slovenia	70% of the net minimum salary Paid by the Institute for Health Insurance of Slovenia, and not by the employer
Older persons	Solidarity supplement for the recipients of minimal and low pensions	Spain	300€ for the minimum pension, 230€ and 130€ for low pensions





## 2.1.5. Childcare

Most of the States have implemented compensation mechanisms for the cessation of activity due to taking care of children or nursery expenses coverage. In all countries, the collective nursery system for children, like the school system, has reduced or even stopped its activity. On the other hand, COVID-19 might have affected some children. So, coverage mechanisms have

been implemented for sick leave regarding childcare, with a time limit in most countries, extending the existing benefits (e.g. Belgium) or through ad hoc benefit (e.g. Spain, Italy, Poland and Rumania). Belgium has also made provisions for some centres to receive children from parents subject to special social or working conditions. Denmark has also introduced accompaniment measures for the end of the lockdown, establishing allowances aimed at children's holidays.

Target population	Measures	Country	Details
	Suppression of conditions on the allowance for children's nursery	Austria	
Parents of children younger than 12 or of a child with special educational needs	During COVID-19, special parental permit to support parents (corona parental permit)	Belgium	The compensation for this parental permit will be 25% higher than the usual allowance for the parental permit
Autonomous workers who need to take care of their children	Temporary allowance for care	Belgium	
	Access for families to the reception in after-school activities with or without accommodation, accompaniment	Belgium	Nursery schedules and modes adapted to specific social situations or atypical working days
Employees in the private sector for the care of children up to 15	Granting a "special permit" to parents due to the suspension of school classes, in private and public schools, nurseries and kindergartens	Cyprus	
	Funding to offer summer holidays to vulnerable families	Denmark	Seventeen organizations and charities will receive funding to aid vulnerable families to go on holidays during summer
Parents who need to take care of their children	Family allowance to pay parents who need to take care of their children during the closing of schools, and when their companies are not able to provide alternatives	Spain	
Parents working with children (teaching and nursery of early childhood)	Special permit for parents to look after their children during the closing of teaching centres and nurseries for early childhood during the COVID-19 crisis	Greece	For parents employed in the private sector, the Government covers 1/3 of their salary, while the employers must pay the rest



# Social protection measures taken by the EU member states to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Target population	Measures	Country	Details
Parents of children younger than 12	Permit that can be extended up to 30 combined days	Italy	50% of the salary paid by the State. Absence related to a quarantine is considered as sick leave, and the State bears the expenses
Private sector workers with children younger than 12 deciding not to benefit from the parental leave	Increase of the value of the vouchers to pay the nursery	Italy	Nursery vouchers up to 1200€ for workers. The voucher can reach 2000€ for health sector workers. The vouchers can also be used for summer camps
Parents or legal custodians of children younger than 8	Additional allowance of 14 days in case the nursery, club, kindergarten or school the child is attending is closed due to coronavirus	Poland	The payment period of the additional allowance (14 days) is not included in the general limit of 60 days allowance
Parents taking care of children younger than 12 (whose schools are closed)	Paid leave for one of the parents	Romania	75% of the salary per business day, but not more than 75% of the gross average salary at a national level

## 2.2. A pragmatic management

Taking into account the urgent responses, Member States have modified existing allowances or created temporary allowances limited to the crisis period.

Regarding the existing allowances, their amounts have been increased, or they have been extended to cover different recipients who were not benefiting from them. Almost all the countries have eliminated the qualifying periods (unpaid days prior to compensated sick leave in case of common illness).

The sick leave was extended not only to the sick people, but also to quarantined people or people obliged to stop their activity to take care of a sick child or not included in the school system or nurseries. In the latter case, a parental permit has been frequently requested.

However, specific allowances have been introduced, whether because the specific categories were not receiving any coverage, such as self-employed workers

in some countries, or because the countries have preferentially opted for an allowance that is adjusted to the duration of the crisis (coverage of the lack of income linked to the different aforementioned causes). New allowances, universal or aimed at specific recipients have been created.

During normal times, the social benefits systems, and particularly of social aid, have high rates of non-claiming or rejection. In that case, the possible recipients do not know their rights, or the beneficiaries decide not to claim when confronted with the complexity of the proceedings. Public powers are often resigned to this situation as it has the advantage of allowing budgetary savings. During the COVID-19 crisis, the scope of needs, as well as the immediate public healthcare goals linked to the different benefits, have led to measures of simplification in order to facilitate access to the benefits:

- ▶ suspension of the conditions
- ▶ reduction in the reference periods (e.g. Austria and Germany)



- ▶ purely declarative system for certain benefits or automatic renewal (e.g. France, Greece and Italy)

Taking into account the difficulty to locate the intermediary categories that are not among the beneficiaries of the social aid, there has been recourse to similar systems regarding their goals. However, this has not exactly covered the target beneficiary population. For instance, in France people receiving a housing allowance have been included among the

beneficiaries of the exceptional aid, inasmuch as their situation may be similar to the beneficiaries of the minimum income.

On the other hand, the use of the new information technologies has been increased in order to bypass the closing of the public offices (e.g. Italy), but also to streamline the declarations of benefits (e.g. Greece, Ireland and Romania).

Measure	Country
Parents losing their income due to COVID-19 can more easily access child benefits	Germany
A simplified process of allowance per child has been established ( <i>Kinderzuschlag</i> ), with an income test of one month instead of six	
Temporary waiver of the conditions for claiming childcare allowance (that is, compulsory medical examinations that, in general, need to be performed in specific moments of the pregnancy and until the child is 5)	Austria
Temporary waiver of the requirement of regularly being interviewed by the social worker in the labour market service in order to receive unemployment subsidies	
Maintaining the allowances of the family assignment fund despite the lack of quarterly statements	France
Parents and tutors can register online for places in educational centres and nurseries for early childhood (ECEC)	Greece
Recipients of the guaranteed minimal income from the solidarity social income	
They are relieved from presenting a new application on expiration of the re-certification period of the allowances, except if they have opted for doing so. Three consecutive extensions have been granted, in the case of the benefits approved which have expired since February. The same extensions are also granted in the case of the housing allowance	
Extension of the coverage, adapting and relaxing the eligibility criteria for the existent regimes or introducing new benefits	Ireland
Immediate extension of the coverage of sickness benefits	
Guaranteeing the quickness of the sickness benefits, eliminating unpaid waiting periods (or using technology to guarantee a quick payment)	
Easing or suspension of the eligibility criteria or of the expected conditions for the different allowances	Italy
Accessing the Lithuanian family card is already possible through an application called virtual Family Card, additional means that offer reductions to families with more than three children	Lithuania
The family permit cannot be denied	Luxembourg
Simplified procedures for the applications of a special permit due to family reasons, because of the closure of schools, with public financial support	



Measure	Country
The expired allowances for people currently in maternity leave are extended until the end of the emergency	Hungary
All the conditions related to the programme of guaranteed minimal income are suppressed until July 2020, except the acceptance of an employment offer in the home municipality	Italy
For employers contracting at least 50 employees at 30th June 2019, the final date to reach agreements on the retirement regimes for employees needs to be extended until September 2020	Poland
All the social aid allowances can now be requested electronically (e-mail, online applications)	Romania
The conditions for school assistance have been eased	
In order to facilitate the tasks of the countries and regions, suppression of the obligations for statement in 2020 related to five agreements between the Central Government and the Swedish Association of Local Powers (SALAR)	Sweden

## 2.3. Specific measures for certain categories

### 2.3.1. Specific categories

Certain categories have shown to be particularly vulnerable, particularly as a consequence of the lockdown.

Two main categories can be distinguished:

- ▶ people whose vulnerability has been aggravated by COVID-19; they are elder people or women who are victims of domestic violence, minor children;
- ▶ people who are not mostly targeted by the social mechanisms, such as students and apprentices. In the case of students, for instance, the lockdown has meant the suppression of access to collective dining facilities and has ended access to part-time supplementary employment. This, in turn, has provoked problems in the response to basic needs. On the other hand, the characteristics of student accommodation have generated difficulties during the lockdown. In addition to the material aspects, sometimes the reinforcement of the psychological accompaniment has been needed.

### 2.3.2. Evolution of social work practices

In most countries, the detection of already vulnerable populations has been subject to an adaptation of the available measures. For the populations that have been already weakened by the crisis, the acknowledgement of the difficulties has been progressively made. It stresses the need for a permanent observation function as well as, as far as possible, for the anticipation of the difficulties and, at least, tracing in real time the emerging difficulties. The COVID-19 has affected, in the area of social aid, an important number of households who were not known by the social services. The way this information is retrieved, its capitalisation and future use constitute the legacy of this crisis, without prejudice of the rules regarding the protection of the individual data.

In addition, the lockdown has led to the modification of the social work practices. Obligated to be locked down the same as other workers, social workers had to review their practices. For the purpose of keeping contact, “green numbers” for free calls have been developed (e.g. in France), Internet platforms (e.g. Germany, Latvia and Sweden).



Target population	Measures	Country	Details
People with disabilities	"Green number" for people whose families cannot take care for medical reasons	France	
Domestic violence	"Green number"	France	
People with mental illness	Keeping contact through all digital means	Sweden	
Children and young people	Emergency counselling platform for young people	Germany	Additional federal funding in order to increase the capacity of the platform and develop an application allowing access to the assistance
Vulnerable children and young people, vulnerable adults and disabled people, drug addicts	During the lockdown, accompaniment in order to reassure and fight against loneliness and with the mental disorders of vulnerable groups	Denmark	
Homeless people	Hygiene kit, food and drinks, information on prevention measures	Spain	
Parents and tutors	Freephone number to support parents	Latvia	The inspection in charge for the protection of children conducted a campaign named "I educate one!" that allows to receive psychological aid and support
Children	Distribution of books to children at their home	Malta	Ministry of Education and Employment and Ministry of Culture
Children	Children can ask questions about the COVID-19 crisis	Spain	#LaInfanciaPregunta [ChildhoodAsks] initiative: it encourages children to express their concerns and ask questions about the COVID-19 crisis to the Spanish Government

## 2.4. Measures regarding social contributions

Although in the first moment, social protection and aid were used to provide social benefits, afterwards the system was broadly used to contribute to maintaining economic activity.

All the possibilities were used, such as exemptions of burden focused in an economic area (e.g. Hungary) or in a category of workers (e.g. Spain). In some

cases, social contributions have been taken over by the State (e.g. Germany and Sweden). In some other cases, it is just a postponement (e.g. Portugal). Traditionally, social protection systems provide their contribution, together with the budgetary policy, to the automatic stabilisation goals of the economy. In terms of the COVID-19 crisis, they contribute, then, massively to keeping the purchasing power of the individuals, but also to the financial safeguard of the employers. The main advantage is they are received in real time, relieving the burden for the employers or increasing the purchasing power of the employees,



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through the almost total absence of paperwork, compared with the budgetary measures aimed at employment. The counterpart, when they are not

compensated by the States, is the burden, that weighs on the sustainability of social protection.

Measure	Country
The contributions to social security that the employers must normally pay for their staff are totally reimbursed by the Federal Employment Agency	Germany
Lifting the requirements in the contributions to social security in the case of small and medium-sized enterprises not dismissing their employees. Adjusting the contributions to the social security system for self-employed workers whose income had fallen due to the crisis (exemption of 75% of the employer's contribution or 100% for companies with less than 50 employees, under the condition that staff are kept on)	Spain
Reduction of the pension contributions up to the end of 2020. The pension funds might grant, upon request, a deferment that can last up to 3 months for the retirement bonus paid by employers and self-employed workers	Finland
Sectors that are particularly affected by the crisis (tourism, hospitality industry, leisure, sport, cultural services, personal transport/taxi companies) are exempt from the payment of social security	Hungary
Modification of social contributions increased on the overtime hours to take into account the increase in the activity of some sectors due to the COVID-19 crisis	The Netherlands
Deferment in social contributions	Belgium Portugal
All the contributions from the temporarily laid-off employees and paid to the sickness and retirement insurance regimes will be covered by the State and the insured person's rights will be preserved The affected autonomous workers will be exempt from the payment of contributions. During this period, the contributions to the health assistance and retirement insurance regimes will be paid by the State on their behalf.	Slovenia
A temporary reduction of the employer contributions to social security was proposed. It will come into force from the 30th June 2020. This reduction is applicable up to 30 employees and when the monthly salary is not over 25000 SEK (2500 USD). For self-employed retailers, a reduction in the individual contributions is also proposed. The only contribution that needs to be paid is the old-age pension.	Sweden



## 3. Lessons learned for SOCIEUX+?

Social protection schemes have acted as automatic economic stabilisers during the COVID-19 crisis. Large segments of the European population affected by the crisis were protected by the schemes that were in place or that were created specifically to address the social and economic impact of the crisis. The COVID-19 crisis reveals the need for a flexible organisation that can evolve, and it also confirms the relevance of a universal social protection in terms of the covered risks and the categories of the population covered.

### 3.1. A more cooperative social organisation, better informed and equipped with new competences

The need of covering, during times of crisis, the primary needs that do not show up in normal times depends, most of the times, on a social aid that is deployed at a local level.

#### 3.1.1. Governance: better organising the cooperation of the stakeholders

The lessons from the European experience reveal the importance of an adapted governance. The practices of the partner countries can be used as a base for reflection that allows a good organisation in the member countries, aiming at the safeguard of the capacity to act at local levels, that can better adapt the responses quickly, particularly regarding basic needs (food, housing, etc.).

More than defining an institutional framework, it is about helping recipient countries to identify good practices regarding cooperation and adaptations to the local context that might be introduced. On the occasion of the COVID-19 crisis, it is not about examining the whole of the institutional organisation of a country, but to ensure that the organisation of public powers and the different areas of civil society is efficient and effective. Constitutional frameworks (federalism versus unitary State, for example) impose rules regarding the inter-regional inequalities, and their compensation through national solidarity. Then, at the local level, we also find different dynamics. In health and social policies, the local level is often linked to the pluralist character of services and possible actions, adapting the evenness of the national benefits. Local agreements are better adapted to the complementarity between the public sector and associations. The health dimension and its management modes constitute a structural element of the responses in terms of social aid or protection. Thus, it is particularly interesting that the partner countries are able to study which is the effective organisation in the social field, and how it can be optimised to better answer the COVID-19 crisis, ex ante, during the crisis and ex post.

#### 3.1.2. Observation and identification of the populations

The issue of testing has shown that, even in this essential matter in the health crisis, the capacity to



identify people in need of medical treatment has shortcomings. At the information level, it is still difficult to estimate the contamination and to define a morbidity rate linked to COVID-19. A fortiori, it was difficult to have, from the beginning of the crisis, the information needed to manage the social dimension: territory, particularly vulnerable categories, and also the new psychosocial risks that emerged during this period. The Member States have built systems for the transmission of information, that might be shared, aiming to improve the decision making. In Sweden, for example, social services foresee 1000 visits to establishments where elderly people are lodged, in order to prepare a report in 2021. France foresees longitudinal studies in order to follow the effects, among others, of the recently identified psychosocial risks.

Furthermore, information systems, frequently focused on the fight against fraud and errors, have been broadly mobilised in order to not leave anyone behind. This lesson might be very valuable for the countries where the informal economy is still very prevalent.

European countries typically could use existing population registers, civil registration systems and identity systems which were helpful for identifying populations. Further investment in such schemes, if these registers are deficient, might be important for low- and middle-income countries.

### 3.1.3. Evolution of social work

The lockdown has obliged social work to evolve. The institutions which receive the public have been closed. Tele-working has developed and, paradoxically, for

some services home visits or phone calls have become a more common practice. Social work practices have digitised also (e.g. digital consultations). SOCIEUX+ could propose initial and continuous training of social workers to share the newly acquired ways of working.

### 3.1.4. Surveys in partner countries reveal the relevance of European experiences

The questions asked to the correspondents in the partner countries have revealed two primary topics:

- ▶ food aid;
- ▶ the fight against impoverishment of the households that are affected by COVID-19.

These topics are well covered by the measures implemented in the European Union. Furthermore, as a study by ILO shows, countries are among others worried about guaranteeing access to quality health care, ensuring income security and protecting workers in the informal economy. The Covid-19 pandemic is generally seen as a wake-up call for accelerating the building of social protection schemes, including floors.

A survey regarding migrants has also been done. It shows that migrants are under-represented in the population of the partner countries, compared to the situation of the European Union States.

## 3.2. The need for a universal health insurance and child allowances

It is very obvious that the COVID-19 crisis consolidates the core concepts of SOCIEUX+<sup>1</sup> regarding the

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1 • Consolidation of the capacities through the training of national and regional institutions for social protection;  
• General diagnosis of social security;  
• Drafting general legislative texts on social security and subsequent regulations;  
• Financial regulation of social protection (social insurance);





development of a universal social protection schemes, progressively including people in the informal economy. However, there are two topics that are significantly reinforced: universal healthcare coverage and an extended system for family allowances.

### 3.2.1. The need to overcome the gratuity of healthcare in case of crisis

Access to healthcare linked to COVID-19 has been broadly covered. However, the gratuity of healthcare has shown its limits. It can answer the needs linked to a health crisis or a limited range of health care, but the option in favour of a universal medical coverage has shown its value for the prevention and healthcare of the whole of the pathologies. Even more, categories that are often reluctant to register in the universal regime, such as self-employed workers or informal workers, were able to verify the interest of this coverage.

### 3.2.2. A family policy, foundation of the fight against household poverty

The other stressed aspect is regarding the policies aimed at families. Family policy doesn't have as its only goal the fight against poverty. However, as shown by the place of children in the measures established as a result of COVID-19, this tool is particularly efficient.

## 3.3. Need for coherence

Even if the perspective remains insufficient today to extract consequences of a crisis that has not yet ended in Europe, where it might reappear and it is still in development in the partner countries, some

elements of the follow-up of the crisis deserve to be shared.

### 3.3.1. Reinforcing non-institutional partners

The COVID-19 crisis has contributed to weaken some stakeholders of social policies.

In addition to the aforementioned governance of public stakeholders, foreseeing a support plan for social and family tourism, entertainment, social centres, integration, vocational training, culture and sport stakeholders is needed. These collaborators, who contribute to social integration, and thus to good social policies, emerge weakened from the current period. It prevents them from accessing private donations, but also to count on the volunteers they need for their actions.

The intervening establishments in the reception of vulnerable people (disabled people, elderly people, and also homeless people and drug addicted people) have seen their activity adversely affected. The definition of a continuity plan of the activities needs to be implemented to confront restrictions such as the lockdown, in order to cover the professions of healthcare, but also the accompaniment, entertainment and catering functions. Meanwhile, the planning from establishments and home services needs to be improved in order to adsorb the redeployment of people in the closed establishments, who had to return to their homes.

In addition, the development of a digital offer for access to rights promotes a new reflection on the minimal training on digital issues for the prospective users, simultaneously preserving the traditional supports, such as radio, with an important level of reliability.

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- Social dialogue in order to foster the extension of the social protection coverage;
  - Social marketing, communication services and public relations of the social protection entities.



### 3.3.2. Reinforcing learning between countries and within the States

Whatever the organisation and heterogeneity of the sub-national structures of the partner countries, the conceptual framework of the Open Method of Coordination open method (OMC), used within the European Union in the areas of employment and social protection, has shown its full relevance. This method does not result in binding legislative measures, but it might lead to a cooperation framework between neighbouring countries, which national policies could focus on certain common goals, but also between communities from the same country with competences in the area of social protection:

- ▶ identification and joint definition of goals that need to be fulfilled;
- ▶ some jointly defined measurement tools (statistics, indicators, guidelines);
- ▶ benchmarking, that is, the comparison of the results of the EU countries and the exchange of best practices.

SOCIEUX+ could make the methodological repertory of the OMC available for the partner countries. Furthermore, Socieux+ could also lead cooperation initiatives on request of a group of countries per continent to organise learning among countries of a certain region.



## Conclusion

All European countries took measures in the field of social protection and basic services during the spring and summer of 2020 to mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas goals were similar, the measures taken differ substantially. This study gives an overview of the variety of measures taken by EU member states, mainly at national level, during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (up to the end of July 2020). The study is based on a literature review, written surveys sent in French or English to EU delegations, social protection administrations and counsellors for social affairs in French embassies, and interviews done by phone with these actors. The study finds that guaranteeing quality health care and rapid deployment of universal health insurance, maintaining income (especially for families with children and for self-employed people) and complementing social assistance benefits for vulnerable people form the common denominator of the policies implemented by the member states. Also measures to guarantee access to basic services, such as food, housing and energy are common. Furthermore, several states have used the temporary exemption of social contribution payments to maintain economic activity.

To deliver these services and cash transfers, new governance structures have been established. The local level has been reinforced as it can easily identify local groups at risk and quickly respond. Furthermore, digitalisation, the use of (new) social work

practices, and less restrictive conditions for benefit entitlement (in order to leave no one behind) can be mentioned. Coordination among national, regional and local entities, among different types of actors (state entities, civil society, charities, ...), across fields of intervention and across task forces established to address Covid-19 issues is key.

Regarding what SOCIEUX+ can offer to low and middle-income countries, the survey correspondents in the partner countries identified food aid and maintaining income as immediate needs. However, emergency crisis responses need to be complemented in the mid-term with the implementation of universal social protection, including floors. In particular universal health insurance and family allowances are pivotal. Hence, the usual peer-to-peer expertise exchange offered by SOCIEUX+ remains of great value. In addition, regional events could be organised to foster benchmarking and learning among countries, as has been done in Europe through the Open Method of Coordination. Moreover, the remote (training) activities and simplified requests, initiated as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, satisfy some of the needs of partner countries.

To conclude, the diverse experiences of the European member states to address the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic offer many learning opportunities: social protection is a powerful lever to mitigate socio-economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.



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## About SOCIEUX+

The European Union (EU) fosters and maintains ongoing dialogue on social protection and inclusive employment policies with a broader number of partner countries. This effort has been confirmed by the European Commission (EC) Communication COM (2016) 740 final - "Proposal for a New European Consensus in terms of Development, under the title 'Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future'". An important number of cooperation initiatives in these areas is funded by geographical or thematic instruments of the EU in different countries. These initiatives are highly structured and they give response to middle and long term initiatives of the partner countries. However, some short-term measures and peer cooperation tending to promote the development of social protection systems are needed to complement the EU cooperation with third-party countries.

SOCIEUX+ has been established and funded by the EU through a co-funding of France, Spain and Belgium, as well as resources managed by the Directorate General for Development and Cooperation of the European Commission (EuropeAid). This ability for technical cooperation is applied by an association consisting of agencies for the development cooperation from the Member States: Expertise France (main partner of the association), the Fundación Internacional y para Iberoamérica de Administración y Políticas Públicas (FIIAPP), the Belgian International Cooperation on Social Protection (BELINCOSOC) and the Agence Belge de Développement (Enabel, Belgian Development Agency).

The main goal of SOCIEUX+ consists in contributing to the extension and improvement of access to better employment opportunities and to inclusive social protection systems in the partner countries. Its specific goal is increasing the capacities of the partner countries aiming to improve the design, management and surveillance of sustainable and efficient strategies for employment, as well as social protection systems, thanks to the development of knowledge and to peer technical support in the short term.

SOCIEUX+ acknowledges the impact of social protection and employment on the reduction of poverty and vulnerability. It supports the efforts from the partner governments aiming to promote sustainable and inclusive systems for employment and social protection.

This tool is an extension of SOCIEUX (Social Protection EU Expertise in Development Cooperation), established in 2013.

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