

European Coordination Group on Social Protection in International Development (ESPG) meeting

Date: 5 June 2025

Venue: Hybrid: Online and In-Person (VIP Room, DG INTPA)

Main participants:

AT

Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection

BE

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Enabel

SOCIEUX+

CZ

Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs

DE

BMZ

GIZ

ES

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

FIAPP

FR

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Ministry of Labour

Expertise France

AFD

HR

Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs

HU

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade

IE

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade

LV

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

PT

Ministry of Labour

RO

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

SE

SIDA

European Commission

DG INTPA G4

DG INTPA G1

DG INTPA G2

DG INTPA A2

DG INTPA B2

DG INTPA F3

DG EMPL

DG ECHO

DG ENEST

DG MENA

Guest presenters:

International Labour Organization (ILO)

Action Contre la Faim

WIEGO - NGO

CONCORD – NGO platform

Introduction: Opening remarks

DG INTPA G4 welcomed members of the European Social Protection Group (ESPG). INTPA thanked both in-person and online participants, noting representation from 11 countries. ESPG had now been registered as a special informal group in the RegExp BackOffice, with its Terms of Reference and privacy statement uploaded, and a dedicated Capacity4Dev page now available.

INTPA also welcomed Ireland as a co-chair, taking over from Belgium, and thanked the Belgian team for over two years of collaboration. The focus of EU development cooperation was evolving towards investment and the Global Gateway, and it was important to position social protection (SP) as a key enabler of sustainable development and just transitions. INTPA also flagged upcoming global events – including the G20, FfD4 in Seville, the World Social Summit in Doha, Qatar, and COP30 in Brazil – as key opportunities to elevate social protection in the political agenda.

1. Institutional updates on Social Protection: EU policies and programming – INTPA/NEAR/ECHO

DG INTPA G4 opened the session by presenting key institutional development on social protection and inequalities, with a focus on INTPA evolving policy framework including the Global Gateway and its 360-degree approach as relevant on the social agenda. INTPA colleagues provided updates on programmatic development, including the EU-funded Digital Convergence Initiative which was focusing on standard-

setting, country-level implementation, and capacity building. The fourth phase of SOCIEUX+ continued to promote technical cooperation on social protection and labour across EU external action regions. The EU's Equality Flagships align I-Marker scoring with Global Gateway priorities to exemplify impactful actions addressing inequalities. INTPA G4 also presented the knowledge development strategy for social protection and inequalities, including ongoing publications, events, and digital learning tools supporting EU Delegations and partner countries.

DG INTPA B2 presented the Team Europe Initiative (TEI) on Inclusive and Equitable Societies in Latin America and the Caribbean, outlining how this flagship regional programme supported social innovation, care policies, and gender equality.

DG INTPA A2 updated participants on the Team Europe Initiative (TEI) on Social Protection in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), highlighting progress in mapping EU Member States' contributions, strengthening regional coordination, and refining the TEI's collective narrative and workplan.

DG ECHO provided an overview of evolving approach to humanitarian safety nets, highlighting a new compilation of country experiences, and participation in the SPIAC-B Working Group on linking humanitarian and social protection responses.

DG MENA explained the recent institutional reorganisation of DG NEAR, clarifying that support to social protection continues through bilateral and regional programming. Emphasis was placed on employment, youth, and inclusive policies under the New Pact for the Mediterranean.

DG ENEST A2 presented DG ENEST engagement in social protection in the Western Balkans, focusing on human capital reform agendas, ongoing support via SOCIEUX+, and the alignment with EU enlargement processes through [Chapter 19](#) coordination¹.

2. Tour de table – Institutional updates by ESPG members

AT reaffirmed its interest in contributing to inclusive social protection through multilateral dialogue and expertise-sharing. At present, AT supports bilateral projects in RS, BA, MK, AL, MD, UA, GE, PS, BF, UG and ET. These focus on poverty eradication, promoting social resilience, combating homelessness, providing care and health services as well as fighting gender-based-violence. Furthermore, AT has supported multilateral initiatives from UNHCR and WHO focussing on humanitarian aid in crisis regions.

DE presented four evolving priorities in its approach to international cooperation on social protection: first, improving coordination and fostering global alliances; second, linking social protection with climate action, including advocacy for SP to feature in the COP30 Presidential Declaration in Brazil; third, engaging in fragile and conflict-affected settings, notably through the Adaptive Social Protection Programme programme in the Sahel; and fourth, accelerating digitalisation of SP systems in cooperation with the European Commission through the Digital Convergence Initiative.

BE outlined its Team Belgium approach, which combined multilateral, bilateral, and regional engagement. BE contributes to various ILO programmes including the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions (GA). BE (via Enabel) has bilateral programmes focusing on UHC and social protection in health in Burundi, the DRC and Senegal Guinea, Benin and Senegal and is leading preparations for a regional conference on social health protection in Dakar (2026). BE also funds (via Enabel) programmes focusing on Decent Work in Benin, DRC, Guinea, Morocco and Uganda. Since 2024, BE is also contributing a full-time expert to the TEI on Social Protection in SSA.

PT stressed the importance of gender-responsive and rights-based SP. PT was supporting reforms in Lusophone countries including Guinea-Bissau and implementing a trilateral project with FR in Mozambique on formalisation, social dialogue, and decent work. PT emphasised the need for SP systems that address the care economy and the realities of informal work.

¹ https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership/chapters-acquis_en

ES confirmed its longstanding commitment to SP as a strategic axis of development policy. ES was a key contributor to the GA and the Joint SDG Fund, and supported the M-GA in facilitating ILO-WB cooperation. ES was advocating for a ministerial declaration on SP under SDG 8 and would actively participate in the WSS. As a host of the FfD4 (Sevilla), it promoted increased domestic investment in SP.

ES - FIAP presented Spain's leadership in the TEI on Inclusive and Equitable Societies in Latin America and the Caribbean and highlighted ongoing projects in Chile and Costa Rica on SP digitalisation and formalisation. ES also mentioned employment-focused initiatives in Mexico and Moldova, and support to institutional development in Georgia. The focus spanned social cohesion, care, and inclusive digital transformation.

LV described its bilateral focus on Moldova, noting that although it was not part of large-scale programmes, it contributed targeted technical support and shared EU accession-related experience. LV requested more clarity and coordination from the EU to better align smaller EU Member States' efforts with broader programming.

CZ provided updates on Moldova and Ukraine. It was supporting Moldova's social services reform and coordinating with Ukrainian institutions on decentralised service delivery. CZ highlighted the complexity of aligning EU support with accession negotiations, particularly Chapter 19, and stressed the need for structured priorities in Moldova's accession path.

SOCIEUX+ had received 22 requests since January 2025. Key themes included social security coordination (e.g. Moldova), social assistance and income guarantees (25%), social services and work (13%), and OSH (12%). Two new e-courses would launch in June: on equitable SP in health; and on labour market inclusion of persons with disabilities in low-income countries.

RO outlined efforts to strengthen both institutional and individual capacities. Forty per cent of RO's official development assistance (ODA) on SP went to Moldova, with activities focusing on gender-based violence response and social inclusion. RO also supported partnerships with CSOs and the private sector to implement projects in priority countries.

FR reaffirmed its commitment to universal and rights-based SP systems and highlighted the importance of resilience and just transitions. SP should address the needs of the most vulnerable, be responsive to climate and biodiversity risks, and integrate platform and informal workers. FR was following the SP agenda in South Africa and the G20 closely, and underscored the importance of domestic resource mobilisation. Gender equality and human rights remained guiding principles.

SE – SIDA was undergoing an internal change process, and SP remained a focus sector in 15 bilateral strategies in Africa, MENA and Europe. SE also supported capacity building through the EPRI international training programme, and was preparing thematic briefs on SP linkages with climate change, migration, forced displacement and gender. SE continued to contribute to SPIAC-B working groups on humanitarian-development-peace linkages.

HR shared its dual perspective as a recent aid recipient and a new donor. Its cooperation prioritised human dignity, child and women's rights, and youth empowerment. HR provided technical support in post-conflict and democratic transitions (e.g. Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership) and emphasised long-term, multi-annual programming. Projects included a 3-year UNICEF partnership in Moldova and new initiatives in Ukraine to support women's vocational training in the mining sector.

3. Update on International developments on Social Protection

IE, a co-host of the meeting, opened the session with an institutional update on Ireland's international engagement on social protection. IE confirmed its continued support to the ILO and its projects in countries such as Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique and underlined the country's role as a core supporter of the Global Accelerator through the Multi-Partner Grant Agreement (MGA). IE noted that the MGA allowed flexibility in supporting national systems and addressing key bottlenecks, including coverage, fragmentation, and financing.

Reflecting on recent global reports, including the ILO's World Social Protection Report and the World Bank's SP & Jobs Atlas, IE highlighted that while there had been notable progress in coverage globally, many low-income countries still underinvested in social protection, both in terms of domestic spending and donor alignment. In many of these contexts, support was fragmented and channelled through temporary programmes. IE emphasized the need to better make the case for investing in long-term systems, pointing to a growing convergence across international fora such as the G20, the upcoming World Summit for Social Development (WSSD), and the Global Accelerator. Finally, IE mentioned recent participation in the G20 Development Working Group, where Member States including **DE**, **FR**, and **ES** demonstrated strong alignment and collective commitment on social protection.

IE noted the ambition of the Global Accelerator to scale up to 30 pathfinder countries and emphasized the opportunity for the ESPG group to strengthen political positioning around this initiative. IE remained committed to ensuring coordination with key global instruments and would continue advocating for increased financing at the upcoming 4th Financing for Development (FfD4) conference.

DG EMPL presented updates on EU-level engagement in global SP fora. The European Commission continued to play an active role in the International Labour Conference, where key topics under discussion included the proposed Convention and Recommendation on biological hazards in the workplace, decent work in the platform economy, and social security reforms. The Commission was contributing to the ILO's input for the WSS and was also involved in shaping the social dimension of G20 discussions, notably through the EMPL Working Group. Under the Brazilian G20 Presidency, social protection had been highlighted as an enabler of inclusive growth, youth employment, gender equality, and resilience in the digital economy. DG EMPL also reported on progress in the development of the EU position for the WSS, including contributions to the Food-for-Thought paper and two draft political declarations currently under negotiation. The EU had reaffirmed its commitment to promoting adequate, universal, and rights-based social protection as part of a renewed social contract. The Commission was also closely following the FfD4 negotiations and supporting alignment with ILO standards and adequate fiscal space for social investments.

BE followed with a presentation on the lead-up to the UN World Social Summit for Development, which BE will be co-leading with Morocco in Qatar in November 2025. The presentation focused on the negotiation processes and on opportunities for EU Member States to shape the outcome.

The discussion that followed zoomed on the EU's role in shaping a strong and unified voice on social protection at international level, including in the WSS. Participants also pointed to the importance of increasing the number of GA pathfinder countries and consolidating funding channels to reduce transaction costs for governments. Better coordination across donors and multilateral organizations could reduce the burden on partner countries and help with system-building. They also welcomed ongoing reflections on the links between climate finance and social protection, particularly within the context of National Adaptation Plans and eligibility criteria of global climate funds.

4. Mainstreaming Social Protection in the Investment Agenda – Introduction

DG INTPA G4 opened the session, underlining the importance of defending and advancing the social protection agenda in the current challenging context. INTPA stressed the value of collective thinking and coordination to ensure a fair balance between the green and social dimensions of investments. Referring to the EU Global Gateway Strategy, INTPA recalled the need to operationalize the 360-degree approach — linking investment design with an enabling environment that promoted decent work, inclusive services, and social cohesion. Participants were invited to reflect on how Team Europe could further integrate social protection across the investment agenda by building on recent efforts such as the application of the Inequality Marker to EFSD+ - starting with blending operations and to be extended to guarantees for the next call of proposals.

DG INTPA G4 then, presented a conceptual framing of social protection within the Global Gateway, highlighting its role as an enabler of just transitions. The presentation covered three sectoral entry points for integration: the green transition (e.g. support to workers in carbon-intensive sectors), care economy (e.g. investing in early childhood and long-term care), and digital transition (e.g. digital skills for vulnerable

groups). INTPA introduced a set of operational principles for mainstreaming social protection in investment pipelines and noted the need to assess project outcomes not only in terms of returns and infrastructure outputs, but also through their broader contribution to social development and inequality reduction.

ILO, a special guest for the meeting, presented on aligning investment strategies with the objectives of the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions. The ILO team shared updated figures showing that 52.4% of the global population was now covered by at least one form of social protection — a significant increase since 2015 — while warning of persistent underinvestment and financing gaps, particularly in low-income countries. They introduced the ILO's Structural Model for Sustainable Development (SMSD), a tool for assessing the economic and social returns of investments, and highlighted ongoing collaboration with development finance institutions. The discussion underscored the necessity of embedding social protection in national investment strategies and leveraging innovative tools and partnerships — including the Global Gateway's 360-degree approach — to move from political commitments to implementation.

Providing additional details on the SMSD model, ILO explained that it was developed to simulate the employment and income effects of policy measures and investments, both at the household and at macro levels. The model allowed stakeholders like Ministries of Finance and Labour to "speak the same language", bridging technical and political dimensions of reform. Its use of machine learning techniques and national surveys enabled context-specific insights and micro-macro linkages, thereby informing negotiations with governments and development banks.

5. Mainstreaming Social Protection in the Investment Agenda – Discussion on cooperation opportunities

AFD outlined its operational social protection strategy, which rested on four pillars: (i) Universal Health Coverage; (ii) Adaptive Social Protection; (iii) Just Transitions; and (iv) Supporting care policies and programs (aging, dependency, disability, early childhood). Using the Just Energy Transition (JET) in **South Africa** as a flagship case, AFD illustrated how social protection instruments such as public employment programmes and subsidies for the most vulnerable were essential for smoothing the transition and promoting public trust. The South African example highlighted the integration of social investments with structural reforms to mitigate rising inequalities, particularly among NEET youth. AFD also presented sectoral approaches in countries like **KH** (support to voluntary health insurance for self-employed workers and factory employees in the textile sector) and a system-level approach in **MA**, where health insurance reform was being embedded across investments. The agency reaffirmed that social protection must be treated as a core pillar of just transition efforts, not just a complement.

The discussion that followed centred around the specific mechanics of health insurance schemes for informal workers in Asia and how these were integrated into national systems. **AFD** clarified the distinction between individual schemes and pooled insurance mechanisms, noting the importance of equity and risk-sharing. Asked about lending practices, **AFD** highlighted its conservative lending doctrine, forbidding loans to over-indebted countries, and described ongoing technical support efforts in countries such as **KH**, **GE**, and **BR**, often in coordination with **ILO** and **WB**. There was also interest in AFD's experience in supporting care systems in Asia. AFD confirmed its engagement in care-related projects in China and welcomed the possibility of further dialogue.

DE proposed closer collaboration between AFD and KfW in **SSA** and **MA**, and in their co-financing with the World Bank in **GH**. He described IFE+, competitive investment facility for employment where investment proposals from companies and organisations that feature social protection components are prioritised².

² <https://invest-for-jobs.com/en/investing-for-employment>

The **ILO** cautioned that the private sector should support social protection not by purchasing private insurance for their employees, but rather by registering workers and suppliers in statutory schemes, participating in policy dialogue, and improving protection along their entire supply chains.

The discussion concluded with a commitment to further reflect on linking public and private investment strategies with universal and equitable social protection frameworks, with the support of technical tools, financial instruments, and stronger coordination across EU actors and global partners.

6. Exchange with Civil Society Organisations on Social Protection priorities and cooperation opportunities

DG INTPA G4 again welcomed the opportunity for this Team Europe dialogue with civil society organisations (CSOs) and highlighted the longstanding cooperation through the 2024-established INTPA-CSO structured dialogue on social protection and inequality reduction, which meets on a regular basis. INTPA underscored the value of civil society-led research and advocacy and reaffirmed the Commission's openness to continued exchanges, also opening them to the rest of the ESPG members.

The session featured a presentation co-delivered by **representatives from Action contre la Faim, WIEGO and CONCORD**, who introduced the critical importance of universal social protection (USP) as a human right and a key response to current global challenges such as the climate crisis, economic vulnerabilities, and growing inequalities. CSO representatives framed their key question for discussion around the EU's role in supporting partner countries to establish universal social protection systems and floors, aligned with human rights and ILO standards. They emphasised the need for the EU to help close financing gaps, invest in public services, including affordable care, and promote national ownership and systems strengthening. They also pointed to the strategic alignment between social protection and inclusive economic transformation, arguing that social protection enables structural change and reduces inequality. The presentation outlined key international coalitions such as the **Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors, USP2030, the Global Accelerator, INSP!R, Africa Platform for Social Protection (APSP)**, and **WIEGO**, highlighting their efforts to advocate for universal systems. The speakers called attention to opportunities linked to upcoming multilateral processes (FfD4 and WSS), where social protection should be reaffirmed as a development priority and resourced accordingly. Specific policy recommendations were also presented in the context of the next **Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)**, including on proposed increased ODA targets, greater support for local CSOs, and strong ESG safeguards in the use of loans and blending instruments.

In the discussion that followed, participants welcomed the clarity and ambition of the CSO messages. Participants appreciated the framing of social protection as central to addressing systemic challenges and inquired how to better make the case for it politically. CSOs responded by suggesting that contributory schemes, often seen by governments as more sustainable and less fiscally burdensome, could be a strategic entry point.

CSOs shared some concerns over the focus on 'mutual interest' in external cooperation, because it risked leaving certain sectors outside (e.g. primary health care, nutrition), if interests were narrowly interpreted. They also mentioned that the current design of the Global Gateway also risked prioritising EU commercial interests over inequality reduction. CSOs also called for more funding for the external instrument, greater transparency, more grants than loans, and stronger commitments to universal social protection in project designs, including explicit deliverables and indicators aligned with the Inequality Marker and evidence from distributional impact assessments. They also reiterated the importance of inclusive and accessible systems, drawing attention to the needs of persons with disabilities.

In concluding, **DG INTPA G4** acknowledged the points raised and confirmed that the European Commission would continue reflecting on how to make best use of its instruments and policy spaces to support national systems, universal approaches to social protection and inequality reduction. INTPA emphasised the value of ongoing structured engagement with CSOs, especially as the Commission shapes its positioning ahead of global summits and the next EU budget cycle.