

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

Date : 10 December 2025

Venue : Online and in person (VIP Room, DG INTPA)

Main participants:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ministry of Foreign Affairs ○ ENABEL • CY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Permanent Representation to the European Union • DE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ BMZ ○ GIZ • ES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ FIAP • FR <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ministry of Labour, Health, Solidarity and Families ○ Expertise France ○ AFD • HR <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs • IE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Co-Chair) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ SIDA • SL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs • European Commission <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ DG INTPA G4 ○ DG INTPA A1 ○ DG INTPA A2 ○ DG INTPA B1 ○ DG INTPA B2 ○ DG EMPL ○ ED ECHO ○ DG ENEST ○ DG MENA ○ EEAS |
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Guest Presenter:

Susana Martinez- Restrepo, Independent Expert

• Opening Remarks by the Co-Chairs

DG INTPA G4 Head of Unit opened the meeting, welcoming participants online and in person and introducing the new Team Lead for Social Protection, Inequalities, Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Demography, Ms Laure Rogès. INTPA highlighted that in 2025 social protection had been recognised as a crucial enabler of sustainable development in a series of multilateral events– the G20 South African presidency, the Financing for Development Conference, the COP30 in Brazil – and notably, the 2nd World Social Summit (WSS) in Doha. During the WSS, Team Europe presented a unified message on the key themes and a joint programmatic approach through the TEIs. Social protection systems was instrumental to ensure that the green and digital transitions did not lead to increased inequalities. INTPA G4 had been working on redefining its approach to social protection, in line with the Global Gateway. The Global Gateway, as a value-based strategy sought to mobilise public and private investments through partnerships with DFIs and innovative financing instruments.

IE as current Co-Chair, welcomed participants, recognising the importance of the group as the only platform where currently EU Member States and the Commission could work together on social protection in the framework of international development. IE emphasised the need to recognise that the global landscape was changing, especially as far as multilateralism was concerned, with a series of significant reforms taking place – the UN80 reform process, the OECD DAC review and the

Humanitarian Reset amongst others – implying that a business as usual approach no longer applied. The European Commission and EU Member States remained the largest global donor and faced with large of part of the population in low-income countries still deprived of social protection, it was important that programming approaches are adapted to enhance outreach.

1. Institutional updates on Social Protection: EU policies and programming

DG INTPA G4 started the session by mentioning that the Commission had shared its proposal for the next Multiannual Financing Framework (MFF) and negotiations with Member States and the EU Parliament were currently ongoing. The new MFF followed a geographic focus, with inequalities, gender, democracy and social issues dealt within each geographic pillar. Reference was made to the recently held Global Gateway Forum and to the Global Gateway Investment Hub, which was open to receive proposals. The Unit G4 intention had been to integrate social protection in the Global Gateway agenda through a threefold approach: i) by promoting high social impact investments; ii) by mainstreaming social protection and/or a social perspective in the sectorial investment agenda and iii) by operationalising the 360-degree approach through methodologies and tools, currently being defined. In view of the next programming cycle linked to the next MFF, the team was preparing updated social protection guidance for the EU delegations, as well as the forthcoming thematic seminar, planned for April 2026. A new social protection specialist, Ms Marialaura Ena, had joined the Health, Inequalities and Social Protection expert facility (HISP), which continued to provide technical support to the Unit, as well as to DG MENA and ENEST, and to EU Delegations. An update on bilateral as well as global EU programmes was provided, focusing on the Digital Convergence Initiative (DCI) and on Socieux+, the EU expert Facility on Employment, Labour and Social Protection, currently in its 4th implementation phase.

DG INTPA A1 provided an update on the AU-EU Summit held in Angola in November 2025. The Summit saw a good level of participation from Head of States and Government from both sides and concluded with the adoption of a joint declaration that included recognition of the importance of the Global Gateway Investment agenda for the continent's prosperity. The Africa-Europe Business Forum and the Civil Society and Youth Forum were also mentioned as important side events of the Summit.

DG INTPA G4 and ENABEL took turns in presenting the Team Europe Initiative on Social Protection in Sub-Saharan Africa, mentioning an upcoming technical working group on 12th December, to discuss country mapping and examples, as well as 2026 priorities, in view of the contract signature foreseen for the beginning of the new year. The intervention logic of the initiative was presented, highlighting its close linkages with the UN Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection led by the ILO, as well as the Global Gateway planned investments to support energy transition and agricultural supply chains.

DG INTPA A1 presented the TEI on Opportunity-driven Skills and VET in Sub-Saharan Africa (OP-VET), a 5-year initiative co-funded by the EU and BMZ. The initiative, which had been allocated an additional EUR 43 million by the Commission for 2026, invested in strengthening VET systems while looking at establishing job placements and traineeships with the private sector partners. Starting from next year, TEI OP-VET would include two additional pillars, on country-driven skills projects – where linkages with social protection could be prioritised – and on the Africa-Europe Cooperation Mechanism on Skills.

DG EMPL flagged that the European Training Foundation (ETF) was assessing VET system and provided advisory services to African Governments in the framework of bilateral cooperation agreements. DG EMPL also emphasised the importance of engaging with social partners in planning and consultation of activities, in addition to private sector's representatives.

DG INTPA B1 updated on relevant initiatives implemented in Latin America and the Caribbean, specifically mentioning the discussions held at the EU-LAC CSO Forum and Business Forum, both held in Colombia in November 2025. The TEI on Inclusive and Equitable Societies in LAC included a sizeable social protection component amongst its key priority areas of investment. The pilot phase running until end of 2026 was prioritising high impact projects to showcase the 360-degree approach. A social accelerator grant would be launched through a call for proposals to support social innovation initiatives empowering women and youth entrepreneurs.

DG MENA highlighted the challenges brought by the exclusion of informal workers and the importance of promoting decent work and national social protection systems in a context of protracted instability and conflict. Specific reference was made to social protection projects in Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, implemented both through direct budget support and indirect implementation, through a variety of partners. The support to inclusive economies was a key priority for the EU and had been reiterated through the new Pact for the Mediterranean, which included initiatives focusing on skills, employment and innovation as well as women and youth empowerment.

DG ENEST reminded that the social protection agenda was guided by the Chapter 19 of the social acquis in the enlargement context. A new enlargement package of reforms with specific country recommendations was published in November 2025. New funding instruments were being implemented in the field of social protection, education and employment, conditioning disbursement to results, to accelerate pace of reforms in the Western Balkans, Moldova and Ukraine. The European Child Guarantee had been extended to candidate and potential candidate countries, with dedicated technical assistance deployed recently through TAIEX to support the development of National Action Plans.

DG ECHO provided a brief overview of the upcoming communication on humanitarian aid, encompassing the humanitarian principles, the effectiveness of the EU humanitarian response and the importance of strengthening the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus in fragile contexts. Reference was made to ECHO's participation in the High-Level Panel on Social Protection in Fragile settings in November 2025 and to the launch of the Common Donor Approach to Humanitarian Cash Assistance. DG ECHO also mentioned the introduction of updated Multi-Purpose Cash Transfer Indicators.

EEAS explained their role in supporting social protection policy at international level from a political perspective, including by assisting electoral processes, contributing to humanitarian law and promoting an integrated approach to fragility, especially through the work of the EU delegations. EEAS had actively participated in the World Social Summit and recently in South-South Cooperation talks with landlocked countries, where social security was specifically discussed. Besides, EEAS had coordinated the Council meetings dedicated to international development, thus contributing to the formulation of political commitments for social protection through Council Conclusions.

2. Tour de Table on institutional updates by group members EU MS

BE presented its ongoing engagement in social protection programming in international development through the ILO, as well as its support to CSOs operating on decent work and social protection. ENABEL presented its current programming on social health insurance as well as its support for decent work programming across various Sub-Saharan African countries. Reference was made to the solution session organised at the World Social Summit on youth inclusion through social protection and decent work. ENABEL presented events planned for 2026, focusing on building synergies on integrated social protection (in collaboration with DG INTPA) and on Social Health Protection.

SE-SIDA illustrated its human-rights based approach to social protection and presented its contribution to bilateral programming for 2025, mostly focused in Sub-Saharan Africa, and fragile or crisis contexts (Syria, Yemen, Ukraine). SIDA also mentioned the global social protection initiatives supported through multilateral organisations including the UN, but also INGOs and the OECD on evidence generation, capacity development, inclusion of informal workers and women and domestic resource mobilisation, sharing a sample of recent briefs on cross-cutting areas (e.g. forced displacement).

DE was prioritising social protection despite the challenging context, with specific support provided to regions affected by conflict and fragility such as the Sahel, Horn of Africa and MENA. In those contexts, further coherence between social protection system building and humanitarian assistance was implemented through transitional development assistance instruments. In addition to a sizeable contribution of EUR 20 million to the Multi-stakeholder Engagement to Implement the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions and the World Bank Compass (External link), a new contribution of EUR 40 million had just been made to the Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Programme, implemented by the World Bank. Germany was also steering the Task Force on Linking Adaptive Social Protection and Climate Financing including at COP30 and publishing a guidance document on scaling up of social protection for climate action. Reference was made to the recent [Solution Lab](#) led by GIZ in Frankfurt at the end of October on social protection for gig workers.

IE presented their continued focus on policy engagement and financial support for nationally owned life-cycle universal social protection systems. Social protection expenditure overall is approximately EUR 24 million with 9.2 million spent at headquarters, and the remainder through bilateral assistance to national social protection systems in Sub-Saharan Africa. There is a continued emphasis on promoting social protection measures, especially cash assistance, as a policy instrument to support inclusive economic growth, nutrition, education and gender equality, Highlighting also the importance of cash assistance in creating local demand and supporting future social protection systems Ireland's EUR 50 million Child Wasting Initiative includes a strong focus on social protection through a partnership with UNICEF in Madagascar and DRC,. A light-touch review of international partnerships and mapping the use of cash and other social protection measures across programs would be undertaken. Ireland also contributed to the Global Accelerator and participated in the Task Force on Linking Adaptive Social Protection and Climate Financing and in the G20 Call to Action on Social Protection and the Ministerial Declaration which also emphasises social protection and strengthened multilateralism.

HR provided updates on the establishment of a new Commission for International Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid, based on the relevant 2024 Act. The Act had expanded the range of stakeholders in development activities, involving the private sector and NGOs. The total ODA of Croatia in 2024 had amounted to 214.9 million euro, having grown by more than 500% since 2016. The new National Programme for International Development and Humanitarian Aid was structured along geographic priorities (Eastern neighbourhood, with a focus on Ukraine, the Mediterranean and Syria) and three main sectoral areas, including i) education, health and human rights; ii) responsible economic development, green transition and strengthening of SMEs and iii) peace, security and support for democratic institutions, with a focus on transferring knowledge on post-conflict reconstruction. Gender equality was integrated into all programmes.

FR reviewed major events organized in 2025, including the OECD ministerial meeting on social protection held in Paris in February 2025 and the G20 labour ministers' meeting. The OECD meeting explored new horizons for social policies, labour market changes, and financial sustainability of social protection systems. The Declaration adopted specifically emphasised the goal of universal social protection, mentioning sustainability in financing as the first condition of solidarity. The G20 labour ministers' meeting had focused on youth employment and reducing the gender pay gap. The World

Social Summit, where France co-organised a side event with Qatar, produced modest results but succeeded in disseminating innovative policy and projects for social development, poverty eradication, productive employment, and social integration. France highlighted the launch of the Action Plan of the Union for the Mediterranean in November 2025, which included specific reference to active labour market policies and activation measures, specifically targeting social protection beneficiaries, amongst other specific vulnerable categories. France would also hold the presidency of the G7 in 2026, with social protection possibly featuring among topics.

AFD mentioned its updated strategy, focusing on 4 main pillars, including: 1) Universal Health Coverage (e.g. supporting reforms in Northern Africa and in South Africa; 2) the Care economy (e.g. elderly care in China); 3) adaptive social protection (e.g. support for the Sahel, Asia and the Pacific and Pakistan); 4) Just transition (e.g. energy transition in South Africa, supported through a EUR 400 million loan). The economically constrained environment – with a reduction of 60% in ODA- is leading to increased use of loans, while grants are being sought through partnership with philanthropic foundations (e.g. Gates). AFD concluded by mentioning the decision by the World Bank of including Social Protection within the broader category of social policies, thus posing a risk of diluting the specificity of the sector.

ES explained FIAP's role in managing European and Spanish international cooperation projects, focusing on social protection and social policies. FIAP's key thematic areas of intervention in the sector were on the design and reform of national social protection systems, care policies, digital transformation with a gender lens and progressive taxation. The organisation was also engaged with SOCIEUX+ and with the EU-LAC partnership, focusing also on nutrition and food security, as well as on taxation through bilateral projects in Latin America and the Caribbean.

SL concluded the round of updates by Member States by presenting its priorities for bilateral aid, including health, education, child protection and basic social services. Slovenia had been providing specific support on mental health and psychosocial services, including trauma counselling and school integration in crisis context such as Palestine and Ukraine. Gender-based violence (GBV) in fragile and post-conflict settings is another key area of intervention.

3. Updates on International Developments on Social Protection – Ireland (IE)

IE as Co-Chair presented the main headlines related to recent international events. The South African G20 had been marked by a call to action and a leaders' declaration making specific reference to social protection. At the World Social Summit, several leaders' declarations emphasized the human right to social security and the need for universal social protection systems. Member States were successful in providing a joint input in the negotiation of the final Declaration. This included repeated mention of social protection, referring to hunger and nutrition, transition to the formal economy and adaptive social protection. The role of the ILO as standard setting body for the building of social protection floors was especially recognised. A pledge to increase investment was emphasised, although the 2 percentage points target on increased coverage was dropped. Looking at opportunities for 2026, the Co-Chair specifically mentioned: a) the MFF, encouraging members to engage with the process; b) the Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty led by Brazil, which included large programmes featuring social protection; c) the COP30 Belem Declaration on Human-Centred Climate Action, also including Social Protection. Reference was made to the Humanitarian Reset and the UN80, indicating the need to continue supporting UN agencies which maintain a strong social protection agenda.

DG EMPL provided an in-depth debrief from their participation in the World Social Summit, the G20 and the G7. DG EMPL recognised Belgium's role in co-facilitating with Morocco the negotiations leading to the adoption of the political declaration, which represented an overall positive outcome,

although compromising on few aspects. During the Summit, the EU Delegation, led by Executive Vice President Minzatu, had facilitated the first Leaders' Meeting of the Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty. The Summit had been an opportunity to present relevant EU internal policies and plans, including the Youth Guarantee, the Anti-Poverty Strategy, the Union of Skills and the Quality Jobs Roadmap, besides showcasing the Team Europe's and the Global Gateway's contributions to the achievement of the SDGs. DG EMPL also mentioned the Labour and Employment Ministerial Meeting of the G20 in July, concluded with the adoption of the Ministerial Declaration. South Africa had secured a Leaders' declaration including a commitment to advance universal social protection, although the US and many other important members had not attended. The G7 Labour and Employment Ministers meeting held in December, had focused on the theme of "Empowering Youth for the Future of Work" and included discussions on the AI-driven transformation of the world of work, the creation of quality employment for young workers and the integration of youth with disabilities. As priorities for its upcoming G7 Presidency, France had outlined the tackling of global imbalances, with a crucial role for the G7 Employment Working Party to tackle the challenges posed by the digital, ecological and demographic transitions. Other relevant initiatives mentioned were the strengthened Child Guarantee initiative, the Fair Labour mobility package and the ongoing revision of the Regulation on social security coordination.

CY intervened to present its priorities in development cooperation, as President of the EU Council for the next semester. Cyprus has decided to place fragility at the core of its interventions as a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity, considering the significant impact on the lives of many, both in Europe and across partner countries, with estimated two billion people living in contexts of fragility. Specific thematic priorities recognised as key drivers of development would include: water security and cross-border cooperation; global health systems; youth engagement; women's empowerment. The geographic focus would be on the EU southern neighbourhood, small island states and Sub-Saharan Africa.

BE concluded the morning session by sharing its experience in co-facilitating the role, along with Morocco, during the World Social Summit. Furthermore, Belgium had co-organized five side events focusing on inclusive social protection, youth, digital economy, besides some high-level bilateral meetings. The Summit's key outcome was a political declaration which recognised social development as essential for peace and sustainable growth, supported by a clear roadmap for implementation, with review of progress foreseen for 2031. Belgium reflected on the capacity of multilateralism to deliver results despite all the constraints and highlighted the importance of aligning external actions with social protection commitments and engaging proactively in upcoming processes.

DG INTPA G4 responded by sharing reflections on the Summit emphasizing how, contrarily to the general Summit's outcome that was felt short in providing a new horizon for a new economic/development model reinstating the social contract, the EU and Team Europe had come with a clear narrative linking investment agendas driving economic structural transformation with social outcomes, leveraging the Global Gateway. The Summit had demonstrated the importance of multilateralism and the need for proactive engagement in upcoming processes. Moving forward, it would be important to promote solid social protection, linked to other social policies, identifying opportunities to maximise the positive social impact of the investment/economic development agenda in partner countries.

4. Opportunities for Investing in the Care Economy

The consultant presented the INTPA thematic paper on "*Financing the care economy: building inclusive and scalable systems through the Global Gateway*". The presentation provided conceptual

clarity on the care economy, noting that it represented 11.5% of global jobs and 8.7% of global GDP. The consultant identified specific challenges (regulatory fragmentation and underfunding) and opportunities (e.g. promising examples of social enterprise and private sector involvement in Kenya, and the public care system in Uruguay). The meeting then discussed the potential for integrating care components into Global Gateway investments in priority sectors. Examples included assistive technologies in digital sectors, time-saving water and sanitation schemes, and childcare in green transition facilities. The paper would be shared in the coming weeks, with a possibility for comments until the end of January.

EEAS introduced the recently adopted EU-LAC Bi-regional Pact on Care, which aimed to establish a permanent forum for regional cooperation on care policies. The Pact responded to the urgent need to reform care systems increasingly under pressure, due to demographic changes and rising demand for care services. It created a structured, permanent dialogue on social affairs between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean, two regions facing similar structural challenges. The Pact would facilitate exchanges of policy experiences, good practices, legal and political developments and comparative studies amongst the national focal points nominated by the relevant participating countries. It would be an opportunity to showcase the EU's capacity to lead a value-based social agenda globally and align existing funding and activities with the Pact, in addition to providing a structured setting to mobilise existing EU funding and better align ongoing initiatives under Global Gateway or bilateral programmes. For Member States, the Pact provided access to a wider pool of solutions, innovative approaches from LAC countries, and opportunities for cooperation at technical and policy levels.

In the discussion that followed, participants shared their experiences and initiatives related to care economy and social protection. Sweden presented the programmes supported through UNICEF on Cash Plus and public works with childcare flexibility and nutrition-sensitive support. Examples from Ethiopia, Kenya, and Mozambique were provided, focusing on those including case management for vulnerable families. Belgium recommended the creation of a strategic roadmap to clearly introduce the subject on the policy agenda. The role of the private sector in care economy was discussed. Germany was focusing on policy engagement and specific projects with the private sector, while France (via Expertise France and AFD) was supporting projects in Latin America and the Pacific on childcare and social services. IE emphasised the importance of the topic within the broader agenda on women's economic empowerment and gender equality. Spain highlighted the importance of contextual analysis of the care system, as regions play an important role, especially in Latin America. The discussion concluded by highlighting the challenges of integrating informal migrant workers and networks into care economy initiatives in Europe. The EU-funded ICR facility and the Inter-American Development Bank were mentioned as potential partners for business environment reforms and investment criteria. The importance of formalizing care workers and providing decent work conditions was emphasized, as well as the need for innovative financing mechanisms and blending guarantees within the Global Gateway.

5. Social Health Protection – strengthening links between health and social protection

INTPA G4 and HISP presented an internal paper on social health protection, a key cross-sectoral theme for the unit moving forward in better linking Health and Social Protection for the achievement of universal health coverage through financial protection and effective access to health care services. The presentation illustrated the relevance of social health protection for global poverty reduction, by providing key figures on catastrophic health expenditure at global level and provided a brief overview of its main financing mechanisms and international social security principles (universality, risk sharing, and solidarity in financing). HISP listed specific interventions to mainstream social health protection in health programming and vice versa, to promote health in social protection. INTPA G4 provided reference to relevant EU programmes integrating Health and Social Protection such as in the

Dominican Republic, Morocco, Burkina Faso and Senegal. The importance of aligning health care packages with country-specific health needs, such as HIV/AIDS and non-communicable diseases, was emphasized as well as the role of the private sector in providing health care within a strong regulatory framework.

In the following discussion, Sweden presented its long-term support for social protection programme linked to community-based health insurance in Ethiopia and to enhanced health services access in Tanzania. France (via AFD) highlighted programmes supported on universal health coverage in Nigeria, Cameroon and Morocco, while mentioning the impact of different accompanying measures with regards to nutrition outcomes in Pakistan and the Philippines. Expertise France mentioned its support to mandatory health insurance institutions in Senegal and its experience of working with “mutuelles” on disability, amongst other relevant initiatives. Belgium via ENABEL presented the findings of a recent visit to a social health protection programme implemented in Mauritania with EU funding, focusing on the supply of care and health services, the technical assistance to social health Insurance institutions, the provision of social assistance for those unable to contribute and the promotion of patients’ rights. A key lesson learned from the 7-year project was the importance of investing in the supply of health services and goods (medicines) to attract and retain clients to the social health insurance schemes. Germany highlighted the importance of digitalization for management of social protection and health financing programs for example through OpenIMIS, and mentioned its portfolio in social health protection. At the end of the presentation, and considering the significant interest raised amongst members on the topic of social health presentation, INTPA proposed to convene a specific meeting to take stock of the relevant interventions undertaken by Member States, especially considering its relevance to identify new opportunities for integrating effectively social protection in the Global Gateway Agenda.

6. Conclusions and closing remarks

INTPA G4 closed the meeting, thanking everyone for their active engagement and the many examples showcased of a successful Team Europe approach in the promotion of social protection on the global development agenda. INTPA reminded participants that the next ESPG meeting would take place in May-June 2026 and would include a session on fragility, with a communication staff working document expected at around the same time.