

High-Level Meeting on the Social Protection of the Self-employed. 13 Nov. 2023

Concept note.

Social protection for the self-Employed has been identified as one of the social priorities of the Spanish EU Council Presidency. While the design of social protection systems has been historically oriented towards the protection of salaried work, efforts to extend the quality of social protection to self-employed workers are not new. Four years ago, on November 2019, the EU Council adopted the recommendation on access to social protection for workers and self-employed, calling for adequate social protection to all workers regardless of the type and duration of their employment relationship.

In that recommendation, the Council call Member States to develop National Action Plans, along with the establishment of a common monitoring framework and to assess the implementation of those plans.

In the meantime, the European economies have been affected by several shocks that have affected the way in which national and supranational institutions have effectively responded to the need of social protection for self-employed. The halt of the economic activity associated with the pandemic visualize how new, exceptional measures, were needed to protect incomes of groups abruptly affected by public health measures, but only weakly protected by the standard social safety net. The inflation shock that impacted European economies, following the war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine, also required the implementation of new compensating measures to protect individuals and groups insufficiently protected by standard social protection policies.

This past October, the EPSCO adopted a set of conclusions on social protection for the self-employed, calling for new efforts to carry out national plans to make further efforts to close remaining coverage gaps and ensure the effectiveness of the principles of formal and effective coverage, adequacy and transparency. These conclusions invite Member States explicitly “to address existing gaps in national schemes regarding the access of the self-employed to social protection, especially in branches where the largest gaps exist, such as unemployment benefits, sickness benefits, accidents at work and occupational disease”. And it asks countries to “reflect on ways to reinforce access to social protection and close remaining gaps, where necessary, also involving social partners and civil society organisations”.

In this spirit, the Spanish Presidency organises the High-Level Meeting on the Social Protection of the Self-employed. This event is aimed at sharing and discussing with policymakers, experts and academics, policy innovations developed in recent years, the national and international challenges they face, as well as proposals to address these standing issues.

Participants are expected to engage, during the presentations and discussion, on the following topics, among others:

- What new challenges in coverage gaps remain, and what ideas have been put forward recently to reduce those coverage gaps? What lessons can be learned from the most recent policy innovations?
- How can digitalization help social protection providers to identify the need for social protection among non-salaried workers, and hence improve the efficiency of policies aimed at improving social protection in this group?
- Designing social protection systems aimed at facilitating access and transparency is key to guarantee coverage of the self-employed. What initiatives can we look into that successfully address these issues?
- Given the evolution of European labour markets and the changing nature of work in our economies, how should we address the (changing) differences between salaried and non-salaried work in designing differentiated policies aimed at protecting all types of workers? How can strategic arbitrage among schemes that could lead to greater segmentation among workers and deterioration in social protection be avoided?
- What is the appropriate way to finance in a resilient and sustainable way the extension of social protection policies for self-employed workers?
- What role can supranational and international organizations play in addressing these concerns? How do the transformations in the nature of work (more telework, more mobility, more complex labour careers, ...) call for greater participation of supranational and international organizations in this domain?