



2019 EUROPEAN SEMESTER

How to build on the increasing focus on care?

Eurocarers' Briefing

October 2019

Why it is worth looking at the EU Semester

The European Semester was established in 2010 as an annual process through which EU countries coordinate their economic policies and address the common economic challenges facing the EU. While it primarily focused on economic policies in the first years, the process has progressively incorporated employment, health and social policy elements as part of the structural drivers of national economic reforms, hence becoming more and more relevant to Eurocarers' – and civil society organisations' - mission. Furthermore, the European Semester has now integrated the principles of the Pillar of Social Rights as proclaimed by the European Union in 2017.

The European Semester takes place via a continuous dialogue between the European Institutions and member states, aimed at defining joint as well as individual overarching policy priorities.

The EU Semester process: how is it happening?

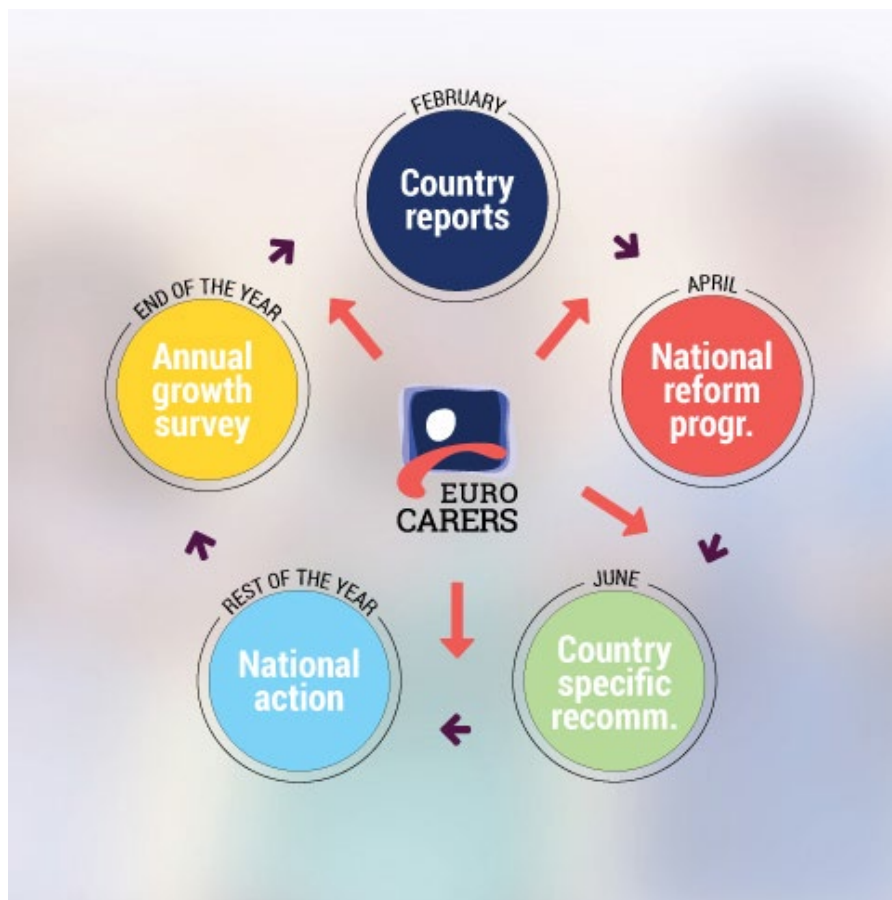
During the Autumn, the Commission's Annual Growth Survey ([AGS](#)) sets out the general economic and social priorities for the EU for the following year. The Commission gives Member States focused policy guidance to strengthen the recovery and foster convergence in line with the EU's long-term growth strategy Europe 2020. The AGS marks the start of the European Semester. It applies to the EU as a whole and to member states individually. Its main messages will form the basis for the Country-Specific Recommendations next spring.

During the Winter, the European Commission presents an analysis of the member states' situation (in the form of [Country Reports](#), published in February).

In May, member states respond to this analysis through the publication of [National Reform Programmes](#) detailing both the progress made with regard to the previous recommendations and policy reforms envisaged.

In June, the EU Council adopts 3 key [Country Specific Recommendations](#) for each member state, based on EC proposals.

From June to December, member states are expected to implement these recommendations.



The EU Semester

The set of documents issued for each member state through the EU Semester process reveals their situation vis-à-vis their commitments towards EU's common objectives, therefore shedding light on:

- Each country's achievements regarding EU targets and objectives;
- Reforms implemented by national governments;
- Areas requiring further action by national governments.

Eurocarers' interest in the EU Semester process is underpinned by the fact that, while the EU has no legal competencies in the areas of social cohesion, health or long-term care policies, the EU Semester is delving more and more into the priorities and investments put in place by member states in these areas.

Every year, some Country Specific Recommendations (in)directly concern carers because they affect:

- Access to health services (including digital health and active ageing);
- Inclusion in the labour market and fight against poverty (in particular concerning women);
- Sustainability, access and quality of long-term care systems.

Importantly, the EU Semester process is also a guide to how EU Funds should be used in each country so that they contribute effectively to the agreed objectives. In this regard, the 2019 edition contains an important novelty: the inclusion of an '**Annex D in the Country Reports, identifying key priorities for support by the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund Plus**', in line with the analysis outlined in the report.

The 2019 edition confirms the growing focus on informal care and long-term care

As every year since 2015, Eurocarers has reviewed the EU Semester's documents for all EU countries, underlining content that is of relevance to our concerns.

The template, accessible [here](#) includes the 2019 Eurocarers' annual analysis of the EU Semester.

This year, as in previous years, the sustainability of health and long-term care systems in the current context of demographic transition remains of fundamental concern across the EU. Against this backdrop, more attention is geared to informal carers as main providers of care.

Based on our review¹ of the 2019 Semester, the following priorities can be identified across the EU.

Health and long-term care

- The EU Semester process underlines potential drivers of economic and financial unbalance. Unsurprisingly, expenses related to pensions, health care and long-term care are considered as a **threat to public finances in a majority of countries**. Healthcare and long-term care are among the main topics captured in 22 Country Reports. 17 Country-Specific Recommendations concern health and long-term care.
- Moreover, long-term care increasingly tends to be explored as a stand-alone policy area that is distinct from health care, although closely interconnected. In particular, expected long-term care costs are explicitly mentioned as a sustainability threat to public finances in at least 10 countries².

¹ Eurocarers' analysis of the Semester documents (Country Report, National Reform Programmes, Country Specific Recommendations) is based on a keyword search. The keywords used were 'care', 'carer', 'family', 'long-term care', 'work-life balance', 'conciliation', 'gender', 'women', 'health'. Only the sentences or part of sentences considered as relevant with regards to the objectives of the analysis were listed in the template. Documents which were not available in English have been excluded from the search. Considering the limitation of this method, this analysis can't be considered as exhaustive.

² AU, HR, CZ, FI, LV, MT, NL, PT, SK, UK.

Long term care

- While the **sustainability of long-term care** is considered at stake in 10 countries³, other long-term care-related issues are also emphasised: **accessibility** (12 countries)⁴, and **quality or efficiency** (6 countries)⁵.
- In addition, comments are also made regarding the **organisation** of long-term care provision (for example Belgium is expected to “*further focus on home care*”, according to the Country Report).
- Interestingly, long-term care is considered as a **priority for investment** in 9 countries according to Annex D to the Country Report⁶.

Health

- In a majority of countries, **equal access to health services** is considered an important issue (and is mentioned as such in the Country Report or the Country Specific Recommendations in 18 countries).
- In two countries, developing **e-health** services is considered as a way to improve access to health⁷.
- **The shortage of health and care professionals** is explicitly mentioned as a major concern in 7 countries⁸.

Informal carers

Importantly, the number of countries for which the EU Semester points out informal care as an issue has increased. Whereas informal care was only mentioned in 8 countries in 2018, and in 10 countries in 2017, the issue is raised for 17 countries this year. For 5 countries⁹, the documents refer to care responsibilities of children and dependent relatives altogether, whereas the focus is clearly on informal carers providing long-term care to dependent people in 12 countries¹⁰.

While different wordings may be used in order to describe the reality of informal care (‘informal care’, ‘family care’, care responsibilities...), **the wording ‘informal care’ tends to be the most commonly used in the above-mentioned documents.** Some Country Reports even include detail regarding the way informal carers are supported or not in their country (see below).

Informal carers in the Country National Reports

³ BE, AU, CY, EE, IT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT.

⁴ BE, BU, CY, EE, EL, IT, LV, LT, PL, PT, RO, SK.

⁵ BU, LT, PL, PT, RO, SK.

⁶ BE, HR, AU, IT, IE, PL, PT, SK, RO.

⁷ DE, RO.

⁸ DE, HR, LT, RO, SP, UK.

⁹ HR, CZ, LT, NL, SP.

¹⁰ AU, BE, CY, EE, FI, EL, IE, IT, MT, PL, PT, UK.

“Some action was taken towards a formal status for informal carers and training and empowerment is included in the National Reform Programme.” (Portugal)

“Support for informal carers includes a combination of cash benefits, care leave and respite services provided through community services and the ‘Community Care Unit’. (...) However, respite services are limited and difficult to secure for those who care for elderly people, which restricts labour market participation of informal carers.” (Malta)

“...in fact, most long-term care is provided by informal carers, often family members who have almost no institutional support.” (Poland)

The gender dimension of informal care

- The negative impact of informal care responsibilities on women’s participation in the labour market is clearly considered as a key issue, particularly against the backdrop of insufficient employment rates across the EU. Indeed, in most countries, the prevalence of informal care is **correlated with the unsatisfactory situation of women on the labour market**, referring to low activity /employment rates, or the predominance of part-time work amongst women. The need to untap the potential of women on the labour market is mentioned for 14 countries¹¹.
- In order to improve the situation, recommendations comprise the need for **investment in long-term care services** (see above), as well as **measures to improve work-life balance** (for 8 countries)¹².

How to use the Semester?

The nature of the EU Semester entails **limitations** which prevent it from reflecting the complexity of the reality of care and caring in the EU. Its primary focus on economic growth and macro-economic balance, does not leave much space for considerations relating to **well-being, human rights and dignity**, but does allow to capture the negative impact of informal care on women’s participation in the labour market and its central role in the financial sustainability of long-term care systems. Besides, **the lack of democratic legitimacy** of the whole process, as well as the lack of consultation with civil society, are yet to be fully addressed.

However, the EU Semester provides stakeholders with a valuable and powerful tool to engage in and nurture a dialogue with public authorities, based on the many entry points it offers.

How to use the Semester leverage at national level?

Challenges related to informal care, health and long-term care systems, access to the labour market, or gender equality, are all policy hooks that can be used by Civil Society Organisations to engage with public authorities and discuss the policies and investments required to support our collective mission.

- You may ask to be involved in the definition and implementation of the policies mentioned in the Semester, which have a bearing on carers’ life. Building on your Eurocarers membership, you could also build on our collective expertise

¹¹ AU, CZ, FI, EL, HU, IE, IT, LT, MT, NL, PL, RO, SP, UK.

¹² AU, FI, GE, IE, IT, LU, MT, SP.

(notably our [Strategy](#), which can be transposed at national level) and on our examples of good practices and carer-friendly legislations from across Europe.

- Should your country's National Report shed light on challenges specifically related to informal care and carers, you could use the opportunity to hold your government accountable for its (in)action. Should your country's National Report not mention informal care at all, you could challenge this lack of visibility, building on the information available for other EU countries.
- Such advocacy work could also be developed in cooperation with other civil society organisations, sharing a similar approach to health and long-term care issues (for example organisations representing families, elderly people, health professionals' organisations, organisations fighting for social cohesion and intergenerational solidarity...). In particular, trade-unions and employers' organisations are meant to be involved in the transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive adopted last June, which introduces the right to 5 days of carer's leave per carer per year at European level. You could use this opportunity to establish links and inform their work.
- You may also build on the content of your country's EU Semester-related documents, and in particular Annex D to the National Country Report, to contribute to the programming of EU Funds in your country, thereby strengthening your potential applications to the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund Plus.

What can be done at European level?

- You may consider that the analysis developed by the European Commission does not adequately reflect the situation in your country/region and the latest research outcomes at your disposal. The Commission has expressed interest in information contributing to a better understanding of the situation at national level, you might therefore share any **informative research or practices concerning both informal care and civil society participation in this policy area**. Eurocarers' Secretariat will be more than happy to put members in contact with your country's Desk Officer in the European Commission (DG EMPL), who is in charge of drafting the social aspect of the country analysis.
- You might also get in contact and share your views with your country's representative in the **Social Protection Committee (SPC)**, which is an advisory policy committee to the Ministers in the Employment and Social Affairs Council, where all member states are represented. The SPC's tasks include preparing Council discussions on social protection and on the country-specific recommendations in the context of the EU Semester. You will find more information about the SPC and find the contact details of your national representatives [here](#).
- Obviously, the Eurocarers' Secretariat remains actively involved in discussions with EU institutions about the EU Semester, bringing our collective expertise, sharing concrete examples and demanding that informal carers be considered fairly.

Conclusions

Despite its limitations, the EU Semester remains a valuable tool to set (and learn about) priorities for policy developments and social investments. It provides us with an important leverage both in terms of advocacy and project development, at EU and national levels. It is also considered a key instrument for advancing the principles set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights, although these often remain dominated by economic objectives.

It is only through coordinated pressure from stakeholders that a more consistent integration of the Social Pillar and a real participative process will be brought about. The European Commission has expressed its willingness to improve stakeholders' participation at various occasions, which is good. However, in order for informal care and long-term care to be adequately addressed in this process, reliable and comparative data are still needed. Initiatives have been taken in this direction by the European Commission under the Finish Presidency, which we hope will be followed through by the new Commission and upcoming EU Presidencies.

References

All 2019 Semester 's documents for the EU and each member state are accessible [here](#).

Jonathan Zeitlin & Bart Vanhercke (2017) Socializing the European Semester: EU social and economic policy co-ordination in crisis and beyond, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25:2, 149-174

Review of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP) – ESF Transnational Platform- EC, 2018.

As usual, we remain at your disposal should you need any additional clarification on this subject. Your feedback concerning the relevance and the usefulness the Semester in your country would also be extremely valuable. Contact: Claire Champeix, Policy officer (cc@eurocarers.org).