Scene-setter

The meeting has been requested by Mr Jan De Volder (Head of the Brussels Office of Sant'Egidio) and Dr Cesare Zucconi (Secretary-General of the Community of Sant'Egidio), following your visit to the Community of Sant'Egidio in Antwerp in spring 2014. The objective is to discuss social exclusion and poverty, which are important issues for them.

The Community of Sant'Egidio is an international movement committed to solidarity with the most defenceless of the poor. At local level, it provides after-school services for children from underprivileged neighbourhoods, language classes for adult migrants, soup kitchens for the homeless and visits to the elderly.

Mr De Volder and Dr Zucconi will be accompanied by Ms [Name Redacted] (Liaison Officer of their Brussels Office).

Main topics on the agenda:

1. Reducing poverty and social exclusion: policy
2. Reducing poverty and social exclusion: financial instruments (ESF, FEAD)
3. Socio-economic integration of migrants
Speaking points

**Topic 1. Reducing Poverty and social exclusion: policy**

- I am deeply concerned that, instead of moving towards our Europe 2020 poverty target, we are drifting in the opposite direction. The population at risk of poverty or social exclusion has increased by more than 6 million since 2008, affecting one in four persons (24.5%).
- We have also seen increasing divergence between and within the Member States across the EU. Labour markets become increasingly polarised between high- and low-income jobs, triggering more and more inequality and poverty.
- Young adults, inactive or unemployed women, lone mothers, migrants, people with a migrant background and older working-age adults outside the labour market are among those at a higher risk of persistent poverty.
- We believe that growth, jobs and rebalancing the economic and social agenda are necessary to give new impetus to the European project; driving a job-rich recovery with better access to decent jobs for all and fostering upwards social convergence is the highest priority for us.
- In fact, the European countries with the most effective social protection systems are also among the most successful and competitive in the world. This is also what drives the idea of inclusive growth in the Europe 2020 Strategy.
- This is why we continue to recommend labour market and social protection reforms as part of the EU’s economic policy
coordination. This year the European Semester process has focused even more on challenges of the labour market and social protection.

- The policies that have been recommended to Member States broadly aim at:
  - modernising the legislative framework so that labour markets are flexible enough to deal with today's changing working conditions;
  - modernising labour market policies to activate and support unemployed people;
  - shifting tax from labour to other bases, in particular for lower incomes;
  - improving access to education and training systems and matching skills to labour market needs;
  - making social protection systems more sustainable so that they continue to support, protect and enable people throughout their lives.

- Progress in reforms in these key areas would make labour markets in the Member States more resilient and social protection systems more adapted to protect against modern risks.

- **Topic 2. Reducing Poverty and social exclusion: financial instruments**

  **2.1 The European Social Fund (ESF)**

  - We are all very well aware of the severe budgetary constraints many of our Member States are currently facing. That is why it
is absolutely crucial to ensure the most efficient and effective use of the ESF.

• The ESF is the EU financial instrument to support the creation of more and better jobs and to build a more inclusive society in line with the Europe 2020 strategy.

• This is why the EU and its Member States have made support for the most disadvantaged people a key priority for the programming period 2014-2020. To this end, Member States are committed to dedicate at least 20 % of their budgets for 2014-2020 ESF projects and measures to promote social inclusion, combat poverty and discrimination. The majority of the Member States has in fact exceeded this, allocating a quarter of their budgets on social inclusion measures.

• This is not only a reaction to increasing inequalities inside the EU, but also a recognition of the model on which the EU should build its future prosperity – allowing everyone to contribute and everyone to benefit.

The ESF can support a wide range of measures in the field of social inclusion, including measures to strengthen the employability of those furthest from the labour market, to support the socio-economic integration of marginalised groups, such as Roma, to combat discrimination via awareness-raising and empowering activities with local communities, and to enhance access to affordable, sustainable and high quality services.
The ESF can also support labour market inclusion of the homeless and provide a number of services to foster a progressive integration in the labour market and to support training of staff of homelessness organisations.

- Another important element is the framework for supporting social entrepreneurship, combining the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund and new EU-level support instruments under the so-called EASI programme. This should help new social enterprises to get off the ground and grow, contributing not only to social cohesion and employment of society's most vulnerable members, but also to addressing other challenges such as energy efficiency and population ageing.

- Using the ESF well is about working together. A lot of the necessary policies can only be developed and implemented at national regional and local level. Indeed, experience has taught us that very often the regional and local levels are those who can most efficiently deal with issues such as poverty and social exclusion because they are often closer to the people's needs. In fact I believe that a lot can be done to work through networks at regional and local level.

- I would also like to invite you to use the European Code of Conduct on Partnership. The Code aims to maximise the impact of EU funds on the ground by ensuring that implementation and evaluation of the European Structural and Investment Funds will involve all relevant partners including
public authorities, social partners and bodies representing civil society at national, regional and local levels throughout the whole programme cycle.

2.2. The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD)

- Some people are so far from the labour market that they cannot benefit from the activation measures of the ESF. The FEAD, with a budget of EUR 3.8 billion, has been created for them.

- The FEAD thus covers a gap in EU cohesion policy, by helping the most vulnerable people through tangible aid. Via FEAD we support Member States to provide food, clothing and other essential items for personal use. FEAD can also finance activities to promote the social inclusion of the most deprived.

- I am pleased to say that we have now adopted all our programmes for the use of that Fund in Member States. The focus now is on selecting partners, initiating purchasing and distribution cycles, and putting appropriate procedures and control systems in place.

- The success of the Fund will depend greatly on these efforts by EU countries. The role of partner organisations will be crucial to ensure that the food or clothing reaches those most in need – that is, to ensure fairness.
**Topic 3. The Socio-economic integration of migrants**

- Migrants throughout Europe find themselves at greater risk of poverty and social exclusion and are more likely to be employed in positions that underutilize their skills. They are less likely than the natives to progress professionally and socially.
- The three major challenges they face are *discrimination* (notably but not only on the labour market), *education* (which does not play its role of promoting social mobility) and *recognition of diplomas or competences* (which results in the waste of human capital).
- This Commission has set the issue of migration amongst its top priorities and last month adopted a European Agenda on Migration.
- This Agenda aims to address both the urgent challenges of the crisis in the Mediterranean and to provide a comprehensive response to the structural problems of migration in Europe.
- In this respect, it is very important to improve the framework for legal migration, as Europe is in a global competition to attract talent. Europe’s population is ageing, which augurs increasing difficulties due to labour and skill shortages. To this end, the Agenda sets the framework for concrete actions in the short and medium term. This includes a platform of dialogue on economic migration to include input from national administrations social partners and other stakeholders.
- At the same time, it is clear that we need to ensure that the integration policies in place are effective. The European Social
Fund is providing up to €70 billion to finance social and employment support programmes. 20% of this amount - around €14 billion - is specifically earmarked to promoting social inclusion and reducing poverty. We will actively support Member States and other stakeholders involved in the implementation of these projects to ensure that they meet their objective.

- However, the success mainly depends on the close cooperation of national governments, local authorities and civil society. Indeed, your role is crucial in implementing and making this Agenda a success on the ground.
Background

1. Poverty and social exclusion

What is the issue?

- The EU headline poverty and social exclusion target, set in 2010, is to have at least 20 million fewer people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2020, thus reducing poverty from 116.8 million people in 2008 (latest data available when the target was set) to 96.4 million in 2020.
- Latest data available shows that poverty and social exclusion has increased to almost 123 million.
- Member States’ ambition levels in reducing poverty and social exclusion, as defined by their national targets which they have to set to achieve the Europe 2020 target, are in many cases very low. This lack of ambition is due to the fact that Member States were allowed to set their targets on the basis of their relative starting positions and national circumstances.
- The freedom of Member States to depart from definitions agreed for use at EU level for their own national poverty targets has led to difficulty in evaluating the cumulative ambition of MS versus the 20 million target at the EU level. It has also led to some Member States not developing national integrated strategies for tackling poverty.
- EU Member States are facing both short-term and structural challenges that are threatening the sustainability and adequacy of their social models.
- Many Member States are experiencing increasing poverty, inequalities and long term labour market exclusion, though there are significant divergences across the EU. These challenges existed before the crisis, and have been further exacerbated. Most Member States are currently off-track towards reaching the 2020 target to reduce poverty and social exclusion.
- Moreover, in the context of the crisis, many Member States are experiencing increased fiscal constraints.
- In addition, demographic pressures, namely an ageing population and a shrinking working age population, are leading to further pressure on public budgets and posing challenges to long-term financing of our social protection systems.

What are we doing?

- In February 2013, the Commission adopted the Social Investment Package (SIP). It provides guidance to Member States on how to adapt their social models to the challenges above, with a view to achieving the smart, sustainable and inclusive growth objective of the Europe 2020 Strategy.
- The Package consists of a Communication setting out an integrated policy framework, actions to be taken by Member States and the Commission, and guidance on the use of EU funds to support reforms. It is accompanied by a Recommendation on Investing in Children, and seven Staff Working Documents providing specific guidance in various social policy fields.
The package is organised around three principles:
  o Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of social protection systems
  o Pursue activating and enabling policies, that are joined up as much as possible and adapted to people’s unique situations
  o Pursue timely, preventative approaches to reduce the need for remedial intervention

**Implementation**

- The European Semester process has pursued an integrated EU-level approach to steering and monitoring Member States’ reforms aimed at addressing poverty and exclusion as well as reforms in the economic and employment fields. The Country-Specific Recommendations have been especially useful in providing guidance, based on the specific Member States' contexts.
- The guidance of the Social Investment Package is informing the European Semester exercises by feeding into the Commission’s selection of priorities in the Annual Growth Survey and development of Country-Specific Recommendations.
- Commitment for improved cooperation and coordination of social policies, in the framework of the social Open Method of Coordination, has been strengthened. It has led to more structured and comparable monitoring of the social situation in MSs and across the EU through new instruments such as the Social Protection Performance Monitor.
- The European Social Fund, as well as other EU funding instruments such as the European Regional Development Fund, the Employment and Social Innovation programme, and the new European Fund for Aid to the Most Deprived are vital financial instruments to support the reforms towards social investment.
- The focus is now on effective implementation of this guidance by the Commission and the Member States. In addition to mobilising its governance framework and funds, the Commission has committed itself to several specific initiatives to support Member States’ efforts, synthesised in an Implementation Roadmap.
2. Child poverty

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<td>The achievement of a more inclusive growth depends greatly on Europe's capacity to invest in its children, giving them the best start in life and breaking the transmission of disadvantage across generations.</td>
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Yet, in a large majority of Member States\(^1\), children are more at risk of poverty and social exclusion\(^2\) than the overall population. They have also been particularly hit by the crisis: the share of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the EU increased from 26.6 to 27.6% between 2008 and 2013 (as against an increase from 23.8% to 24.4% for the overall EU 27 population).

More specifically (2013 data):
- 20.3 % of children in the EU are at risk of poverty\(^3\), as against 16.6 % of the total EU population.
- 9.3 % of children live in a household with very low work intensity\(^4\) (as against 10.6% of the overall population).
- 11 % of children are severely materially deprived\(^5\) (as against 9.6 % of the overall population).

Without the necessary social investment in their upbringing, health and education, many will not be able, as adults, to live up to their full human, social and economic potential, which in turn could jeopardise the prosperity of the next generations of Europeans and generate higher costs to our welfare systems. Europe can and must sustain investment in children and families as a condition to its sustainable recovery.

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<th>What are we doing?</th>
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<td>More than 12 years of cooperation under the Social QMC (through activities such as policy coordination, peer reviews, studies, stakeholder involvement, transnational projects) have developed a common understanding and a shared awareness of approaches that work best to break the cycle of disadvantage.</td>
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The Europe 2020 Strategy has given a new impetus to the issue. A number of Member States have already (UK, EL) or will (IE) set specific targets or sub-targets relating to child poverty/social exclusion and many have mentioned the issue as an important challenge in their 2014 National Reform Programme and/or National Social Report.

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1. All except CY, DK, FI, SI and SE.
2. This indicator corresponds to the sum of children who are: at risk of poverty, severely materially deprived or living in households with very low work intensity.
3. I.e. live in a household with an income below 60% of the national median income.
4. Defined as working less than 20% of their full work potential over the year.
5. E.g. live in a household which cannot afford at least 4 items out of the following: 1) to face unexpected expenses, 2) one week's annual holiday away from home; 3) pay for arrears; 4) a meal with meat, chicken, or fish every second day; 5) keep the home adequately warm, 6) washing machine; 7) colour TV; 8) a telephone; 9) a personal car.
As a result almost all MSs received one or more Country Specific Recommendations (CSR) in June 2014 that focus on child poverty related topics such as: income support, effectiveness and efficiency of social services for children, early childhood education and care/childcare, inclusive education, early school leaving, youth activation, reconciliation, financial disincentives to the labour market, affordable housing and Roma children.

- The AGS 2014 continues to emphasize the importance of addressing child poverty to contribute to the overall EU target on poverty and social exclusion.

- The growing consensus on the issue was also underlined by the EPSCO Council Conclusions adopted on 5 October 2012 which call on the Member States to sustain investment in children and action against child poverty.

Various EU financial instruments directly or indirectly contribute, such as the new Fund for Aid to the Most Deprived as part of the ESF, the European School Fruit and School Milk schemes (managed by DG AGRI), the Erasmus for All Programme, the ERDF and ESF (through for instance support to childcare and reconciliation measures for parents, the promotion of de-institutionalisation of children).

Various other policies are particularly relevant, such as EU education and training policies, the EU Agenda on the Rights of the Child, the EU Strategy on Equality between Women and Men.

Building on this momentum, the Recommendation Investing in children - breaking the cycle of disadvantage (was adopted as part of the Social Investment Package on 20 February 2013). It provides policy guidance and related indicators to help the EU and Member States focus on successful social investment towards children.

The Recommendation takes an approach based on children’s rights. It proposes a balance between universal and targeted approaches by promoting progressive universalism, and it calls on the MSs to mitigate the negative impact of the austerity reforms on the most disadvantaged children and families. However large gaps remain in the design and delivery of policies that are essential to break the cycle of disadvantage. The Recommendation is organised around three pillars.

Problems and challenges

**Pillar 1:** Supporting parents' access to resources in the form of paid work should always be the first step when it comes to fighting poverty. Parents should not only be able to find work, we must also make sure that work pays for them and that they have access to childcare. Yet in too many countries there is a lack of jobs while the inadequate design of tax and benefit systems as well as the cost (or lack of) early childhood education and care services deter second earners or single parents on low income from entering the labour market. Besides, in work poverty is still a reality for more than 10% of families in the EU, including those with two parents at work.

That is why access to the labour market for parents has to be combined with adequate income support for children and their families, through in particular tax relief or credits, family and child benefits, housing benefits and minimum income schemes. These should be delivered so as to reflect the evolution of living arrangements (e.g. single parent
families), avoid inactivity traps and ensure sufficient redistribution towards those in lower income. Yet, even if social protection reduces child poverty by 40% on average in the EU, its efficiency and effectiveness varies importantly across countries.

**Pillar 2:** Children, and in particular the most disadvantaged, need also access to quality services that can have a crucial impact on their development. Among these, early childhood education and care ECEC) play an essential role in reducing inequality from the start. Unfortunately those children who would benefit the most from quality ECEC have generally lower access: for instance, in BG, EL, HU, IT, PT, SK, CZ, FR, PL, RO and ES on average only one out of two Roma children attends pre-school or kindergarten.

Social inequalities persist across the EU also in children’s health outcomes. These inequalities are linked to their social, psychological and physical environment but also to the organisation of health systems, in particular health coverage and early prevention programmes. 11% of the children at risk of poverty do not eat fresh fruit or vegetables once a day because the household cannot afford it, against 3% for the rest of the population.

Children from disadvantaged families are overrepresented in the estimated 1 million children in alternative care across Europe. More can be done to ensure that poverty is not the only reason for removing a child from their family, through for instance the development of parenting support services. When alternative care is identified as the last resort solution, it is essential to ensure that children are placed in a supportive environment which is as close as possible to a family setting, and benefit from adequate help during their transition to adulthood.

**Pillar 3:** Child participation in after-school activities and through the right to be heard are both important to break the cycle of disadvantage. Such activities can compensate for immaterial deprivation and lack of pedagogical stimulus by the parents. All children should benefit from extra-curricular activities such as sports and social clubs and cultural programmes. The right to be heard is crucial when it comes to involving children early on in social services and legal decisions that affect them.

*Cyclical challenges: addressing the crisis' consequences*

Key services and policies supporting children have been by budget cuts, through tighter eligibility and cuts or freezes in the level of benefits. There are signs that the most universal forms of child allowances are being abandoned or cut in a number of countries (UK, CY, EL), shifting support measures towards those most in need. In this context, it is essential to sustain investment in children and families and to continue assessing how policy reforms affect the most disadvantaged.

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7 Social Protection Committee (2012) 'Tackling child poverty and social exclusion, promoting child well-being', see table p. 27. Data are based on the 2009 EU SILC module on material deprivation.
**Next steps**

Commission focus has now shifted towards the Recommendation's implementation, mobilising existing EU instruments.

The European semester within Europe 2020 will monitor the evolution of key policies in the Member States and the implementation of existing CSRs. This could lead if necessary to the adoption of new Country Specific Recommendations related to investing in children.

The Social OMC will complement and deepen action under Europe 2020, helping Member States share experiences and disseminate best practices. In this context,

- new steps will be discussed with Member States to improve EU indicators as regards child deprivation, quality and affordable childcare, children’s health as well as the situation of the most vulnerable children (i.e. handicapped or with a Roma or immigration background);

- a pilot knowledge bank in the form of a European Platform for Investing in Children has been created, which collects and disseminates “evidence based” innovative best practices in areas such as early childhood education and care or parenting support. The EPIC website contains also individual country profiles on child and family policy and links to reports of other organisations;

- The Commission has started to organise a number of national seminars to discuss with the national and local authorities the implementation of the recommendation in more detail. In 2014 there were seminars in IT, GR, SP, HU, LV, RO, BU and IE, more are expected to follow in 2015.

- The Commission has published a study in 2014 on the merits of conditional cash transfers and their impact on children’s outcomes. The report will be discussed in an upcoming peer review seminar.

The new ESIF program period of 2014-2020 provides ample opportunities for more social investment in children which the Commission will encourage Member States to grasp. At least 20% of the ESF envelope has been earmarked for social inclusion projects, and there is a strong focus on issues such as ECEC and alternative community based care. Besides, the new European Programme for Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) will address children’s material deprivation, through the provision of food, goods and services adapted to their needs.

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**3) The European Social Fund (ESF)**

**Linking the ESF to EU political priorities**

Based on strategic multiannual programming of 7 years in the context of the cohesion policy, the European Social Fund (ESF) is one of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). As the ESF should be fully aligned with the Europe 2020 strategy and its quantified targets, it should support the policies pursued by the Member States under the integrated guidelines adopted under the Treaty, as well as the country specific recommendations issued under Articles 121 and 148. This aims
to provide targeted investment and focused on EU policies on employment, structural reforms, skills and education, social inclusion and efficiency of public administrations.

In order to increase the effectiveness of investments in the Member States in the area of inclusive growth of the Europe 2020 strategy, they must, in particular, comply before the adoption of the operational programmes (or, failing that, details of their action plans to the provisions on macroeconomic conditionality. This involves, for example, setting up a national strategic policy framework for poverty reduction,...)

**Minimum thresholds**

The ESF’s budget has increased substantially compared to the previous programming period (2007-2013).

— For the first time, a **minimum share for the ESF within the total allocation of cohesion policy** has been set up. It accounts for a minimum of 23.1 % of the financial envelope for cohesion policy. In reality, the ESF share of the cohesion policy budget was 24.8 % or 86.4 billion euro.

— **Earmarking of 20 % of the ESF on social inclusion** was also **significantly exceeded** (25.5 % on the basis of the latest versions of the OP submitted to the European Commission).

**The scope of ESF intervention**

The 4 thematic objectives of the ESF are aimed at achieving the social objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy (employment, poverty reduction and early school leaving) namely:

- **Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility**

- **Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination**

  ✓ Within this thematic objective, there are 6 investment priorities (IP).

  — The IP on “active inclusion” is about integrated and progressive pathways to enhance employability of those furthest from the labour market. This aims firstly to strengthen the participation of disadvantaged people in society and empower them (e.g. via the learning of social skills, increasing self-confidence, language courses) and secondly to support activation measures towards the labour market (through guidance, education and vocational training, coaching and mentoring), together with the provision of social services (such as childcare services, for example).

  — The IP on increased access to services allows the financing of a broad scope of actions for the homeless such as:
    
    - Integrated support including psychological assistance, counselling centres, multi-purpose centres, anti-eviction programmes;
    - Support for the training of the service providers working with homeless people, including volunteers;
    - The establishment and development of apprenticeships, vocational training and actions related to the social economy in order to facilitate the integration of homeless people in the labour market.

  — Under the IP on community-led local development, local action groups (including public and private organisations, local authorities, NGOs and
companies) prepare, lead and drive local strategies to develop the economic and social attractiveness of local territories. The ESF can complement activities implemented in the context of such local strategies and support capacity building of relevant actors.

- Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning
- Enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration

4) The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD)

The EU has provided food aid to its most needy citizens for over a quarter of a century. This began in 1987 with the Food Distribution programme for the Most Deprived Persons of the Community (MDP), which channelled food provisions free of charge through a number of organisations in direct contact with the targeted recipients.

The newly established FEAD allows Member States to continue providing vital food aid, while making sure that people receiving assistance are also offered support in view of their social reintegration or providing social inclusion measures.

The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) supports actions carried out by EU countries to provide material assistance to the most deprived. This includes food, clothing and other essential goods for personal use such as shoes, soap and shampoo. Material assistance needs to go hand in hand with social inclusion measures, such as guidance and support to help people out of poverty.

National authorities may also support measures non-material assistance for the most deprived people, helping them to better integrate into society.

How does the FEAD work?

The new Fund offers considerable flexibility to Member States in terms of procuring and distributing assistance for the most deprived. They can plan their programmes for 2014-20 on the basis of their national situations and needs and their institutional set up.

There are two types of operational programmes under the FEAD:

- The food and/or basic material assistance programme (OP I) supports the distribution of food and goods to the most deprived.

- The social inclusion operational programme (OP II) on the other hand finances the provision of social inclusion measures to the most deprived.

While most of the EU Member States (24) will implement an OP I, 4 MS have decided to implement an OP II.

The European Commission approves the national programmes for 2014-20, and national authorities then decide on the delivery of the assistance through partner organisations, which are public or non-governmental bodies. Partner organisations are selected by Member States on the basis of objective and transparent criteria.
What are the resources available?

In real terms, over **EUR 3.8 billion** are earmarked for the FEAD for the 2014-2020 period. In addition, EU countries must **co-finance at least 15%** of the costs of their national programmes.

How does the FEAD complement the European Social Fund (ESF)?

The FEAD will help the most deprived people in taking their first steps out of poverty and social exclusion. It will help to meet their most basic needs, a precondition to enable them to find a job or training, particularly those financed by the ESF.

**ESF/FEAD allocation by Member State (in million EUR — current prices)**

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**Contacts:**
- (EMPL D1)
- (EMPL D2)
- (EMPL E1)
- (EMPL E1)

**Coordination:** (EMPL 01)