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Towards 2026: What to expect from the first-ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy?

A long-awaited strategy: Poverty reduction re-enters the agenda

In her 2025 State of the Union address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the need for an ambitious EU Anti-Poverty Strategy to help eradicate poverty by 2050, backed by a strong child guarantee. This initiative comes at a moment of persistent poverty and growing political pressure to prioritise competitiveness, defence and security. Despite the EU's commitment to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) by 15 million by 2030 – including 5 million children – compared to 2019, progress remains limited. Eurostat data¹ show that the number of people AROPE increased from 92.3 million in 2019 to 93.2 million in 2024, highlighting the limitations of current policy efforts. Child poverty has followed a similar trend: the number of children AROPE rose from 18.4 million in 2019 to 19.5 million in 2024. This lack of progress reflects the EU's earlier failure to meet its Europe 2020 target of lifting at least 20 million people out of poverty or social exclusion.

Against this backdrop, the forthcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, expected in January 2026, is long overdue and represents a crucial opportunity to reshape the EU's social agenda. However, it is noted that the idea of a European-level anti-poverty strategy is not new. It has its roots in the Community 'Poverty Programmes' of the 1970s to 1990s,² which funded local pilot projects and comparative research. The forthcoming EU anti-poverty strategy should therefore be presented not as a completely new idea, but as the next – crucial – step in this long-standing European effort to act against poverty.

1 Eurostat, EU-SILC (ilc_peps01n).

2 For more information, see: "Key events 3 EU Anti-Poverty Programmes (1975-1993)". EAPN; Pochet, P. (2019) *À la recherche de l'Europe sociale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France).

Following the conclusion of the public consultation at the end of October 2025, the Commission is now preparing its proposal, which is expected to be adopted in the first quarter of 2026. Although only limited information is available at this stage, there are some broadly positive indications: the strategy “will reflect on the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and its root causes” and “address poverty through a life cycle perspective, building on the social investment approach”.³ These directions are welcome, but they need to be translated into concrete policy commitments to ensure that the strategy aligns with its scope and ambition.

The Commission has also highlighted that the strategy will address poverty through a life-cycle perspective, building on the social investment approach. This is an important and timely shift, as poverty often accumulates and deepens across different stages of life. A life-course approach requires coherent and continuous support – from early childhood through to adulthood and older age – with a strong emphasis on prevention. Strong child-centred and intergenerational policies; targeted support for young adults transitioning to work or independent living; and investment in public care, education and health services are essential to breaking the intergenerational perpetuation of poverty.

No one left behind: Rethinking poverty protection in a changing Europe

These promising directions should be complemented by a human-rights-based and intersectional approach, recognising that poverty can be both a cause and a consequence of human rights violations. Tackling child poverty and all forms of extreme poverty, including homelessness, requires special attention. The strategy must also avoid treating employment as the only pathway out of poverty. Adequate wages, secure employment arrangements, quality working conditions and access to adequate social protection are critical levers for preventing and reducing poverty.

Several loopholes persist in access to social protection, especially for those in non-standard and precarious work. Many workers in temporary or part-time jobs, including platform workers and those in other atypical forms of employment, face fragmented contribution records, stricter eligibility conditions and weaker effective access to social protection. This undermines income security during labour-market transitions, reinforces work poverty and contributes to the low adequacy of social protection benefits. In this context, the forthcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy should explicitly address these issues and call for a further strengthening and systematic monitoring of the 2019 recommendation on access to social protection for workers and the self-employed.

A comprehensive approach centred on quality jobs, fair wages, job security, access to social protection, work-life balance, collective bargaining and well-functioning labour markets is needed.

3 See: “EU Anti-Poverty Strategy”. European Commission.

Moreover, the eco-social transformation is reshaping both the drivers and the experience of poverty, notably, through the growing phenomenon of energy poverty, which affects both winter and summer. While energy and transport poverty are now recognised challenges, climate neutrality will also accelerate labour-market restructuring; deepen territorial divides between ‘winning’ and ‘losing’ regions; and expose gaps in housing, health and social protection systems, with disproportionate impacts on already marginalised groups. A further dimension of this eco-social transformation concerns the intersections between health and poverty. Climate change and environmental degradation act as ‘risk multipliers’ for low-income groups, increasing exposure to extreme heat, air pollution, food and water insecurity, and climate-related disasters, while at the same time straining already under-resourced health and care systems. In this context, the forthcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy should not view green policies as an external constraint, but rather as a central structuring factor of social risk, and should seek effective interaction with specific funding tools, such as the Social Climate Fund. Tackling energy poverty and ensuring access to adequate housing should also be seen as part of a broader vision of social protection in the eco-social transition. In this respect, indicators of eco-social risks (such as energy poverty, heat stress and exposure to pollution) should be integrated into the monitoring framework of the strategy. Ensuring strong synergies with other EU initiatives is also essential to avoid fragmentation and guarantee coherence.

Despite these promising directions, the initiative risks facing criticism if it fails to address several longstanding shortcomings in EU social policy making, such as the fragmented approaches to poverty reduction. A significant concern is the potential marginalisation of vulnerable groups: unless the strategy explicitly addresses the realities of undocumented migrants, Roma communities, people with disabilities, older people and people in precarious jobs, it risks overlooking those most affected by poverty and social exclusion.

Ambition needs anchors: Funding and governance that deliver

A potential issue could be the absence of a clear implementation timeline, dedicated budget and stable financing arrangements. In the context of a worrying reduction in anti-poverty funding in the proposed Multiannual Financial Framework, political promises without corresponding resources will inevitably be dismissed as symbolic. Similarly, relying solely on broad EU-wide targets – without concrete action and operational objectives – would risk turning the strategy into an aspirational document. Evaluation and monitoring arrangements are equally crucial to ensure a practical impact on poverty reduction.

Why this strategy must be different – and how it can succeed

As the EU approaches a critical juncture in 2026, the forthcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy offers a unique opportunity to reset the EU's social agenda and finally move beyond broad targets toward enforceable action. Its potential lies in providing a coherent and intersectional framework, but its credibility will depend on whether ambition is matched with concrete instruments: adequate financing; clear timelines; minimum standard; and robust monitoring.

Moving beyond monetary or income-based measures requires confronting the structural drivers of poverty and recognising that poverty is not only a matter of lacking financial resources. Discrimination and barriers faced by marginalised groups, labour market segmentation, unequal access to essential services, socioeconomic and territorial inequalities, and gaps in social protection need to be effectively addressed to achieve the eradication of poverty. A multi-dimensional approach must therefore underpin all aspects of the strategy, expanding the definition of poverty beyond income to encompass the broader inability to meet physical, material and social needs due to a lack of resources.

The strategy must provide a realistic roadmap backed by EU financial resources and ensure the systematic involvement of people experiencing poverty alongside relevant civil society organisations. Without firm commitments on funding, governance and accountability, it risks remaining aspirational rather than transformative. Ultimately, to make a meaningful difference, the strategy must translate its intentions into concrete, measurable actions capable of addressing the depth and persistence of poverty across member states, paving the way toward a more just, inclusive and socially sustainable Europe.