



## The Social Protection Committee

### The Secretariat

#### **Access to rights of vulnerable groups and the problem of non-take-up.**

*Thematic discussion on a priority topic of the French Presidency*

*(March 2022)*

Upon a proposal of the French Presidency of the EU, the Social Protection Committee held a thematic discussion on the topic of **Access to rights of vulnerable groups and the problem of non-take-up (NTU)**. The exchange was framed by the presentation of a comparative study, conducted by the French *Directorate for Research, Studies, Evaluation and Statistics (DREES)*, analysing the issue in five European Countries. Researchers from the University of Antwerp presented the effect of various forms of automation on the take-up of income-tested health insurance in Belgium.

The delegates further discussed the scope of the issue of non-take-up of social rights, its causes and possible solutions. The exchange highlighted that:

- **The right to social benefits plays a major role in reducing the risk of poverty and social exclusion. It further supports social and labour market integration.** Such benefits usually come in the form of transfers (in cash or in kind) by social protection schemes to individuals or households in need. They may also provide or facilitate access to health, education, care or other (social) services. Their design shows considerable variety across Europe, but their effectiveness largely depends on the level of the benefits and on ensuring that the benefits actually reach those, they are intended for.
- **Non-take-up of social benefits affects a range of different public services** and typically refers to persons or households being unaware, or unable to take advantage of the social benefits to which they are eligible in principle. Such entitlement is usually defined by law and takes into account a range of factors, such as household composition, residence, age and means testing, used to assess the household's level of income or assets against a defined threshold.
- **The non-take up of benefits appears to be high in all the Member States** considered in the comparative study conducted by DREES, typically ranging around 30% to 40% of the eligible population to minimum income benefits and sometimes as high as 50%. This in turn raises questions and concerns about the effectiveness of social protection and social inclusion systems.
- **The main factors, leading to this high non-take-up of social rights include: complexity of procedures, lack of awareness, fear of stigmatisation, unwillingness to declare income, and the relevance of the support offered.** The exchange further demonstrated that Member States are considering similar measures to address the issue, such as simplification and consolidation of

services, improved accessibility and developing personalized support adapted to the most disadvantaged.

- **An important challenge in view of designing effective policies to tackle NTU consists in monitoring it by comparing the size and composition of the group of those who are potentially eligible to receive the social benefit considered with the size and composition of the group that actually receives the benefit.** The importance of using multiple sources of information – such as administrative data, tax reporting, studies or in-person interviews was emphasized, alongside with the need for better data exchange within the administration.
- **Automation and improved data exchanges between relevant authorities can improve the uptake of social rights.** There are various levels of automation possible, which could include, for example, the automatic identification and means assessment of potential beneficiaries; their automatic enrolment in social assistance schemes; as well as automatic assessment of their continued eligibility. Such automation could streamline the process of granting access to social rights and – by reducing the time spent in administrative tasks – enable social workers to target their efforts more efficiently. On the other hand, some concerns were raised, linked to privacy and data protection; the large-scale and immediate impact of potential programming errors, as well as a possible lower capacity of identifying more specific needs. An example was shown of how automation has led to a substantially increased take up of a benefit.
- **Better integration of benefits and services can improve the effectiveness of social protection.** In some cases, the multiplicity of benefits and services, agencies, and application procedures increase the complexity for people to access all the support they are entitled to. Lack of integration of benefits and services reduces their effectiveness in addressing poverty, and in supporting social and labour market integration.
- **The importance of making information available to potential beneficiaries was emphasized.** This needs to happen through various channels, and be accompanied by efforts to address self-censorship and stigmatisation to make the receipt of social benefits more acceptable in all the society.

The exchange demonstrated the need to deepen the dialogue among competent authorities, and for further mutual learning activities to promote the exchange of best practices and sharing of good experiences among the Members States. To that end, the SPC Minimum Income Network will engage in further discussion of the issue of non-take-up in minimum income schemes.