

# Social Dialogue in Defence of Vulnerable Groups in Post-COVID-19 Labour Markets (VS/2021/0196)



## EU Level

### COVID-19 labour market developments

- Restrictions on mobility, mass gatherings, and public interaction during spring 2020 – aimed at protecting public health – resulted in a **significant increase in unemployment rates** across EU27.
- Regulations to lessen socio-economic consequences such as the temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) loans provided to support **job retention schemes** in many EU countries, **reduced further unemployment and protected labour markets**.
- **The Member State governments and national social partners played a vital role in protecting vulnerable groups, but the practices varied**, depending on the aims of MS governments and the strong/weak role of national trade unions in social dialogue.

Unemployment rate in the European Union and the Euro area from February 2019 to February 2023 (seasonally adjusted)



Figure 1: Unemployment rate in the Eu (and Euro area) from February 2019 to February 2023  
Source: Eurostat (2023a)

### COVID-19 and vulnerable groups

- **Vulnerability** is not only about **being exposed to particular hazardous/risk situations or economic risks**, but also shaped by a **person’s intersectionality**, such as age, gender, ethnicity, social context. It is related to a **person’s own or collective ability or capacity or resilience** to cope with these risks.
- **Vulnerability is not static, rather it changes overtime**. Thus, there is a need to take into account the temporal and spatial changes of social vulnerability.
- The vulnerable groups based on the results of DEFEN-CE research include, but are not limited to: women, the elderly, LGBTIQ+, lone parents (especially single mothers), low-income and minimum-income workers, low-skilled workers, persons with disabilities, care workers, migrant workers, non-standard workers, the self-employed, undocumented workers, seasonal workers, and ethnic minorities.

### Social dialogue in defence of vulnerable groups

- **Most EU-level policy measures**, considered as **“top-down”**, focus on protecting the labour market and businesses in general; they **were not tailored to safeguard vulnerable groups**.
- **The SURE instrument** was an innovative attempt of the European Commission and the EU institutions’ bodies that encompassed national unemployment insurance schemes in Member states.
- The influence of trade unions in the European Semester, regarding the **European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)**, decision-making was mixed, found to be low or absent at the MS level based on trade unions’ historical legacies and power.
- **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)** is conditional financing provided to Member States; it is neither linked to social dialogue nor to social partners, since the MS governments may have other focuses other than supporting vulnerable groups.

### Policy relevance

- The Covid-19 pandemic is a reminder of the necessity of social dialogue and the unsolved issues of **working conditions**.
- The pandemic revealed **the limitations of some recently adopted measures**; while highlighting **the need for comprehensive discussions and negotiations** between employers, employees, and relevant stakeholders.
- **Precariousness of work** links to vulnerabilities of workers, not only EU citizens but migrants from outside of the EU such as seasonal workers, domestic workers, and care workers.
- **Trade unions** played a crucial role in raising awareness and advocating for the rights of vulnerable workers.
- **Knowledge institutions and non-governmental organizations** are not social partners, but they were crucial players in advocating and creating **“civil dialogue”** during the pandemic.
- The pandemic had revealed **a particular need for social dialogue that is associated with labour rights**, i.e., occupational health assistance, the reconciliation between work and family, and telework and platform work.

**Further information** Project details: <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/projects/social-dialogue-defence-vulnerable-groups/about>, contact: University of Helsinki ([Chaitawat.Boonjubun@helsinki.fi](mailto:Chaitawat.Boonjubun@helsinki.fi)).

