



# IFFD

INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION FOR FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

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## IFFD PAPERS no. 14

PRODUCED BY



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### Family policy and demographic change: The role of the European Union

1st November 2012

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#### Overview of the current EU demographic situation

With birth-rates well below the replacement threshold for several decades<sup>1</sup>, women having their first children ever later in life, higher separation rates, higher percentages of single parent households, more families without a regular source of income, greater life expectancy and a rise in the number of dependent elderly people, largely resulting from past demographic trends, the configuration of European families is in a state of flux.

In terms of fertility, none of the Member States (MS) are achieving the basic replacement rate (2.1) with, France and Ireland being not far off. This implies an ageing of the European population. According to last statistical projections, by 2050 there could be two people of working age for each person aged 65 or above in the EU, whereas today the ratio stands at four people of working age for each person aged 65 or above.

Needless to say that basing on these projections, demographic ageing could have a strong impact on the labour market, productivity and economic growth as well as social security and public finances.

However there are significant differences in situations and trends among MS and their various regions, in terms of both their demographic situations and their family policies. In addition, even within each MS there are wide variations in population density, with some regions very densely populated and others de-populated, raising the issue of regional development and the maintenance of public services, including services for families. The European Union's motto, "unity in diversity", is therefore particularly apposite in this connection.

Demography change (ageing) and changes in family structures bring new challenges, which need to be taken into account when it comes to designing, coordinating and implementing family policies.

The economic crisis has had heavy effects that impact on living conditions for families and made it more difficult to respond to the resulting need for support.

#### Diversity in family policies among MS

Family policies exist in all EU countries (sometimes devised as social policies), although the focus may differ from one country to another according to varying motivations, traditions, needs, and social - or even philosophical – approaches. For example....

- Scandinavian countries have placed particular emphasis on equality between fathers and mothers, on conciliation measures and on measures making easier for parents the return to work.

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<sup>1</sup> A phenomenon known by demographers as "demographic winter".

- In the Netherlands, the key aspect has been the increase in part-time work to enable more time to be devoted to bringing up children.
- In France, the most successful country in term of fertility rate, the key aspect is the long-standing and stable character of these policies as well as their universal character and the flexibility and multiplicity of policies available.
- In UK there has been a greater – and effective - focus on getting families and children out of poverty and the State does not interfere in personal life choices.

### Key factors determining the success of family policies

In view of the current demographic situation in the European Union, it is extremely important to identify what impact past policies have had on fertility levels and what have been more successful. Indeed, although family-friendly policies vary, the successful ones have several points in common:

- Focus on conciliation and balance between family and work life<sup>2</sup>;
- Measures tailored to parents expectations and children needs without wanting to ideologically influence them;
- Preventing and combating family poverty (even more in crisis period);
- Stability and universality of such policies;
- Recognition of the family and highlight the role of the family and the value of having a successful family life;
- Taking into account situation of large families.

### Family policy: a EU competence?

Is the family policy a proper EU competence? Not as such and indeed article 9 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU explicitly says that “the right to marry and the right to found a family shall be guaranteed in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of these rights”.

This is a good thing as, in an approach based on subsidiarity, the EU must respect and not interfere on the diversity among MS as concerns societies, cultures, traditions.

Still, there are several provisions in the Treaty that protect family:

- Art. 7 “Everyone has the right to respect for his or her (...) family life.”
- Art. 33.1 “The family shall enjoy legal, economic and social protection.”

In the '90, several tools (a budget line, an Observatory, an Interservice Group within the European Commission, a high-level group of government experts, an European Parliament Intergroup on Family) had been put in place by the EU, but have then been quitted.

Since 2005, there has been a renewal of interest and action with a focus on, and as a tool of policy to answer to, the demographic changes. Several documents have been issued by the European Commission (COM(2005)94, COM(2006)571, COM(2007)244)

Beyond legal provisions, concretely, in terms of policies, the EU can enact legislation on several important aspects impacting on families:

- Balancing work and family life;
- Equality at work between women and men;
- Child protection and development, drawing on the European Commission’s recent agenda for the rights of the child<sup>3</sup>;
- Parenting support<sup>4</sup>;

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<sup>2</sup> In this area the social partners can negotiate agreements that will become directives.

<sup>3</sup> COM(2011) 60, final.

<sup>4</sup> Eurofound research; available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef1186.htm>. See as well a study made by Eurochild describing several good practices in parenting support throughout Europe available at [http://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/Communications/09\\_Policy%20Papers/policy%20positions/EurochildCompendiumFPS.pdf](http://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/Communications/09_Policy%20Papers/policy%20positions/EurochildCompendiumFPS.pdf).

- Fight against poverty of families and children (The EU's strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth for the next decade, Europe 2020, has for the first time, ever set a target for the reduction of poverty (bring at least 20 million people out of poverty and exclusion by 2020). The European Commission will eventually publish its Recommendation on Child Poverty (probably in 2013).
- Other policies which indirectly influence families (family reunification, social funds (European Social Fund), housing, especially social one, taxation (VAT)).

Let's see in details the more important of them at EU level: conciliation.

Conciliation implies two main pillars:

- time flexibility (part-time, flexible working time) and leaves;
- child (and other dependant persons) care structures (Barcelona process, Prague Council Conclusions (2009)).

As concerns leaves, probably the area on which the EU has a major role to play, there are essentially two forms of them: maternity leaves and parental leaves.

### Maternity leaves

It is a break from employment taken by mothers just before and after child birth to protect maternal and infant health and safety. Currently ruled by Directive 92/85/EEC, which sets 14 weeks of it at the level of sick pay. The European Commission proposed in 2008 to extend it from 14 to 18 months; the EP took position in favour of 20 months leave but this proposal was freeze by the Council of the EU. At present the situation is still stuck.

### Parental leaves

It is ruled by the Council Directive 2010/18/EU of 8 March 2010 implementing the revised Framework Agreement on parental leave concluded by social partners. According to it, workers are entitled to parental leave on the birth or adoption of a child. Such leave may be taken until the child has reached an age determined by national law and/or collective agreements, but anyway before the age of eight. This Directive applies equally to all workers, men and women, irrespective of their type of employment contract (open-ended, fixed-term, part-time or temporary).

Parental leave shall be granted for at least a period of four months. In principle, workers should be able to take all of their leave. It should therefore not be transferable from one parent to the other. However, such transfers may be authorised on condition that each parent retains at least one of the four months of leave<sup>5</sup>.

### Sharing and exchanging practices

When it comes to knowledge of demographic situations and trends, at all the various geographical levels, evaluation of family-friendly policies - including both national policies and the family policies implemented by local authorities - and the exchange of good practice between MS, the EU also has a valuable role to play.

To this end, the EU has set up in 2007 an European Alliance for Families, "a platform for exchange and knowledge concerning pro-family policies and best practices in the MS".

Through its technical support group, it will aim:

- To constitute an evaluation framework for best practices in the area of family policy;
- To identify and validate best practices;
- To support and promote the dissemination and the exchange of these practices at EU level;
- To monitor and report on family policy trends and changes in the EU;
- To contribute to the evidence base on family policies at EU level;

As for the evaluation framework, in order to have evidence based family practices, it aim:

- To provide a reference framework for evaluating family practice;
- To adhere to scientific standards of transparency and replicability;
- To distinguish between practices with differing levels of evidence and benefits;

<sup>5</sup> [http://europa.eu/legislation\\_summaries/employment\\_and\\_social\\_policy/equity\\_between\\_men\\_and\\_women/em0031\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/employment_and_social_policy/equity_between_men_and_women/em0031_en.htm).

This will be achieved through three evaluation criteria: evidence of effectiveness, transferability and sustainability.

## Studies

The European Union, through its Framework Research Programmes, has funded a range of projects with a research focus on family-related issues in Europe<sup>6</sup>.

## Some EESC proposals

The EESC, in its opinions on family<sup>7</sup> has made several proposals on how to better support families at EU level. These can be found on the site<sup>8</sup>, but it is worth to briefly mention here some of them.

- Associations that represent families should be more involved in drawing up family policies and policies that have an impact on families, both at the EU and national levels.
- Family issues should be mainstreamed in all European policies, particularly in the impact studies which are now required for all European legislation<sup>9</sup> and incorporated into all evaluations of existing policies for the purpose of revision.
- People should be able to choose to put back their retirement age if they prefer to take time out (financed in the same way as retirement) during their working lives.<sup>10</sup>
- Corporate social responsibility also extends to supporting a good balance between work and family life, where businesses are at the coalface in terms of implementing these measures. It would be interesting to establish a label for "family-friendly" businesses, such as the one set up in Spain, with the support of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs<sup>11</sup> or in Veneto (Italy)<sup>12</sup> or in Germany.
- The Committee firmly supports the idea of making 2014 the European Year for Families and celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations' International Year of the Family.

In conclusion, it is important to include recognition of the family and highlight the role of the family and the value of having a successful family life. In contemporary society, success is mainly defined in individual and professional terms, but there are other forms of personal success, connected with our relationships to others and to the common good, including success in family, community or cultural life, which should be given more attention, particularly in the media<sup>13</sup> and in national education systems.

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<sup>6</sup> See [http://europa.eu/familyalliance/eu-funded-projects/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/familyalliance/eu-funded-projects/index_en.htm).

<sup>7</sup> See 'The family and demographic change, Official Journal (OJ) C 161 of 13.07.2007, p. 66, 'Promoting solidarity between generations' in OJ C 120 of 16.05.2008, p. 66, and 'The role of family policy in relation to demographic change', OJ C 218 of 23.07.2011, p.7.

<sup>8</sup> See these opinions at <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.fr.social-policy-opinions&page=1> and following pages.

<sup>9</sup> EESC Opinion on 'Promoting solidarity between the generations' OJ C 120 of 16.05.2008, p. 66, point 4.8.

<sup>10</sup> EESC Opinion on 'Links between gender equality, economic growth and employment rates' OJ C318/15 of 23.12.2009, point 4.2.6.2.

<sup>11</sup> See [http://www.en.aenor.es/aenor/certificacion/resp\\_social/respEFR.asp](http://www.en.aenor.es/aenor/certificacion/resp_social/respEFR.asp).

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.venetoperlafamiglia.it/>.

<sup>13</sup> EESC Opinion on 'The family and demographic change' OJ C 161 of 13.07.2007, p. 66, point 8.15 and on 'Promoting solidarity between the generations' OJ C 120 of 16.05.2008, p. 66, point 3.13.