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**European Expert Group Meeting**  
**“Confronting family poverty and social exclusion; .**  
**ensuring work-family balance;**  
**advancing social integration and intergenerational solidarity**  
**in Europe”**

**Integration of family policies responses**  
**and shared responsibilities**

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Over the past several decades, the structure of families has changed rapidly in most of the world's industrialized countries, and Europe is facing nowadays declining birth rates, with fertility rates falling below the crucial two-child replacement level in many countries, declining marriage rates and union commitments, rising divorce rates, growth of non-marital parenthood, and women and couples waiting longer to have children. At the same time, the population is ageing and life expectancy has been growing: less children, less people in active work, and more ageing people.

## A. The European Union and family policy

Family policy has therefore entered the public debate as a set of policies aimed to cope with the demographic change and to achieve a sustainable growth, pursuing two main goals: (a) to help people have the number of children they want (according to research, European women have on average one children less than they desire); (b) to face the decreasing number of active people and the ageing of population.

The demographic challenges affecting Europe have been addressed in the light of “sustainable growth, a competitive social market economy aiming at full employment and social progress, a high level of social protection of citizens and intergenerational solidarity”. It is a widespread opinion that sustainable growth cannot be achieved without demographic growth.

The European Union has consequently approached family policy in two specific ways:

- the Demographic Challenge;
- the Respect for National Policies.

### 1. The Demographic Challenge: work-life balance policies

According to the aims specified above, the action of the European Union has focused on work-life balance, also indicated as work and family-life balance, and on gender equality, as well as active ageing. This choice is due to the goal to pursue at the same time higher levels of female employment, in order to “fill the gap” of retired people, and higher birth rates. The Lisbon Strategy in 2000 set the goal of 60% of women employed in the labour market, and in those years countries have experienced growing number of women participating in the labour market. According to statistics, moreover, women with a stable job are the ones who decide to give birth to children.

The European Union has shaped policies of work-life balance and active ageing in the light of the equal opportunities for all, developing its function of:

- coordination in employment policies and relevant areas of social policy, in particular by defining employment guidelines;

- coordination and exchange of best practices in relevant areas of social policy, especially those linked to care services for children and dependent people.

Several initiatives have been launched, especially promoting the best practice method (on which is based the action of the European Alliance for Families), and the OMC, Open Method Coordination, aiming to develop soft laws mechanisms.

## **2. The Respect of the National Level**

The European Union has no specific competence on State family policy, according to Art. 4 of the Treaty of European Union: “competences not conferred upon the Union in the Treaties remain with the Member States”. It is therefore “the responsibility of the Member States to formulate policies in support of families.”

Taking into consideration these two characteristics that have shaped the approach of the European Union towards family and family policy, we need to note that:

(a) Reconciliation of work and family life is not seen as a policy to improve the well-being of families, but it is explicitly convened as “a means of achieving equality between women and men”.

In this way, nonetheless, it seems that the demographic challenge cannot be assumed in its complexity, leading to poor results. If we consider the statistics, we can find that the positive correlation between female employment and birth rates is not univocal. The number of children a woman decide to have seems rather to depend on a more complex set of conditions: work-family balance support, tax breaks towards families, cash transfers for families with children, childcare services... For example, as the following charts show, Portugal and Slovenia have high female employment rates, but low investments on family policies and, definitely, low birth rates. France, with a female employment rate similar to Portugal, but with strong family policies, has higher birth rates.

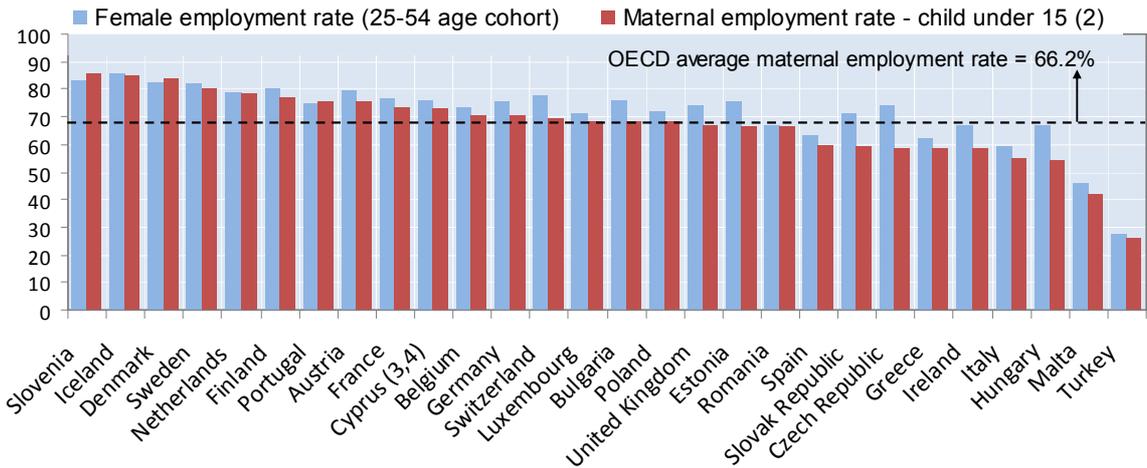


Fig. 1: Female Employment Rate/Maternal Employment Rate (source: OECD Family Database, 2012).

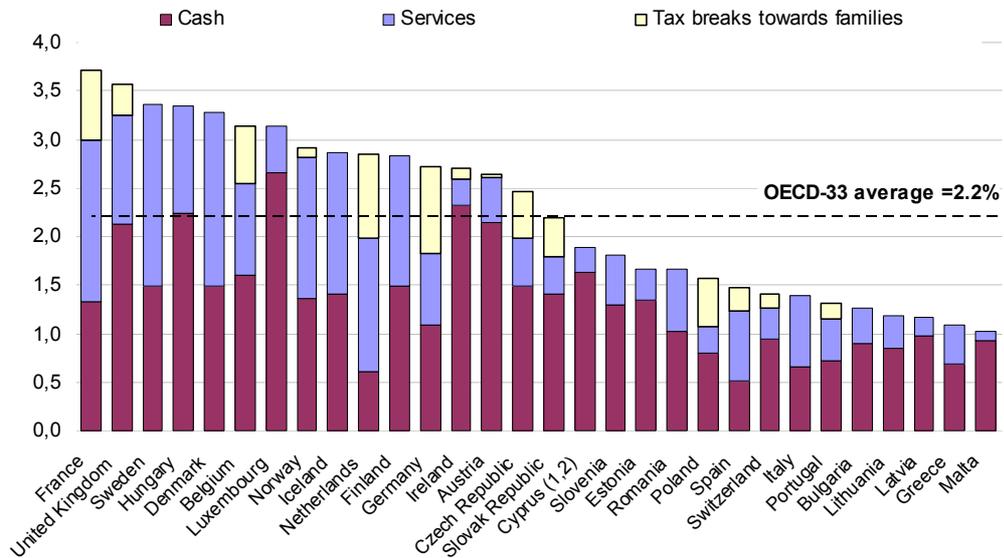


Fig. 2: Public Spending in Family Policies (source: OECD Family Database).

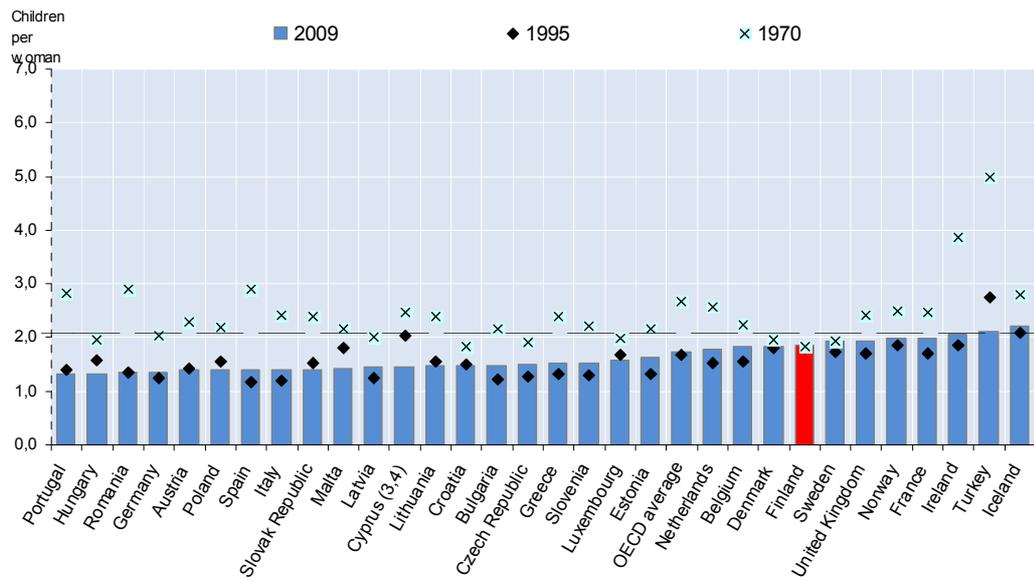


Fig. 3: Birth Rates (source: OECD Family Database).

(b) Being competence of the different European countries, family policy has been strictly linked to the different welfare regimes characterizing single Member States. Categorization of welfare regimes have been tried, but all of them have raised criticism and have led to some revisions. In the present paper we do not face the debate, but we bear it in mind, especially in its most common declination, summed up in the following table. Moreover, as seen in Chart 2, States differ greatly according to public spending on family policies, and this seem to be a determinant factor for families wellbeing and reproductive choices.

**Table 2: European family policy systems about 1990**

Policy regime	Overall Characteristics	Cash support	Support for working parents	Countries
<b>Social-Democratic</b>	Universal state support, high commitment to gender equality	Medium-level cash benefits, high-level other benefits	High-level support to both parents, long leave and extensive childcare facilities	Denmark Finland Norway Sweden
<b>Conservative</b>	Employment-related state supports, driven by more traditional gender view	Medium- to high-level cash support	Medium-level support, long leave and limited childcare facilities	Austria Belgium France Germany Ireland Luxembourg Netherlands
<b>Southern European</b>	High occupational fragmentation, mix of universal and private benefits	Low-level cash support	Low-level support	Greece Italy Portugal Spain
<b>Liberal</b>	Low-level, need-oriented support and market forces	Low-level, need-oriented support	Low-level support with strong private sector	UK Switzerland

Source: Adapted slightly modified from Gauthier 2002

Source: *FamilyPlatform Project*

## **B. Some definitions of family policy**

Building a framework of reference for family policies is therefore quite hard, as there is no univocal definition of family policy or family programmes. We can start from comparing different definitions, trying to underline the common aspects and the cross-cutting elements. Here are some definitions of family policy, taken from research documents or searching in the Web.

1. “Family policies are defined as those policies that increase resources of households with dependent children; foster child development; reduce barriers to having children and combining work and family commitments; and, promote gender equity in employment opportunities.”
2. “Family policy, a subfield of social policy, encompasses one of four family functions: (a) family creation (e.g., to marry or divorce, to bear or adopt children, to provide foster care), (b) economic support (e.g., to provide for members’ basic needs, (c) childrearing (e.g., to socialize the next generation), and (d) family caregiving (e.g., to provide assistance for the

disabled, ill, frail, and elderly). Family policies address issues such as child care, child support, divorce, family violence, juvenile crime, long-term care, and teenage pregnancy. Tax provisions that create a child care tax credit would be considered family policy. However, a tax reform law that lowers taxes for individuals, many of whom happen to live in families, would not be considered family policy. The State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) would be considered family policy. However, a universal health care program would not be considered family policy, because it targets individuals, irrespective of whether or not they live in a family setting.”

3. “Family policy’ is not a single concept but rather a range of concepts. These entail a perspective for thinking about policy in relation to families. Also, (...) while family policy is defined in various ways, its components entail laws, regulations, benefits and programmes that are designed to achieve specific objectives for the family as a whole, or for its individual members. (...) As a field of activity, ‘Family policy’ finds expression in a multiplicity of family-related programmes and services. These include childcare, counseling, social services, income maintenance, etc. (...) Action takes place through policies as well as through appropriate institutional mechanisms. Moreover, reaching policy objectives also involves the cooperation of various social actors. (...) While the eight country studies agree upon the necessity to improve the well being of the family, not all advocate direct intervention. (...) They (Family Policies, ndr) aim at strengthening families as well as at enhancing the overall socio-economic progress of society by using the family as a framework for action. Some of these services are direct and specific, such as day care, public housing, child allowance or financial support to poor families, whereas others have an indirect impact on families, i.e. through counselling and guidance as well as through providing decision makers with useful information. In addition, while some services and programmes (e.g. education, health) are encompassing all social strata, others are tailored as social welfare programmes to address the needs of poor families”.

4. Family policies are an “amalgam of policies directed at families with children and aimed at increasing their level of wellbeing”.

Synonyms and repeated concepts can be found, in this short list of family policies’ definitions:

- (a) “set of policies, amalgam of policies, range of concepts”: family policies seem to be characterized by a certain complexity;
- (b) “increase, support, strengthen”: family policies promote the choice to have a family;
- (c) “children care”: the presence of children in the family is of importance;
- (d) “direct/indirect”: family policies are polarized on two different approaches, between considering families as an explicit object/subject of policies, and considering individuals as object of sectorial policies that help families, but only indirectly;
- (e) “wellbeing”: another complex concept relating to quality of life, happiness, personal fulfillment, freedom

## C. Key Concepts: Family Mainstreaming and Family Empowerment

In order to gather some more indication about the integration of family policies and shared responsibilities, we need to further analyze two key approaches/principles that can help in the definition, as well as in the practical implementation of family policies: Family Mainstreaming and Family Empowerment, both promoted by UN in different documents and fields, starting from the experience and the reflections on gender mainstreaming and gender empowerment. While Family Mainstreaming is intersecting family policies in their designing and implementation, Family Empowerment is intersecting the practice of social services.

### 1. Family Mainstreaming

Family Mainstreaming (or mainstreaming the family issue) was first proposed by UN - DESA, starting from the Gender Mainstreaming approach and applying it to family policies and programmes. According to the document approved in the Consultative Meeting on Mainstreaming the Family Issue, family must be helped in “its supporting, educating and nurturing roles in contributing to social integration. This involved: (a) encouraging social and economic policies that are designed to meet the needs of families and their individual members; (b) ensuring opportunities for family members to understand and meet their social responsibilities; (c) promoting mutual respect, tolerance and cooperation within the family and within society; and (d) promoting equal partnership between women and men in the family.”

Family Mainstreaming is at the same time, “a process, a strategy and a tool. As a process it concerns identifying the implications for families of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes. It is also a strategy for making family concerns an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes. Moreover, it can be a tool for strengthening family-centered policies and programmes as part of an integrated and comprehensive approach to development planning.” Family Mainstreaming can become useful in evaluating the impact of all the policies on families: therefore, it can become a tool not only for policy-makers, but also for NGOs and family associations.

The European Parliament has borrowed the definition of Family Mainstreaming, according to Resolution 2129 (Resolution on reconciling Professional, Family and Private Lives, 2003/2129(INI)), in which the Parliament “encourages the Member States and accession states to analyze the impact of their policies on families (family mainstreaming), while at the same time calling on them to separate gender mainstreaming and family mainstreaming; also calls on the Commission, in the context of its communication of 2002 on impact assessment (COM(2002) 276), to take account of the various dimensions and definitions of the family in order to identify the social impact of the measures proposed”.

## 2. Family Empowerment

Family Empowerment is a criterion and a method for social practice: it is based on the activation of the inner-potentialities of family relations, by recognizing and promoting the symbolic, emotional, cognitive capabilities belonging not only to individuals, but also to the specific relation that individuals have, and trying to build positive synergies among all the individuals involved in the process (e.g. partners between them, parents and their children...)

This approach considers the family as a whole, as a complex and vital system, able to regenerate. Family Empowerment in a way of working with families, activating the single persons, developing their consciousness about their skills and sustaining their possibility to gain control over their choices.

The interventions based on Family Empowerment hold some characteristics:

- are directed to all the families at a local level;
- involve the family considered as a whole, as a subject;
- are focused on promoting the resources of the family (either inner resources or external resources, driven from the context in which the family lives, being those external resources both formal or informal);
- are aimed at enhancing the family as an active subject, main actor on the process, and not only an object and an addressee of intervention.

Family empowerment wants not only to support the relationships in the family, but aims to enhance the family as an active subject in building the community. Therefore, it has consequences not only on the families, but on the society as a whole.

### **D. Family policy: toward integration of responses and responsibilities**

After having approached family policy in its complex and heterogeneous development in EU Countries, and after having considered Family Mainstreaming and Family Empowerment as key approaches, we now consider how to build family policies that (a) consider the family as a subject, capable of assuming responsibility and (b) share responsibilities with families. In this last paragraph some indications about the integration of family policy will be outlined:

#### **1. Family policy is cross-cutting**

Part of the difficulty in defining family policies is due to their extreme heterogeneity. Family policies cross many other policies such as gender equality, childcare policies, youth policies, policies for older people... For this reason, they often suffer from a lack of clarity and direction. OECD evaluates the commitment of Governments in family policies using the criterion of the public spending on family benefits, in percentage of GDP. This public spending is obtained by summing the child-related cash transfers to families with children, the public spending on services for families with children and the financial support provided through the tax system (see Chart 2).

It's interesting to note is that the three Countries with the highest amount of public spending are also characterized by different welfare regimes, and also very different labour markets: once again, we cannot define a 'better' model of family policy. Its cross-cutting character leads to a multiplicity of solutions that gather their specificity to the promotion of the family.

Family policy is therefore a set of policies, different and interrelated. As emerges also from OECD method of evaluation, family policy should not be considered residual policies, but 'core policies'. Better said, governments should promote family policy and should adopt the Family Mainstreaming approach in proposing, developing and implementing all the policies.

## **2. Family policy is explicit, coherent and legitimate**

In particular, also according to researches, family policy should be explicit, coherent and legitimate. Family policy should address to family explicitly: it means that the actions planned and implemented are directed to families, and not to individuals. For example, work-family balance policies can be directed to improve female employment rates (that is a policy directed to individuals, e.g. women) or can be policies directed to enhance the wellbeing of families (that is a policy explicitly for families). Family policy should also promote a set of coherent policies, e.g. a set of coordinated policies that are able to cover different areas of the needs of families. Family policy, moreover, needs to be promoted and implemented by an Agency or a Ministry with a specific appointment and a dedicated budget, at national and local level.

## **3. Family policy promotes the wellbeing of families**

Family policies aim at promoting the wellbeing of families: they are therefore characterized by a distinctive promotional approach. This means that they are focused on promoting the wellbeing of the family considered as a whole, and specifically the relations among the individuals composing the family: the relation among father and children, mother and children, spouses or partners, grandparents and nephews, and so on. In this sense, family pol-

icy does not entangle the area of explicit needs, e.g. poverty reduction, unemployment, children poverty, and so on. Family policies should be considered as preventive policies as well: promoting and supporting the wellbeing of families and their responsible participation should help families in avoiding from falling under the poverty line.

#### 4. Family policy promotes the empowerment of families

Family policy promotes the empowerment of family relations. In this sense,

(a) family policy does not expropriate families from their specific responsibilities in raising, nurturing, educating, and caring for their relatives; family policy helps families in accomplishing their tasks;

(b) family policy recognizes and awards the wellbeing created by the family

(c) family policy promotes the recognition of family as a social subject in society and trigger processes of democratic participation of families in the community.

Family policies are therefore policies targeted not on individuals, but on the family considered as a network of relationships. Family policies are consequently policies aiming at strengthening and improving the relationships among individuals, to preserve and promote the well-being of both the family and the individuals. It is often just an issue of putting the focus on different things –individuals or they relationships– but it changes approach, method and goals. Some ideas for changing the perspective on family policies are listed below:

#### Policies pursued at national and local level - Guidelines for the changement

1. Implicit	Based on the consideration of individuals (gender, age, ethnicity...)	1. Explicit	Based ion the intergenerational relationships as an issue of solidarity among generations
2. Indirect	Focused on social problems and on poverty eradication; family is	2. Direct	Focused on the enhancement of the family rela-

	considered functional to achieve those goals		tionships
3. On the individual	Focused on motherhood	3. On the family	Focused on the family as a whole, and on parenthood and inter-generational relationships
4. Expropriating	Focused on giving services that can replace the family care	4. Promotional	Focused on helping families to accomplish their tasks

These last guidelines drive us to a further consideration: how to build effective family policies without listening to, and collaborating with, families themselves? In the light of the subsidiarity, and considering their cross-cutting character and the method of family empowerment, family policies should be projected and implemented involving families, and families' representatives. The 'old' slogan of people with disabilities, nothing about us without us, can be used for family policies as well.

## **E. For an integration of family policies: policy recommendations**

### **1. Consider family policies as an investment, and not as a cost**

Many researches show the inter-connection between economic crisis and declining birth rates, especially in those countries that have been characterized by long trends of low-fertility rates (Italy, Spain, Greece, and Portugal). In Europe the debate is, in those days, how to promote a sustainable growth: a policy for growth cannot be set aside from investing in families. In times of crisis, the welfare systems of many countries are undergoing different forms of restructuring; the recommendation is therefore that the family policy is not considered as a cost to cut, but as an investment in growth.

## **2. Consider work-family balance as policies for the wellbeing of families**

Work and family life are two fundamental spheres of self-fulfillment and personal wellbeing. As seen, pursuing female employment does not lead to better birth rates, if female employment is not supported by family policies. We furthermore argue that it is the responsibility of childbearing that enterprises and institutions should recognize and support, considering and supporting parenthood. Work-life balance should become an issue of family policies, helping families to find the right balance in their professional and private life.

## **3. Strengthening the Family Mainstreaming Approach**

At national and international level, family policy is still approached as a policy targeted on individuals in the light of equal opportunities. We advocate for a strengthening of the Family Mainstreaming at international, national and local level, not only in Institution but also in the labour market and in work-family life balance policies, as well as in policies for reducing poverty and in policies for migrant families.

## **4. Straightening participation of family associations**

Building family policy as a network in which institution, families and representatives of the economic sector can confront, listen to each other and collaborate; in this direction goes the best practice of the European Alliance for Families, at European and at local level, and also some social platforms promoted by the European Commission, as well as the consultative status of many associations at the United Nations. The European Alliance for Families promotes and enhances family policies through the best practice method; the alliances at local level (especially widespread in Germany) are networks based on the principles of responsibility (of all the actors involved in policy-building), participation and subsidiarity.

## **5. Recognize family care and family care work**

The wellbeing of families, as well as individuals, is strictly linked to time and care. Care is a fundamental dimension of family life, and we believe that it is not only about care for small children or ancient people, but also care of the family relations in the whole life-course of families. Therefore, we advocate for the recognition of family care work. According to a recent research, the family care work is about 30% of the European GDP: an economic and social richness which is never counted in the economic balance of countries. Families do not want to be expropriated of their care work: they want to be supported.

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## 6. Ensure freedom of choice

In a recent survey at European level, many mothers asked for freedom of choice: freedom to decide about their working paths, about how long the maternity leave should be, about the real possibility to be stay-at-home parents. Family policy should build a set of policies and opportunities which enable families to make different choices, according to their attitudes and values. This freedom of choice should of course be balanced with equal opportunities policies for women's participation in the labour market, especially for those women with low-levels of education, more exposed to job loss after becoming mothers.