



2014 - TWENTIETH  
ANNIVERSARY OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL  
YEAR OF THE FAMILY

The Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development (DIIFSD),  
The International Federation for Family Development (IFFD)  
and the Committee of the Regions of the European Union  
in cooperation with the  
Focal Point on the Family (UNDESA)

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

Summary of the proceedings

European Expert Group Meeting  
Brussels  
6 – 8 June 2012

Convened as part of the preparations for the  
Twentieth Anniversary of the International Year of the Family, 2014

## Introduction

The Expert Group Meeting on “Confronting family poverty and social exclusion, ensuring work-family balance and advancing social integration and intergenerational solidarity in Europe”, took place in Brussels from 6 to 9 of June, 2012. It was organized as part of the preparations for the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, 2014. The preparations for the anniversary focus on reviewing family-oriented policies and strategies aiming mainly at confronting family poverty; ensuring work-family balance and advancing social integration and intergenerational solidarity. The preparatory process is to accelerate progress in family policy development; demonstrate its relevance for overall development efforts and draw attention to the role of Member States and other stakeholders in achieving these goals.<sup>1</sup> The approaching anniversary offers an opportunity to share good practices in family policy making and use successful policies and programmes as benchmarks that can be adapted to local norms and socio-economic conditions in different countries.

In its resolutions 62/129 (2007) and 60/133 (2005), the General Assembly has encouraged Governments to continue to make every possible effort to integrate a family perspective into national policymaking. In particular, the General Assembly recommended that the United Nations agencies and bodies, intergovernmental and non-governmental institutions, research and academic institutions and the private sector play a supportive role in promoting the objectives of the International Year and contribute to developing strategies and programs aimed at strengthening national capacities. The 2010 General Assembly resolution (A/RES/64/133) encouraged Member States to adopt holistic approaches to policies and programs that confront family poverty and social exclusion and invited them to stimulate public debate and consultations on family-oriented and gender- and child-sensitive social protection policies.

The Economic and Social Council’s (ECOSOC) resolution on the “Preparations for an observance of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family” (2011/29) noted the importance of designing, implementing and monitoring family-oriented policies, especially in the areas of poverty eradication, full employment and decent work, work family balance, social integration and intergenerational solidarity. The resolution further encouraged Member States to continue their efforts to develop appropriate policies to address family poverty, social exclusion and work-family balance and share good practices in those areas.

In addition, the most recent resolution of the Commission for Social Development, recently adopted by the ECOSOC invited “Member-States, non-governmental organizations and academic institutions to support, as appropriate, the preparations for regional meetings in observance of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family” (E/CN.5/2012/L.3, paragraph 13).

<sup>1</sup> <http://social.un.org/index/Family/InternationalObservances/TwentiethAnniversaryofIYF2014.aspx>

In response to the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council resolutions mentioned above, the Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development and the International Federation for Family Development, in cooperation with the United Nations Focal Point on the Family, have organized the Expert Group Meeting in Brussels hosted by the EU Committee of the Regions. A Raise Awareness Meeting was held one day before, on the 5th June, with the participation of speakers from the European Parliament, the European Commission and the OECD, among others.

The Expert Meeting was convened to address family-oriented policies and practices in the areas of poverty and social exclusion, work-family balance and intergenerational relations in Europe. The meeting gathered 26 experts and observers from 15 European countries to discuss family-oriented policies and strategies and to share information on family-oriented good practices in Europe.

At the outset of the meeting, the experts noted that the European Union has no specific competence on family policy. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the Member States to formulate policies in support of families. Such policies should incorporate concepts such as family mainstreaming and family empowerment and address family units directly rather than individuals. Moreover, the number one priority in Europe: promotion of sustainable growth cannot be set aside from investing in families. In 2003 the European Parliament encouraged member States to analyze the impact of their policies on families (understood as family mainstreaming), while at the same time calling on them to separate gender mainstreaming and family mainstreaming.

Family policies are difficult to define as they cross many other policies such as gender equality, childcare as well as youth and ageing policies, etc. OECD evaluates the commitment of Governments to family policies using the criterion of the public spending on family benefits as a percentage of GDP. Family benefits considered here include child-related cash transfers to families with children; public spending on services for families with children and financial support through taxation.

Europe's families are changing with declining birth rates, lower marriage rates and union commitments, rising divorce rates and the increasing number of single-headed households. With lower fertility and longer life expectancy, Europe is rapidly ageing. To respond to these trends family policy in Europe aims to (1) help people have the number of children they desire; (2) face the decreasing number of people in the labour market and ageing population. The demographic challenges in Europe have been addressed in the context of a competitive social market economy aiming at high level of social protection for its citizens, high employment and intergenerational solidarity.

### **Family poverty and social exclusion**

Equality is a fundamental right within the EU and other European countries. However, deep-rooted disadvantages faced by certain groups of society, coupled with ingrained atti-

tudes and beliefs of others, means that legislation alone is unlikely to achieve the goal of creating a society which genuinely offers equal opportunities to all and is totally free from discrimination. While severe poverty affects certain groups within the EU, most notably the Roma in some Member States, the more widespread form of poverty within the EU tends to be relative poverty, both in monetary and non-monetary terms.

Social exclusion is closely related to poverty as it translates into not being able to enjoy levels of participation and well-being that most of society takes for granted. It is a complex, multi-dimensional, multi-layered and dynamic concept defined as a process whereby certain individuals live on the margins of society and are prevented from participating fully in the life of a society by virtue of their poverty, or lack of basic competencies and lifelong learning opportunities, or as a result of discrimination.

In this context, it is important to note that income poverty measures do not capture all poverty dimensions. Families may have minimal income but still be excluded from the mainstream of society, thus poverty measures should include social exclusion indicators as well. Similarly, more research is needed on intra-household spending habits, the knowledge of which may moderate the definition of poverty and social exclusion. Moreover, there are many families that live below the poverty line that are not included in many of the cross national statistics, such as indigenous and Roma families.

Experts emphasized that Governments should not assume that we have reached acceptable levels of income poverty in Europe, at the same time acknowledging that anti-poverty or income poverty measures have different limits and it is not always easy to monitor them. Although full benefit coverage of the eligible population may not be possible, the level of spending on family benefits can be measured and compared across European countries. Such comparisons can shed light on the effectiveness of family-oriented policies and help to improve them.

Experts agreed that child relative poverty rates have been increasing in Europe despite Governments' overall efforts to reduce poverty. Child poverty is a good indicator of family poverty and can be measured as child-market poverty rate (before taxes and transfers) and child-disposable poverty rate (after taxes and transfers).

Demographic and social changes in Europe have resulted in higher numbers of heterogeneous families, smaller families, higher family instability and increase in single-parent households. Research indicates that family change is an uneven occurrence across different socio-economic groups. In particular, studies from several European countries indicate that family instability and single parenthood have increased the fastest among women with the lowest level of education. In addition, many studies have increasingly stressed the importance of good economic prospects as a prerequisite for stable family life in modern societies and the lack of them partly explains the trends noted above.

Family instability affects children's living conditions, their development and future life chances. Several research studies have shown that separation and divorce have had negative impact on children. Overall, children of divorced or separated parents experience higher economic difficulties and perform worse in terms of educational achievement than children in intact families. In general, direct causality, however, is difficult to establish, as many factors, such as lower income, have to be taken into account.

Policy interventions have a potential to lessen negative effects of family change on children. Among them, income redistribution policies and policies supporting mothers' employment affect poverty levels and children's outcomes. Such policies have a major role in leveling the playing field between children in different family types.

Challenges faced by families are not limited to income poverty and material deficiencies. Emotional deficiencies, such as lack of relationship and interpersonal skills have a negative impact on family life as well. Some experts noted that divorce and single-parenthood often leading to lower standards of living and higher poverty risk, could be avoided if investments in 'life skills' were made. Programmes supporting intra-family relations help prevent family violence or substance abuse often leading to family breakups. Interpersonal skills help prevent and solve family conflicts and contribute to social cohesion. Quality human relationships are key factors determining the quality of family life. Skills can grow through knowledge and practical experiences. Investment in family skills development is then key to better functioning, more resilient families.

The good practice *Veilig Thuis* from the Municipality of Rotterdam illustrates the efforts to mitigate the impact of the economic crisis on families, such as higher unemployment, poverty and stress sometimes resulting in more, family violence and substance abuse. Recent research in the Netherlands (University of Utrecht, 2010) showed that 9 per cent of Dutch households experience severe violence within the family. Family violence is the physical and/or psychological abuse committed by a family member, a relative or a care taker in the household. There are many types of violence within families, also referred as domestic violence, like partner, child and elder abuse, honour related violence, trafficking of young girls and boys, female mutilation and parents' abuse. The main aim of the Rotterdam approach and its action program *Veilig Thuis* is to stop and prevent family violence by using a systemic approach, based on prevention, reporting, analysis & diagnosis, risk taxation & qualification, case management & care provision and follow up.

Other good practices for family poverty reduction were presented by civil society organizations. *Barnablick* (meaning "through the eyes of the child"), a project from the Stockholm City Mission, tries to incorporate children's perspective on poverty and offers child and family-oriented poverty reduction programmes. Another project presented was *Welfare to work* from Dublin which provides an integrated response to the aspirations of lone parents who want to take steps to ensure their economic independence. The model is based on international best practice for supporting groups most displaced from the labour market and incorporates proactive community-based recruitment, thorough needs-assessment and

mentoring. *Parler Bambin* from the Centre Communal d'Action Sociale de la Ville de Grenoble in France, focuses on early child development classes to improve learning and to reduce the link between family's low social background and the learning difficulties of children who have limited language skills.

### **Ensuring work-family balance**

Excessive workload, often due to a combination of professional and family obligations leads to a substantial reduction in life satisfaction. According to the Second European Quality of Life Survey, women who work outside home and experience work-family conflict tend to be less satisfied with life than women who work solely at home. It is unemployment, however, that has the most negative impact on life satisfaction: even those who report a high level of work-family conflict are far more satisfied with life than those unemployed.

Overall, Europeans are more dissatisfied with the amount of time they spend with their family than with the amount of time spent at work, family life being more adapted to employment requirements than work arrangements are to family life. There are substantial differences between countries as far as the reasons for unsatisfactory work-family balance are concerned. In the Nordic countries, as well as in the Benelux countries and France, failure to achieve a satisfactory work-life balance is due to a shortage of time parents are able to devote to family activities. In Central and Eastern European countries and the candidate countries, work-family balance is above all negatively affected by fatigue due to poor working conditions in addition to long working hours. Balancing work and family seems to be easier in German and English speaking countries: this may be explained by a lower proportion of dual-earner couples and working single mothers in those countries.

The lack of work-family balance is assumed to have a negative impact on demographic trends in Europe, leading to the postponement of family formation and overall lower fertility rates. Research indicates, however, that although the average desired number of children in Europe is more than 2.0, fertility rates remain lower. This so called 'fertility gap' is then considered to indicate the need for policy action. Notably, although fertility can be postponed and total fertility rates do fluctuate due to that postponement, the overall fertility rates in most European countries are below the replacement levels.

In some countries fertility declines led to policies alleviating barriers to family formation and childbearing. Most prenatal policies aiming strictly at fertility increases, such as allowances upon the birth of the child, have not been very effective. Instead, policies in Europe may need to focus on helping individuals not to postpone family formation.

The reasons for postponement vary from employment insecurity, lack of housing or personal life choices. The work-family dilemma is by and large a problem of time-use as young adults must take decisions about a sequence of important life events such as completion of education, starting work, leaving parental home and starting their own family.

Different social policies aim to alleviate the work-family conflict along these events by helping individuals not to postpone family formation to later age. These so called ‘tempo’ policies aim to achieve compatibility among events in terms of time use, in order for individuals to have more choices to parallel courses in life. For instance, kindergartens and crèches are offered in universities and in large-scale working enterprises to facilitate education or work with childrearing. Tempo policies have a potential to significantly alleviate the work-family dilemma.

Experts noted that the rising female labour force participation in Europe has been negatively correlated with fertility until 0-15 years ago but recently it has turned non-negative if not positive. Research indicates that this change is linked to the rise in services and support provided to families and other social policies which helped alleviate the conflict in time use of the family and for work. One reason for this positive correlation is the high level of part-time employment available to women who find it easier to care for children with fewer working hours. In 2007, 31.2 per cent of women in the EU 27 was working part time. Investments in quality and affordable childcare also contribute to higher fertility. Notably, the biggest birth rates in Europe are in Ireland, France, Norway, UK and Sweden where overall public spending on family benefits is higher.

Governments in Europe have supported equitable division of labour at work and in the household with the legal systems mostly facilitating gender mainstreaming. Gender equity, however, is difficult to achieve where women take up the bulk of household responsibilities. A conflict between the legal system and traditional social norms on family care are more visible in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, which may explain low fertility there.

Civil society representatives emphasized that both NGOs’ and the private sector initiatives have an impact on work-family balance. Más Familia Foundation from Spain is an independent, nonprofit and charitable organization seeking innovative and highly professional solutions for the protection and support of families, especially those with dependent members (children, older persons, those with disabilities, etc.). Its *Family Responsible Certificate for Corporations or Municipalities* helps identify companies with best work-family balance practices. Similarly, *Audit*, from the Osservatorio Regionale Politiche Sociali (Regional Observatory for Social Policies - Veneto Region, Italy) promotes family friendly working environment in enterprises by awarding *Audit Family & Work* certificates.

Turning to parental leave entitlement, well established policies promoting work-family balance in Europe include: *maternity leave*, intended to protect the health of the mother and new born child.; *paternity leave*, compulsory only in a few countries, aiming at enabling the father to spend time with his newborn child; and *parental leave* which is available equally to mothers and fathers, either as a non-transferable individual right (both parents have an entitlement to an equal amount of leave) or as an individual right that can be transferred to the other parent. It is understood to be a care measure, intended to give parents the opportunity to spend time caring for a young child. It is taken usually after the end

of the maternity leave. Sometimes, parents can choose to take all or part of their parental leave on a part-time basis. There are other measures such as leave to care for children.

In the context of leave entitlements, experts noted that there was still insufficient support for working father's with caring responsibilities. Examples of this support are parental leave and flexible working provisions targeted at fathers, especially in the Nordic countries which have been global pioneers in work-family policy innovation.

There are also other entitlements such as childcare leave, and leave entitlement granted for a variety of reasons. The *Belgian Time Credit System* initially designed to tackle raising unemployment levels, rapidly developed over the years into a valuable tool for work-family balance. Under this career break system employees can reduce their working time in order to cope with their multiple work and family obligations. The leave can be taken for a variety of reasons and has been found to help balance family and personal life. It got an increasing take up rate and was especially successful among young mothers as it was far ahead of the EU Directive on Parental Leave.

### **Advancing social integration and intergenerational solidarity**

The European population is rapidly ageing. A steady increase in life expectancy across Europe during the last century led to increased longevity, while in more recent decades – from the 1970s onwards– Europe has experienced falling fertility rates. These two developments impact upon demographic ageing, a process that has become established in the EU in the last 30 or 40 years and which is expected to become further entrenched during the next half century, as the absolute number and the relative importance of the population of older persons continues to grow. These demographic changes will lead to significant challenges for families and individuals. For example, it could become commonplace for people to move into retirement while still having one or both of their parents alive.

There are many challenges arising from population ageing, such as pressure on public budgets and fiscal systems; strains on pension and social security systems; adjusting the economy and in particular workplaces to an ageing labor force; possible labor market shortages as the number of working age persons decreases; the likely need for increased numbers of trained healthcare professionals; higher demand for healthcare services and long-term (institutionalized) care; and potential conflict between generations over the distribution of resources.

Positive parenting has been recognized as a cornerstone of children education worldwide and as a way to potentially reduce public costs related to poor social integration and intergenerational relations. The case method used by IFFD helps parents improve their child-rearing skills through the use of practical examples. The case method was first implemented at Harvard Law School. Nowadays the case method is adopted by many prestigious Business Schools. A case is a narrative account of a situation, problem or decision usually derived from actual experience and in which people promote active learning, team-based

activities and the ability to deal with real-life problems. Moreover, all universities have available data on assurance of learning validated by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and the method has been used beyond business and law, in environments such as communication or engineering.

Investing in good parenting contributes to better outcomes in children. Supporting parenting programmes is an example of *paying now and paying less* principle since it helps preventing conflicts that would imply higher costs later. IFFD courses, carried out in 65 countries, are designed to suit the different stages of child development. A good practice from Lithuania was showcased to illustrate the fact that all courses are structured on the participant-based case study method and use cases involving real situations. Cases are first analyzed by small teams formed by few couples, and then discussed in larger groups at general sessions moderated by experts in family development. The courses differ depending on children's age.

One of the most important changes for children today are rapidly evolving family structures. Although it is not a new development, its consequences can be seen more clearly now. In the EU, divorce rates rose by 250 per cent in forty years. Moreover, the number of cohabitating couples with children is also increasing in all OECD countries.

Concerning the consequences of divorce for children's well-being, for some researchers such as Simons (1996), divorces and separations were seen as healthy for adults and children because when troubled marriages ended, children escaped the burden of being raised in an atmosphere of parental conflict. Since, 1980s, however, research on the effects of parental divorce on children's well-being has grown demonstrating that although evidence shows that in the long term negative effect of divorce disappear, there are negative adult outcomes such as lower educational attainment, poor adult psychological well-being as well as intergenerational transmission of divorce. However, the causality of the divorce effect is more difficult and sometimes even impossible to establish. Overall, however, family breakdown has negative impacts not only on children but intergenerational relations within families as well.

Experts noted that more research is needed to determine the long-term impact of parental divorce on children (e.g. low-conflict families vs high-conflict families). In light of existing research indicating that parental conflict is often linked to poor parent-child relationship and negatively impacts children's long-term well-being, new policies and programmes aiming at preventing these problems should be developed. Such new policies should be based on good knowledge about various challenges facing European families. In general, programmes promoting parents' relationships quality tend to improve children's well-being and should have a wider use.

The good practice from the *Hungarian Association of Large Families* demonstrated that the legal system to support families is beneficial when it includes universal direct financial support, income tax exemptions, social and cultural services (education, healthcare, re-

duced rate transportation, childcare, nursing of ill and elderly people, etc.), supports and subsidies from local authorities in cash and in kind, as well as compulsory and optional fringe benefits from employers (extra vacation days, schooling aid, etc).

### Research & Exchange of Good Practices

Experts agreed that more research on families should be conducted in Europe. Although there are different family-focused policies and actions, the family perspective in overall policy making is not fully developed in Europe. Mainstreaming of family perspective in overall policy making is needed to analyze and improve existing socio-economic policies and make them more family-friendly. Such analysis, in turn can assist governments and other stakeholders to design strategies to better assist families in Europe.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the experts discussed the importance of collecting and disseminating the information on good practices in family policy making in Europe. The good practice presented was that of the European Alliance for Families, a portal which is devoted to family policies in the European Union. It aims to encourage more family-friendly policies through the exchanges of ideas and experience in various EU Member States. The Alliance was founded in 2007 by the Council of Europe with a view to improving the living conditions of Europeans who have children or would like to start a family. It also focuses on child poverty and on equal opportunities for women in the workplace. The Alliance website serves as a medium for exchanging good practice, ideas and experiences among the different EU Member States.<sup>2</sup>

### Conclusions

Experts agreed on some general recommendations that could improve the situation of families in Europe. They suggested different recommendations for each of the three main topics of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family. Regarding *family poverty and social exclusion*, in Europe there is a need for developing family friendly policies aimed at providing sustainable and affordable quality living conditions for families as well as ending child poverty and promoting family-friendly taxation policies. Avoiding economic and income traps is a good way to be more efficient in policymaking so large and low-income families can receive the necessary support.

Regarding *work-family balance* it is very useful to first recognize the high value of work-family balance in the economy and society. Such recognition should lead to the development of more flexible parental leave entitlements throughout the life course of the family and in periods of transition as well as family-care leave arrangements and part-time working arrangements not just for couples but for lone parents as well. The provision of affordable quality childcare would also promote work life balance.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/social/families/index.cfm?langId=en&id=10>

---

Programmes strengthening *social integration and intergenerational solidarity*, like those based on the case method, should focus on investing in parenting and family communications as a good way to prevent conflicts and to reduce public costs. More investments should also be made in programmes that support the reintegration of parents into work and professional life after periods of parental and family leave as well as for older people in order to reduce intergenerational transfer of poverty.

Finally, the experts recommended wider exchange of good practices in family policies and programmes so that Governments, civil society and other stakeholders can learn from one another. Such exchange of good practices is currently under way through the European Alliance for Families which should be strengthened.