

Preventing child poverty: The role of preventive and combined family policies

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First of all, the Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union (COFACE) would like to thank the organisers for the invitation to participate as a stakeholder in this peer-review. COFACE welcomes the organisation of such meetings, which enable in-depth analysis and fruitful exchanges on key and relevant policies for social inclusion and social protection.

Information concerning COFACE is available on its website: www.coface-eu.org.

I. Relevance of the policy to other countries in the EU

As rightly pointed out by the discussion paper, the policy under review sits at the crossroads of many challenges faced by the European Union : poverty and social exclusion, gender inequality, violence against women, children's rights, and demographic challenges.

Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the problems it addresses are relevant to all EU countries. Member States can learn from many strong points, even though some remain to be strengthened.

1. Problems addressed

Pregnancy and birth are periods where families, and in particular women, are especially at risk, posing financial and emotional challenges. In all EU Member States, these periods can be a breaking point for many families and women, where the household might shift into poverty and/or social exclusion.

Pregnancy and birth periods cause financial pressure for many parents (need for a higher income to cope with the costs of pregnancy, birth, and need for more space and furniture in the housing) while entitlement to family benefits start only after birth and do not cover all the costs related to the child's arrival and bringing up.

This financial threat is frequently accompanied by a high level of stress prejudicial to the good development of the pregnancy, and may also generate conflicts and violence.

Interestingly enough, while the problems addressed are commonly spread across all Member States, Germany seems to be the only country to offer specific cash benefits in case of financial needs related to pregnancy and birth.

2. Strong points of the good practice

The good practice under review offers many strong points for inspiration to other Member States.

Some of these strong points relate to the philosophy behind the policy:

- Modern approach of family policy: the policy fits into a modern approach of family policy, combining cash benefits with access to support services, and orientating towards the social inclusion of the family, gender equality, and child well-being;
- Child's rights approach: with its focus on protection of children against violence and neglect, the policy respects a modern child's rights approach, even though this dimension could be further strengthened.
- Active inclusion approach: by combining income support and access to social services, the policy also fits into the active inclusion approach promoted by the Commission's Communication of 3 October 2008 on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market;
- Early intervention: the policy intervenes at the moment when most needed, i.e. at the breaking point when there is a high risk of entry into poverty, social exclusion and violence for the household. It also aims well at protecting the child from poverty, neglect and abuse by creating the appropriate conditions for his/her development ahead of his/her birth;
- Range of the policy: though a targeted measure, the recipient group is not excessively narrow with more than one in five pregnant women receiving funds from the Mother and Child Foundation.

Other strong points relate to the more practical implementation of the policy:

- Local delivery and user-friendliness: delivery by local counselling and non-bureaucratic mechanisms seem to ensure adequate out reach of persons in need. The fact that a third of the recipients were citizens of foreign countries seem for instance to indicate that those who might be less familiar with the administrative structure and might face a language issue still managed to access support.
- Network: financial support from the Foundation is seen as a 'door opener' to a broader system of early prevention and intervention measures, thanks to its integration in a network of social services and efficient referral mechanisms.

3. Points to be strengthened

COFACE's member organisation in Germany, Arbeitsgemeinschaft der deutschen Familienorganisationen (AGF) e.V., pointed out to several issues. Several members of AGF are represented in the board of trustees of the Federal Foundation Mother and Child.

The first issue is the lack of adequacy of the financial support granted. An average lump sum of 600€ has a very limited poverty-reduction effect – if at all. Besides, COFACE notes that the Länder and the local pregnancy counselling services have to gear their practices in terms of counselling and submitting and approving application towards an optimum balance between the capped budget the expected number of grants during the operative year. It therefore cannot be excluded that the grants are not tailored enough to the needs of the applicant. This is consolidated by findings that there are considerable difference between the average grant levels in the individual Länder.

Another issue is that financial support does not systematically fulfil its role as 'door-opener' to a broader system of early prevention and intervention measures. This depends very much on the counsellor.

The policy focuses mainly on the other mother, when a greater involvement of fathers would be crucial in order to foster their role in the family and address the issue of uneven sharing of household and family responsibilities between women and men.

Finally, there is also a lack of evaluation. As pointed out by the discussion paper, the host country does not provide evidence about measuring the impact of the financial support or evaluating the side-effects as door-opener to support services. This should be addressed.

II. Potential transferability of the policy to other EU countries

As stressed by the discussion paper, a specific financial support for pregnant women in need could be introduced in other Member States, but it would largely depend on financial possibilities and political priorities. In that respect, the strong preventive dimension of the policy under review should play strongly in its favour. It should be looked at as an investment in children well-being which will pay off in pay off in terms of economic and social development.

The model should be adapted to the characteristics of the Member States (more or less decentralised, public or private operators) but local delivery should be maintained in order to retain the link with support services as well as efficient out reach.

III. Important questions raised and debated in family organisations

One of the questions raised is the issue of universal v. targeted benefits. Family organisations unanimously solved the debate by advocating a combination of universal and targeted family benefits.

COFACE asks that basic needs of children be fully covered by universal child benefits, conceived as a right for all children¹. One could argue that financial support during the periods of pregnancy and birth could, instead of a measure targeted to vulnerable families, be a universal measure conceived as a right of the child in order to compensate already for the cost of the child, as do universal child benefits after birth.

Another issue raised is that of timely preparation to parenting. Parenting is a key aspect of successful early prevention and intervention policies. Parents should be empowered and be given advice in their new roles as early as pregnancy (and even earlier at the stage of family planning). It is therefore crucial that financial support during pregnancy serves as door opener to parenting support services. Family organisations all over the EU are running programmes in this field.

IV. Potential contribution to National Strategy Reports on SP/SI

The German best practice needs to be proven efficient by more thorough measurement and evaluation, and points to be strengthened must be addressed.

Based on this, it could provide strong inspiration to other Member States when elaborating their National Action Plans against poverty and social exclusion. This would fit in the framework of the fight against child poverty and of the implementation of the EC Recommendation on Active Inclusion.

V. Key issues and main questions proposed for debate at the review meeting

In addition to those identified by the discussion paper, COFACE would like to propose the following questions:

- How to ensure continuity and sustainability between integrated (cash and in kind) support during pregnancy and at the time of birth, and integrated support after birth?
I.e., how to ensure that there is no gap in financial support? How to ensure that the child's needs are always taken into consideration and met (from early prevention and intervention to childcare services)?
- How to ensure that financial support acts as door-opener to parenting support services?
- Does the policy under review efficiently take into account the actual financial needs (including number of children already borne/to be borne) when assessing the need?

¹ See our position paper [‘COFACE Recommendations on active inclusion, a tool for fighting family poverty’](#)