

Promoting prevention and early intervention

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1. Assessment of the policy debate at European level

Today public policymakers all over Europe have a more direct interest in children and their quality of life. This interest is driven in part by demographic concerns, notably the ageing of the European population and the dramatic decline in fertility rates. Policymakers are looking for measures to enable families to have the number of children they wish to have while policy also seeks to combat child poverty.

Growing up in poverty considerably restricts the children's ability to fulfill their potential. The earlier a child begins to live and the longer the child is growing up in poverty the more severe the respective effect on his/her current and his/her future chances in life will be. Therefore the fight against child poverty in Europe has to become a top political priority. A strong focus has been placed on promoting the quality of life and the well-being of children, which is strongly determined by their family situation and the quality and accessibility of services.

The Council of Europe has conducted an important work in this field. To address the lack of up-to-date and comparable data on family policies, the Committee of Experts on Social Policy for Families and Children, a sub-committee to the European Committee of Social Cohesion, developed a comprehensive questionnaire on national family policies and compiled 40 national replies, which now form a large database with detailed quantitative and qualitative data on all relevant sectors of family policy¹. It covers 40 of the Council of Europe's 47 Member States, including all members of the European Union and helps in mapping family policies, traditions and political orientations across Europe. The five major categories of policy priorities and concerns that these national governments have at present include:

- financial support for families through benefits, allowances, grants or benefit supplements;
- the reconciliation of work and family life;
- governmental investment in new facilities and/or improving service provision to families;
- policies aiming at strengthening family life and parenting and preventing violent behaviour inside the family;

* Eurochild is a network of organisations and individuals working in and across Europe to improve the quality of life of children and young people. Our work focuses particularly on the fight against child poverty and social exclusion in Europe and is underpinned by the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC).

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¹ Council of Europe (2009), *Family Policy Database*, http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/familypolicy/Database/default_fr.asp.

- legislative and/or political measures to protect women and children. This includes, namely, the improvement of existing legislation, or the introduction of new laws, with the purpose of enhancing the protection of children living in institutions. On the other hand, although gender policies are closely related to the fight against domestic violence, new basic legislation (to protect both children and women), particularly in countries in which gender policy is still recent, emerges as a key task to which several governments are committed, according to the responses to the questionnaire (for example Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Romania, Russian federation, Serbia and Turkey).

Over the last decade there has been a growing commitment in Europe to family support. This has been expressed in both policy and practice. There is now sufficient understanding and experience to allow for a strategically managed approach based on a planning cycle of legislation covering policy choice, planning, service delivery, monitoring and evaluation.

2. Relevance of the German policy

Eurochild welcomes the German federal government commitment to the protection of children and the development of a strategy for early intervention and prevention.

As indicated in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, adopted by the General Assembly on 20 November 1959, "the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth". This was recalled in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) preamble.

We live in a society where the socio-economic status into which a child is born is still probably the most important determinant of his/her future health, education and employment outcomes. To break the cycle of "inherited poverty" assistance must be provided as early as possible. High quality and accessible early prevention and intervention measures are therefore crucial. Families with young children, and in particular those facing poverty and social exclusion, must receive the necessary support and encouragement. Intervention before problems occur is less costly and produces long-term benefits to society². However, more attention should also be paid to emotional poverty in which children and young people grow up. Secure attachment, safe community environments, good peer relations, etc., all impact on the future well-being of young people.

Eurochild broadly agrees with some important issues which have been raised in the discussion and host country papers:

- Modern family and household policies are crucial not only for enabling people to have the number of children they want, thereby contributing to Europe's demographic renewal, but also for promoting equal opportunities, supporting intergenerational solidarity, combating child poverty and increasing children's well-being.
- Integrated policies and synchronised complementary initiatives at macro, meso and micro levels are crucial. It is the interplay of policies that either creates poverty traps or brings families out of poverty.

² Action for Children (2009), *Backing the Future*, <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/uploads/media/36/7857.pdf>.

- Children must be considered in their own right. Within the family, the situation of children is specific and may differ from the situation of their parent(s). This challenges the traditional notion that children's interests can be addressed only under the umbrella of family policy or women's policy. In fact the needs of parents can sometimes obscure the interests of children; nor should the needs of children always be perceived as the same as those of women.
- Access to appropriate material, psychological, social and cultural resources should be ensured.
- A key factor of success for effective early prevention and intervention measures is the establishment of networks, including health care facilities, pregnancy counselling services, interventional centres, childcare options, and children and youth services.
- The groups particularly endangered by poverty include the unemployed, the low skilled, single parents, young parents, parents with migrant background, and children who live in families that belong to these groups. A special attention should be paid to best safeguard those vulnerable groups against disadvantage and exclusion.

However, Eurochild emphasises that:

- It is absolutely crucial that services for families should be seen as a universal entitlement and therefore be embedded at the core of all policy relating to both children and young people in particular, and social care in general. This would offer the benefit of ensuring sustainability of service provision and a foundation on which other more tailored services could be developed. In this way universal services would become the "home" for targeted services. Even where services are universal, strategies to promote effective access are required, since vulnerable people often do not use the available services.
- A strength-based approach should be taken: an approach which values parents' empowerment rather than focusing on charity. In addition to material resources, families facing poverty or social exclusion need support that is non-judgmental and empowering in its approach.
- We must give children every chance to take the opportunities which come their way in life and fulfill their potential. The issue critical to strengthening families and neighborhoods and keeping children safe from harm also lies behind this approach. Early intervention with families at risk and empowerment of parents to look after their children will help reduce cases of neglect or abuse, ending the culture of crisis management and mitigating the need for young people to be taken into care. We are clear that we must engage with families at an early stage and tackle problems at their root, which will also enable us to combat the major social ills such as disadvantage, poverty and poor health.
- In order to create a good environment for children, there is a need to support families in their parental role. Actions that remove barriers to positive parenting, including policies providing parenting education and training, should be further promoted. Support to parents in the form of information and guidance on caring for and nurturing their young children should be ensured. Material, psychological maturity, social network are equally important aspects.

The Council of Europe Recommendation Rec(2006)19 on policy to support positive parenting³ encourages to:

- (a) recognise the importance of parental responsibilities and the need to provide parents with sufficient support in bringing up their children;
- (b) take all appropriate legislative, administrative, and financial measures to create the best possible conditions for positive parenting.

Overall principles:

- a rights-based approach;
- respect for parents and children and their potential;
- recognition of the diverse types of parenting and parental situations;
- address key players (childcare, school, health, ...).

Implementation: how can the state support positive parenting?

- Adequate family policy measures (reconciliation of family and professional life, promotion of higher participation of fathers in all situations of family life, ...).
- Mainstreaming children's rights in policymaking.
- Awareness raising (ensuring comprehensive awareness).
- Services to support parents including:
 - local centres and services dispensing information, counselling and training on parenting;
 - spaces where parents can go to exchange experiences and learn from one another, and play with their children;
 - educational programmes for parents, during pregnancy and other stages of the child's development;
 - help lines for both parents and children in a crisis situation;
 - programmes to support children's education, prevent school drop outs and promote cooperation between schools and parents;
 - services targeting populations at risk such as migrant families, parents and children with disabilities, teenage parents or parents in difficult social and economic circumstances.

³ "Parental behaviour, based on the best interests of the child, that is nurturing, empowering, non-violent, and provides recognition and guidance which involves setting boundaries to enable the full development of the child" (CoE Recommendation 19, December 2006).

3. Transferability

3.1 Values of the Federal Foundation's practice vs. risks

- **An empowering approach and not just a "hand-out"**

Eurochild views the Federal Foundation Mother and Child's practice as an important attempt to improve the circumstances of both pregnant women in need and their unborn children as well as better protect children at a very early point in time. Foundation's funds are intended for the period before and after the birth in order to offset expenditures related to pregnancy and birth, as well as for the care and raising of a small child. Such assistance includes the costs of such things as maternity clothing, the baby's initial needs, and the cost of care for the young child, as well as the cost of maintaining a household.

The German approach, which offers a very relevant example of benefits delivered by independent support schemes, supports Eurochild's demands for the need to give children a better start in life, support families at risk of poverty, promote the social inclusion of parents, and increase the opportunities for young mothers to become economically independent. However, Eurochild is concerned that an empowering approach – rather than just a "hand-out" – is neglected.

- **Law threshold of participation**

It is very important that the Foundation uses a minimum of bureaucratic rules in delivering its financial support and provides assistance quickly. As recalled in the host country paper, to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty assistance should be provided as early as possible and offered at a level with a low threshold. This means that opportunities made available should be easily accessible by all as is the case of the Federal Foundation's funds which are allocated through pregnancy counselling services. Nevertheless, this channel of access should be further developed and more effectively linked to existing assistance options.

- **Support psychological maturity and social networking for parents**

Material support is evidently important. When the mother is alleviated of the burden of financial concerns related to the birth, this will ultimately benefit the child. However, this is just the entry point: "immaterial" support, psychological maturity, social network are all crucial aspects. To which extent is this support provided by the Federal Foundation? The maternity services can act as a gateway to the wider services available and receive support from other agencies. Identifying the relevant agencies locally and creating strong referral links with them can also improve uptake of maternity care, as maternity practitioners can raise those agencies' awareness of the importance of pregnant women and fathers making contact with maternity services. To which extent is the Federal Foundation able to ensure an effective and sustainable link with women's shelters, health-care system, and children's and youth services?

- **Involvement of other important people in mother's life**

During pregnancy mother's health is fundamental as it is the material support to reduce her stress. However, it is important that we do not lose sight of the crucial role played by mother's network. This also includes social networking among peers.

- **Evaluation**

The potential beneficiaries of the Foundation's funds receive information and guidance about the financial support through the local information centres with different private and public background, including private social welfare organisations as well as state or municipal authorities.

The implementation through networking with the local pregnancy counselling services may provide good opportunities for reaching-out the most vulnerable groups, detecting other forms of deprivation or social problems and linking financial help with social and health support systems and organisations. However, the effect and impact of this networking on the actual social inclusion and poverty relief of the target population is not clear.

3.2 Potential obstacles

Implementation is quite peculiar to the German system of regionalisation and involvement of private and church related social welfare organisations. This may represent a potential obstacle for its transferability to other countries.

4. Key issues for debate

- **Parental education prior to childbearing and during parenthood**

To create a good environment for children, there is a need to support families in their parental role. Many countries, including Germany, support counselling for parents. Such counselling has a positive effect by fostering a secure environment in which children can develop. Innovative initiatives launched by a number of Member States include preventive care such as regular check-ups of children and free maternity and child clinics as well as in-school health consultants who offer vaccinations, provide dental care, give advice on mental health, provide information on substance abuse, contribute to sexual education and health and promote healthy eating habits⁴.

Hungary offers an example of good practice in this respect. Hungary has got a system of universal health visitation (the so-called *vedono*) since the Second World War, founded in 1915 as a support service for deprived families, which was widened as a general health and later social support to pregnant women by providing pre-natal care and regular visits after the child was born⁵. From the 70's there has been a 4 years college training introduced especially for health visitors. Nowadays some 5000 nurses are working, who are educated health professionals helping families, especially pregnant women, with advices on childbearing and parental role.

⁴ European Communities (2008), *Thematic study on policy measures concerning child poverty*, Policy Studies Findings – 10.

⁵ For further information please see: <http://www.oefi.hu/modszertan10.pdf> and http://www.webbeteg.hu/index.php?page=news_full&cim=Europaban-csak-nalunk-letezik-vedonoi-halozat&type=49&menu=egeszsegugy&news_id=1535.

Earlier health visitors were responsible for children up to 14 in the families, whereas recently the system has been restructured so up to 6 they should follow children's development, and many of the health visitors are reaching children in kindergartens and schools where they are employed as well.

A new plan has been submitted to the EU Cohesion Policy based programme to set up a national database, based on a follow up mapping exercise to cover all Hungarian children from birth up to school age to see – similarly to the Canadian Mapping programme – how are the services influencing the development of children. According to the plans – provided that funds for the programme will be available – Hungary would also reform the curriculum, and set up a computerised database. This would mean a vocational training, universal documentation, follow up of the activities, etc.

Being a parent is a complex and difficult role. It is important to avoid labelling parents and programmes, and instead to provide support for all, share good parenting practices rather than teaching parents how to raise their children, and see it as a powerful tool for social cohesion. It might be useful to stress that if the need for more support to parents is obvious, it should not be 19th century type of support of moralisation, especially about the role and responsibilities of mothers.

Pregnant teenagers and young fathers are less likely than older people to access maternity care early on and are less likely to keep appointments – due to a range of interlocking factors. As well as reduced engagement with clinical care, teenage mothers and young fathers are also much less likely than older parents to attend antenatal education⁶. The '*Teen Parents Support Programme*' originated in July 1999 in Ireland offers an example of effective response to the vulnerability of families headed by teen parents by providing support services for both the young parents and their children, empowering young parents in their parenting role and ensuring equality of opportunity⁷.

▪ Parental involvement programmes

The enhancement of parental skills and practices aiming at improving inter-generational relations is also crucial. A synthesis of experimentally evaluated parent involvement programmes for children found that overall, programmes that actively engage with parents generally have positive impacts on child's outcomes⁸. These include parenting skills training programmes, parent-child involvement programmes, parental education programmes, and programmes that integrate the use of technology into their interventions. Concerns related to basic skills of parenting have also to do with the fight against negligence, abuse and/or violence against children. These kinds of programmes are more common and aimed at families with behaviour problems or at risk due to extreme poverty or substance abuse.

⁶ Department for Children, Schools and Families & Department of Health (2009), *Getting maternity services right for pregnant teenager and young fathers*.

⁷ Margaret Morris (2009), *Teen Parents Support Programme. Review of work 2007 and 2008*, http://www.treoir.ie/pdfs/TPSP_Rev_08.pdf

⁸ Child Trends (2009), *What works for parent involvement programs for children: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Social Interventions*.

These programmes can be run at very different levels (from state to local level) and also by very different kinds of institutions (public, private, religious, NGOs) thus resulting in a wide range of modalities and beneficiaries⁹.

- **Fathers' involvement**

The network with fathers should be encouraged. Sadly, it is common for health and other services to neglect fathers, especially young dads¹⁰. Positively involved dads can be a hugely important resource for their children and also for the mothers of their children. Research shows that mothers who feel supported by their baby's father adjust better to motherhood and behave more positively towards their children – for whom a good relationship with fathers proves protective in face of other disadvantage. Having a highly involved father (independently of whether the father and mother remain a couple) is also associated with better emotional, behavioural and education outcomes for children.

This implies that practitioners who reach out to fathers – in pregnancy services, youth services, early years, health, education, housing – can find themselves doing a much better job all round.

- **Outcomes for children**

It is important to evaluate whether measures for improving mothers' and children's situation are sustained over time. It is difficult to assess whether the Foundation's approach improves children's outcomes in the long run. The financial delivery of the Foundation is yearly closely monitored. However, besides looking at how many people are using the services, the Foundation should look at long-term support and outcomes for children. For instance, it would be of crucial importance to evaluate how this practice has an impact on reducing abandonment or in ensuring that children are not placed into care.

- **Out-reach to the most vulnerable**

Strategies to promote effective access are required, since vulnerable people – including irregular immigrants, ROMA population, teenage mothers, single mothers – often do not use the available services without targeted efforts to reach them.

Single parent households are one of the population groups at greatest risk of poverty, particularly those households that are led by single mothers. The average European at-risk-of-poverty rate for single parent households containing at least one child is 34% in 2007 (Eurostat). 13% of children in the EU live with one parent, among which 1 in 3 is at risk of poverty, 90% of cases, the lone parent is the mother. Female-led single parent households comprise only 4.4% of all EU households, however, they are disproportionately at risk of poverty. Furthermore, female children raised in single-mother households are considerably more likely than their peers to become pregnant at an early age and they are far less likely to finish compulsory or university education.

⁹ Council of Europe (2009), *Family Policy in Council of Europe Member States*, Two expert reports commissioned by the Committee of Experts on Social Policy for Families and Children.

¹⁰ The Fatherhood Institute (2009), *Invisible Fathers. Working with young dads – a resource pack*.

Are the Foundation's funds reaching out the most vulnerable people? Are the beneficiaries reflective of the number of people who are most in need, namely single parent households, young mothers and families with migrant background?

▪ **Participatory approach that empowers parents rather than de-skills**

Services should embody participation and empowerment as an essential value, as an expression of democracy and as a means to combat social exclusion. An approach that empowers parents rather than de-skills them is therefore needed. The development of a deeper understanding as to how parents support children's emotional needs and help children to develop resilience is crucial.

During the current school year, Cyprus Pedagogical Institute has adopted a play-based approach in training parents called '*Parents following the pathway of the heart*' to enhance children's emotional development. More specifically, 75 out of the 130 preschool teachers are trained to organize numerous activities (workshops, talks, etc.) with the parents of the children in their classes. The aim of the workshops is to help parents in children's emotional education including mainly children's expression of emotions, children's understanding of emotions, children's empathy and children's emotional self-regulation.

Participation requires pedagogical work that supports the development and upbringing of each child. Participation means the active inclusion of the entire community: parents, all young children and adults, professionals of all kinds working in services and other citizens. Participation enables all of these groups to contribute to the construction of a common project and to every aspect of the life of the service including helping in many ways and active involvement in management, decisions and evaluation.