

# **Family Platform - Common statement on the final Research Agenda**

**Budapest, Thursday the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2011**

During the Family Platform conference held in Brussels on 4 and 5 November 2010 a great number of issues for future research were presented by the Family Platform consortium. We would like to greet the extensive work carried out by the members of the Consortium and also draw attention to the points that we believe would be the most useful to investigate with regard to the wellbeing of the family in Europe, today and tomorrow.

The EU 2020 strategy aims at smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Sustainability of the family provides sustainability to society as a whole and should therefore be supported. One approach that can be used in research on family related matters and factors that influence the sustainability of the family is identifying policies that have negative consequences on families. On the other hand, such an approach would need to be complemented by bringing in experiences that have proven to have a positive effect on the sustainability of the family. We will hereafter make suggestions using these two approaches.

## **Life course and transitions**

### The “missing child”

There is a gap between fertility intentions and the actual number of children that are born. We need to understand the reasons lying behind this situation. Identifying the reasons why young people in Europe tend to have less children than they wish could help us design new policies that would help us address this situation that has a great impact on a personal level as it has for the society as a whole with regard to demography and the sustainability of the European welfare model. There are research projects financed by the European Commission, namely in the field of demography, that can be very useful and complementary in this regard. For instance, the REPRO project that aims at upgrading the existing knowledge and to generate new scientific and policy-oriented knowledge on the factors that drive changes in the birth rates and influence the reproductive decision-making of contemporary Europeans.

This gap can also be addressed by searching for factors that make society family friendly, asking: Which policies would in fact help parents? What are the conditions for a fulfilling family life? Family mainstreaming is one of the answers to these questions but we still need to have deeper understanding on the interaction between different factors that play a role with regard to family life and welcoming children into the family. Comparative research on the outcomes of family policy models could help bring a better understanding of the measures that make society family friendly, such comparison could be based on already existing research.

### Costs of family breakdown vs. family wellbeing

Dissolution, separation and divorce rates are high all across Europe. These breakdowns have a great impact on each family member and also on society that has to step in to fulfil a buffering role through social policies. The consequences of family breakdown can be described as costs (increases in social policy budgets, need for more housing...). In a context of financial crisis we need to address this situation all the more urgently and search for solutions to reduce costs.

Investigating this area can be done through research on the causes of divorce and family breakdown, on the support families need to deal with problems before and after divorce and furthermore

on the impact of divorce, especially for intergenerational relationships. We would especially stress the need for longitudinal studies on impact of divorce on children's wellbeing and effects of different forms of parenting.

Prevention of family breakdown is another area that should be brought into the research agenda. Identifying the factors that have a negative impact on the family and that tend to lead to family breakdown can help us to design better measures to support couples and families. Investing in support to the family is very likely to reduce the costs related to family breakdown at the other end of the spectrum.

## **Doing family**

### Social innovations and care arrangements

The current situation as shown by the Family Platform studies is that of shrinking experience and knowledge about nursing and child rearing due to the externalisation of care tasks. This can also be connected to the diminution of intergenerational networks as more and more parents tend to live far away from their relatives from whom they could get support and learning.

Social innovations in the areas of child care, care for elders and other family members who need support are connected to the freedom of choice. Freedom of choice, which we believe is a major challenge for the family today, is linked to working conditions and to family policy measures. A transversal comparative study using indicators can help to review and compare policies. Research on how employers interact in this context, looking at care arrangements from a private-public point of view, would provide better understanding on the obstacles that families have to face and could also lead to a deeper dialogue with the labour market.

In different countries of the EU, families and parents have rather different ideas about reconciliation of family and paid work. In particular, there seems to be quite a strong difference between the old member states of the EU and the post-communist countries, in view of the experience in the latter countries with financial and ideological pressure on mothers to go out for paid work during the years of communism. Family policy in a given country should be formed by taking into consideration the preferences of the families in that country, independent of ideologies declared either by a minority or by a majority. Therefore it would be very important to investigate how families would like to arrange their life with respect to work in the family vs. paid work, if such a decision could be made free of financial constraints. Arising out of the experience of family organisations in post-communist countries, a great need is felt towards part-time work and paid work performed at home. More research should be directed to cover this aspect.

Furthermore, a comparative study on children's wellbeing in relation to the care arrangements would help design sustainable policy measures for the future. Likewise, comparisons of expenditure on a child at home and in a child care institution, taking into consideration 'home nurseries' and 'home kindergartens', is an area that is still little investigated. Such comparisons would give better knowledge about the actual costs and benefits of different forms of care arrangements, noting that these costs and benefits are not only a financial matter but do also embrace factors such as the physical and mental health and development of the children, the parents and the family as a whole.

We would like to draw attention to the situation of large families who raise a disproportionately large part of children, research into their living conditions ought to be a topic of investigation.

Civil society can provide many new and innovative ideas and also provide solutions based on volunteering. For instance, young parents need support and advice regarding child care and child rearing.

They are the first educators of their child and therefore need support in their educational tasks. This kind of support is already provided through networks of civil society organisations who contribute to the wellbeing of the family. Surveys and comparative studies on these solutions could bring about a wider knowledge of the work that is already achieved through these networks, developing more exchanges of good practices and providing useful experience to policy makers. The social workers’ experience could contribute too.

In the same field, there is a need to conduct far-reaching research on the “invisible work” done within the family and its recognition by society and by policy makers. Indicators on this kind of work, which is a main component of care arrangements, would help to shed light on ways to integrate this invisible or unpaid work into concepts such as the GDP, which would also correspond to the position of the International Labour Organisation, or such as calculation for pensions.

**Family dimension**

One may look at individuals in their family context but we must bear in mind that these two dimensions are intertwined and we cannot exclude the family dimension from the research perspective. Family has a structural role that must be taken into account when conducting research on family policy. There are positive results stemming from family policies in many Member States that show this and that can be used for mutual learning.

We suggest focusing on issues regarding the “silent” majority of families. They are the base of our European society, providing care, education, support in time of crisis and social cohesion. It is necessary to lead the way to a family friendly society for the generations to come. As grass roots’ experts and representatives of the civil society, we believe that the sustainability of families is what European citizens want. It is one of the key issues for the future of Europe. Investing in research on families should thus focus on the major trends and challenges that families across Europe are facing today. This would provide important information for the policy makers today and tomorrow.

**Conclusion**

We, representatives of civil society, are very grateful to have been consulted during the process of the Family Platform and welcome this participatory approach particularly on a subject close to each European citizen. We thank the European Commission for this very fruitful initiative.

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