



Germany 2010

# Peer Review: The Federal Foundation Mother and Child for pregnant women in emergency situations

Short Report



On behalf of the  
European Commission  
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities



The Peer Review took place in Berlin, Germany, on 21 and 22 January 2010. It was hosted by the Federal Foundation Mother and Child for pregnant women in emergency situations and the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

In addition to representatives from the host country (Germany), officials and experts came from six peer countries – Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Serbia – to assess the German situation and provide information on their own national systems. Presentations also were given by three stakeholders: EUROCHILD, the Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union (COFACE) and the European Social Network (ESN). The thematic expert from the Netherlands and a European Commission official from the Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities participated prominently in the Peer Review.

## 1. The policy under review

*Background:* In the European Union, 19% of children are exposed to the risk of poverty. In some countries, more than one child in four is poor or deprived. This reduces their chances of performing well at school, having a healthy life and finding worthwhile employment. As a result, the EU has made reducing child poverty and social exclusion one of its main priorities. It is no coincidence that 2010 is the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.

Single parents, and large, families are more at risk of poverty than other households. In the EU, on average, 22% of poor children live in one parent families and 25% in large families. In contrast, overall just 13% of children live with a single parent. In 90% of cases, the solitary parent is the mother. Children in immigrant families face more difficulties than their peers, as do those with parents suffering from a handicap or drug addiction.

Of the total German population, 6% live in single parent households – 1% more than the EU-25 average. One third (34%) of the single parents, with at least one dependent child, are at risk of poverty. Of all households at risk of poverty in Germany, 11% are single parent families, compared with 9% for the EU-25. One person households represent 31% of those at risk of poverty. Single women account for 18% of these.

The poverty risk among German children from birth to 17 years of age is 14%. This is 1% lower than the risk for the total population, making the country one of Europe's best performers in the field of child poverty.

### Federal Foundation Mother and Child

Until the early 1980s, assistance and support for families was only possible after the child's birth. In 1984, with the Act on Establishing the Federal Foundation "Mother and Child – Protection of Unborn Life", this changed and, for the first time, women could be helped before delivery with finance to provide clothing, childcare or other needs for their baby. The essential characteristics of the system are:

- *Goals:* The Foundation's aims are to protect the unborn child and give assistance to women in need. This involves not only preventing poverty, but also helping women in difficult circumstances, such as victims of domestic violence.

- *Budget:* By law, the federal government must provide the Foundation with at least 92 million euro annually. It may provide more. In 2009, 97 million euro were made available. Given the current economic crisis, this could fall to 92 million euro next year, even though families are experiencing greater needs.
- *Financial support:* Since 1984 women could be helped before delivery with finance to provide clothing or care for the newborn baby. The amount paid varies according to the mother's personal situation. In 2008, the average per individual was just over 600 euro. In 2006, it was 604 euro and in 2007 606 euro. Payments can go up to 1,000 euro, and in exceptional cases beyond that amount.
- *Conditions:* Applications for payments from the Federal Foundation must be made before the mother gives birth. Once the child is born, financial assistance from the Foundation is no longer possible
- *Federal Structure:* The Federal Foundation's funds are not given directly to the women in need. They are channelled through 11 Länder-based foundations and, in the five former East German Länder, through social welfare organisations. Land bodies may also have their own fund raising systems to extend support to other people in need not eligible for the federal scheme. These organisations cover their own administrative and personnel costs, ensuring all federal funding goes directly to the intended beneficiaries.
- *Counselling:* Pregnant women seeking assistance must first go to one of the 1,500 counselling centres in the country – an extensive network which enables the Federal Foundation to be accessed right across Germany. These centres refer potential recipients to the organisations paying out financial assistance from the Federal Foundation and invariably help them with the application formalities.
- *Opening doors:* The Foundation's structure, with its links to numerous counselling centres, can guide women seeking advice at an early stage in pregnancy and open doors to a network of assistance that might otherwise have remained closed or unknown to them. German legislation, adopted in 1995, stipulates that advice has to be provided at all stages of the pregnancy when the prospective mother seeks assistance for whatever reason.
- *Regular benefits:* Help from the Federal Foundation does not prevent beneficiaries from receiving parental allowances. If below the income level threshold, households may also apply for child benefit for needy families.
- *Public relations:* The Foundation has its own website ([www.bundesstiftung-mutter-und-kind.de](http://www.bundesstiftung-mutter-und-kind.de)). This provides, in four languages, information on its goals; informs pregnant women in need and organisations which help them, on the conditions attached to the assistance available; and encourages donations.

## 2. Key lessons and aspects of transferability

After detailed discussion over one and a half days between the host country and peer reviewers of the work of the Federal Foundation Mother and Child, as well as two site visits, there was general agreement on the following salient points:

### Output and outcome

Much emphasis was placed on the need to evaluate both. While the first is clear, the second appears less so. Participants asked whether the Federal Foundation, in its “door opening” function, is successful in helping to improve beneficiaries’ overall sustainable quality of life in terms of income, employment and services. Such an assessment should focus not only on parents, but also on children. The Foundation readily accepted the advice, agreeing proper evaluation was necessary, not to question its work, but to determine how to develop this further.

### Wider perspective

The Federal Foundation is undoubtedly successful in its fundamental objectives, but there was a strong feeling its activities should also be used as leverage towards the wider goal of active inclusion. In this context, integrated strategies are crucial since there may be tensions, for instance, between parental leave schemes and labour market integration. The longer the first, the harder the second may be.

### Counselling bodies

As the first port of call for pregnant women in need, these play an important role in the overall provision of services. It was widely agreed they should be locally based, easy to access, non-bureaucratic, respectful of their clients’ different cultural, social and religious backgrounds and able to tap into a wider network of family, friends and services. Professionals of such counselling service demonstrated these principles during a site visit.

Their role should be seen not only as protecting the unborn child, but also in the wider context of supporting pregnant women and their families to access assistance from the Federal Foundation and other service providers. Their day-to-day experience and view of how other services they encounter operate should be used for broader policy making, help to develop horizontal accountability and a sense of responsibility for colleagues in other departments. This requires attentive case management, following up referrals to other services and developing a cross-professional approach involving cooperation between physicians, doctors and counselling centres.

The problems facing undocumented migrants and specific vulnerable target groups, such as the Roma and teenage parents, were also raised leading to suggestions that encouragement should be given to investment and energy in innovative ways of helping them.

### Payments

Some participants pointed to the absence of checks the payments would be used in the way intended – i.e. for the benefit of the children and not for other purposes. The Federal Foundation accepted there was a risk of some misuse, but maintains it is more important for the system to be flexible and non-bureaucratic – a view widely shared by peer reviewers. The Foundation is also giving greater thought on how to combine the wider counselling and more direct financial help available to women in need.

### **Empowerment**

Much emphasis was placed on the Federal Foundation's responsibility to empower people seeking its assistance, helping them to develop their potential to be good parents and participate actively in society and not simply to see the money as a one-off act of charity.

### **Targeting**

Germany specifically targets help towards pregnant women in need. Given that this includes financial and other forms of support, some participants suggested the assistance be more universal and not focused solely on people in difficulty. Another idea, given the limited funds available, was not to concentrate on an individual's whole life cycle, but to target periods in their development when assistance is especially beneficial, such as pregnancy and starting a family. Positive parenting programmes for all, irrespective of status and background, was one view expressed.

### **Early intervention**

This is a particularly strong feature of the German system with counselling services encouraged to become involved well before the birth to help pregnant mothers in need. To ensure this, all potential administrative and linguistic barriers must be removed. Early intervention can help reduce the chances of a child being abandoned later. The Foundation's payment can also help bridge the financial gap before receipt of a child allowance – a particularly important consideration in the current economic climate. In parallel, the German system needs to improve the other dimension of early intervention as regards the provision of adequate, affordable and good-quality childcare services which can ensure the well-being of children.

While aspects of the German system could be transferred to other countries and exchanges of good practice are encouraged, it was pointed out that differences in national health care systems, cultures and traditions will inevitably mean that authorities will ultimately continue to apply their own solutions to similar pregnancy problems.

Looking to the future, it was suggested that a future Peer Review could focus on teenage pregnancies – a subject that attracted many comments during the meeting – and the measures to move children from institutional to community care services.