



PEER REVIEW
IN SOCIAL PROTECTION
AND SOCIAL INCLUSION
2009

THE FEDERAL FOUNDATION
MOTHER AND CHILD FOR
PREGNANT WOMEN IN
EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

BERLIN, 21-22 JANURAY 2010

SYNTHESIS REPORT



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



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Executive Summary

The German Federal Foundation Mother and Child aims to help pregnant women who are in difficult situations — be it due to their financial situation or to other factors such as domestic violence or single parenthood — to prepare for the birth of their child by providing them with ad hoc non-bureaucratic and non-conditional financial assistance during pregnancy.

On top of this financial assistance (the average amount of which amounts to some 600 Euro), the programme also aims to provide pregnant women with non-financial support and counselling via its local pregnancy information centres.

With a minimum annual budget of €92 million, allocated by the federal government (€97 million in 2009), the Federal Foundation currently provides assistance to roughly one in five pregnant women (or some 150,000 women per year). And, with the share of German children at risk of poverty now standing at just 14%, Germany is one of the EU's best performers in the field of child poverty.

The Peer Review that took place in Berlin on 21 and 22 January 2010 thus provided a useful opportunity for Germany to share its experience with experts from neighbouring countries, while also identifying areas for improvement in the German policy. In addition to the host country, six Peer countries — Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Serbia — participated in the Review, providing information on their own national systems. The representatives of three European stakeholders — namely EUROCHILD, the Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union (COFACE) and the European Social Network (ESN) — as well as a thematic expert from the Netherlands and a European Commission official also took part in the meeting, which was facilitated by two consultants from ÖSB-Vienna.

The activities of the German Foundation Mother and Child touch upon a number of policies and debates that are also priorities at European level, including demographic challenges, children's rights, poverty and social inclusion. The creation, in 2007, of the European Alliance for Families is a testimony to the growing awareness that policy strategies aimed at

addressing Europe's demographic challenges, combating child poverty and promoting social inclusion have to become more closely linked. Indeed, to ensure Europe's social and economic future, the birth rates in most European countries will need to rise and more people (both men and women) will have to take part longer in both paid work and unpaid caring tasks for the household, for children and for other dependent persons. Modern family policies will therefore have to take these needs into account, for instance combining equal opportunity policies for children and other dependent people, with policies for alleviating the burden on women and increased incentives for men to take up more caring tasks.

The Foundation Mother and Child views its contribution as an integral part of this modern family policy framework. Indeed, besides from the financial support it provides, the Foundation also acts as "door opener" to a whole range of other important social and economic services, thanks to its broad professional network of some 1,300 local pregnancy counselling services.

Participants in the Review recognised the importance of providing financial support during this crucial transition period in the lives of women and families. While no similar initiatives exist in the Peer countries, other measures covering similar needs are sometimes available. It emerged that the specific German governance model would in fact most certainly not apply to other countries, although most of the principles behind it are transferable, namely: local delivery, combination of public and private providers (with freedom of choice for users), and cross-professional collaboration.

The Peer Review also highlighted the need to pay special attention to vulnerable groups, such as undocumented migrants, ethnic minority groups (e.g. Roma), teenage mothers and parents of disabled children (at risk of child abandonment). As to the support methods used, it was agreed that these should focus on outreach and empowerment, and be social network-oriented and community-based rather than institutional. Very early intervention was also widely considered to be an important element in preventing problems from arising and in successfully solving them.

It was agreed that initiatives such as the Foundation Mother and Child deserve more visibility and recognition. Adequate communication and



regular evaluations of output, outcome and impact are the best means to achieve this.

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



1. Policy context at European level

The activities conducted by the German Foundation Mother and Child touch upon a series of issues, policies and debates of importance at European level, namely in relation to demographic ageing, children's rights, poverty and social exclusion.

The discussion paper for this Peer Review provides a more detailed overview of these different issues.

The European Policy framework

There is a growing awareness throughout Europe that addressing the challenges of demographic ageing, child poverty and social exclusion, will require a closer linkage between various policy strategies.

The creation by EU heads of state and government of a European Alliance for Families is a testimony to this recognition. Established in 2007, the aim of the Alliance is to create impulses for more family-friendly policies through exchanges of ideas and experience and increased cooperation among Member States.

The integration of Pensions, Health and Long-term Care, and Social Inclusion policies within the EU's Social Open Method of Coordination¹ (OMC) also seeks to increase linkages between policies addressing the demographic challenge and those touching upon social security, social protection and social inclusion. However, it has to be recognised that requiring Member States to combine these three strands within their National Strategy Reports is by no means a guarantee that concrete policies adopted in these domains will be truly integrated.

In recent years though, the Social Inclusion strand of the Social OMC has witnessed some important developments. First of all, the adoption of the

¹ The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) for Social Protection and Social Inclusion is the EU's tool for helping Member States to combat poverty and build a more inclusive society.



Active Inclusion Recommendation in October 2008² provided recognition of the need for all countries to implement a comprehensive strategy based on the integration of three policy pillars, namely: adequate income support, inclusive labour markets and access to quality services such as training, housing support, health and childcare. The activities of the Foundation Mother and Child relate — directly or indirectly — to all three of these pillars in that they aim to provide additional income and to increase the use of education and employment-related support services.

Secondly, there is an increased focus on child poverty, rather than on family poverty only, which means that children are now considered in their own right. This is important as, although children live in families or households, their situation within the family is specific and different to that of their parent(s), as is their relation to the issues of social inclusion and exclusion.

The European Policy debate

There is growing consensus at European Union level that, in order to ensure Europe's social and economic future, the birth rates in most European countries will need to rise and more people (men and women) will have to take part longer in both paid work and unpaid caring tasks for the household, for children and for other dependent persons.

In concrete policy terms, this will require innovations in at least three areas of family policy:

- Modern policies that guarantee equal opportunities and are child- and other dependent-people-friendly;
- Policies that alleviate the burden on women in terms of reconciling professional, family and private life;
- Increased incentives for men to take up more caring tasks and share household responsibilities.

2 Commission Recommendation of 3 October 2008 on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market (2008/867/EC)



A series of policy documents adopted at European level³ argue in favour of such policy modernisation with a view to establishing conditions that are more conducive to child-raising, that more effectively support gender equality and women's participation in the labour force, and that contribute to the social inclusion of families and the well-being of children.

The modernisation of family policies is considered crucial, not only to enable Europeans to have the number of children they want and thereby contribute to Europe's demographic renewal, but also to combat child poverty (a top priority in the context of the Open Method of Coordination for Social Protection and Social Inclusion). Moreover, this modernisation process is key to promoting equal opportunities — between men and women, parents and non-parents, and children from different backgrounds — and, ultimately, to the success of the Lisbon strategy, which depends to a significant extent on increasing the labour force participation of women.⁴

Combined policies

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In order to achieve the three above-mentioned innovations with regard to family-related policy, it is clear that many different sectors will need to be involved. Operational measures will have to be developed by many different instances. Even if, on a meta-level, all these policies deal with the same basic concern of ensuring a sustainable society and economic growth (the Lisbon objectives), developing operational measures and initiatives that respect all of these different dimensions at the same time will not be easy. It will be essential to assess the complementary nature of policies under development not only on a theoretical level, but also in terms of their real (and sometimes unexpected) impact.

- 3 Commission Communication of 12 October 2006 on «*The demographic future of Europe — from challenge to opportunity*» (COM (2006) 571final); Commission Communication of 10 May 2007 on «*Promoting solidarity between the generations*» (COM(2007)244 final), and the *Conclusions on Employment and Social Policy* of the European Council of 30–31 May 2007.
- 4 M-T. Letablier, A. Lucif, A. Math, O. Thévenon (2009). *The costs of raising children and the effectiveness of policies to support parenthood in European countries: a Literature Review. A report to the European Commission*, p. 153 (http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/emplweb/families/docs/EU_Report_Cost_of_children_Final_11-05-2009.pdf)



The importance of gender-sensitive policies

One of the broad conclusions that can be drawn from the largely unresolved gender gap that exists both in terms of paid work and care and household tasks, is that, if we want to raise the participation rate of women on the labour market, men will have to take on a greater share of care and household tasks. And, this is not just a question of justice and fairness. Indeed, gender-sensitive policies are also key to increasing fertility and participation rates, and thereby to addressing the demographic challenge and promoting economic growth. Experience in the Nordic countries and, to a certain extent, in France, show that, where quality childcare facilities are available, where there is a healthy balance in the gender division of parental responsibilities, and where there is a family-friendly work and policy context, fertility levels and female employment stay above average.

Universal or targeted policies

Another issue under debate at EU level concerns the choice between universal versus targeted policies. Both have their relative advantages and disadvantages: roughly speaking, universal policies tend to gain political and societal support more easily and to be easier to implement, but they also tend to be costly. On the other hand, targeted policies generally garner support less easily and can be more complicated in implementation, but they are also often more effective and less costly.

2. Policy and the situation in the host country: Germany

This section outlines the basic features of the Foundation Mother and Child as described in the host country paper.

Goal of the legislator

The Foundation Mother and Child was established at the initiative of the federal government in 1984 via the “Act Establishing the Federal Foundation ‘Mother and Child — Protection of Unborn Life’” (also referred to under the German abbreviation, MuKStiftG). The federal government’s goal was to enhance protection and improve conditions for unborn life.

According to experiences gathered by pregnancy counselling services operated by churches and social welfare associations, a family’s economic situation and the fear of being (financially) burdened by a child in the long term plays an important role in decisions concerning the continuation of a pregnancy. The objective of the supplementary financial support provided by the Federal Foundation is to improve the situation of expectant mothers in such emergency situations. As of 1st January 1993, the Foundation extended its field of operations to the new federal Länder (states), as a result of Germany’s reunification. Today, Länder-based foundations are established in each of the new federal Länder.

Cooperation between the Federal Foundation and Länder-based organisations

The establishment of a Federal Foundation under public law emerged as the appropriate instrument for linking the various forms of assistance traditionally provided to pregnant women by the Länder, churches and private organisations, and for supplementing this assistance and promoting additional initiatives. The creation of an overarching organisation has helped to stimulate cooperation between all actors — at the federal, Länder and municipal levels, as well as in churches and social welfare associations —



and ensure that all the existing expertise, dedication and experience are put to the best possible use in providing support to pregnant women in emergency situations.

The Federal Foundation does not interact directly with the women in need. Instead, it provides grants to one recipient in each of the 16 federal Länder. Eleven of these recipients are Länder-based foundations that provide assistance for mothers and families, while the other five are Länder-based organisations operated by social welfare associations. The system guarantees that all of the federal funds allocated to the Länder-based organisations are spent to the benefit of pregnant women, as the administrative and personnel costs of the Länder-based organisations are covered by the Länder-based foundations and the social welfare associations themselves. These organisations are, in turn, linked to a broad national network of some 1,300 pregnancy counselling services, to which women can turn when in need of assistance. The local proximity of the counselling services guarantees that women can be seen quickly, counselled individually, and their situations treated confidentially. In this way, the Federal Foundation makes an active contribution to effectively supporting pregnant women and protecting children at a very early point in time.⁵

Broader policy context and subsidiarity

The Foundation Mother and Child is just one element of a comprehensive family policy that has helped to place Germany among the best performers in Europe with regard to family poverty indicators (e.g. the child poverty rate is lower than the overall poverty rate). The host country paper underlines that the benefits provided by the Foundation act as a mere supplement to other legal benefits and are only ad hoc designed to flank regular sources of assistance and other measures provided by the federal, Länder and municipal governments or other providers. Funds granted by the Foundation cannot be taken into account in any way in the calculation of social welfare benefits. Among other family-related benefits, the paper cites child benefits (Kindergeld), supplementary child benefits (Kinderzuschlag), minimum income for job seekers (SGB II — Grundsicherung für Arbeitssuchende),

⁵ Host country paper, p. 5–6

social assistance benefits (SGB X — Sozialhilfe), parental benefits (Elterngeld), maintenance allowance (Unterhaltsvorschuss) and housing benefits (Wohngeld).

In spite of its successful social transfer policies for families, Germany nevertheless continues to face important demographic and social exclusion challenges. Groups particularly at risk of poverty include the unemployed, people who have never completed a vocational training, single parents (mothers), people with migrant backgrounds and children living in families that belong to these groups. Therefore, a strong emphasis is also placed on vocational training, reconciliation of work and private life, as well as on equal opportunities for men and women on the labour market.

Summary of achievements

The Foundation regularly monitors the output of its actions, revealing the following results in recent years⁶:

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Of the roughly 160,000 applications submitted annually, around 92% are approved each year.

The proportion of pregnant women financially supported by the Federal Foundation has remained at a constant rate of 21.5% in recent years, meaning that more than one in five pregnant women receives funds from the Foundation.

Roughly 97% of recipients are over 18 years old, with the remainder aged between 14 and 18. Only around 40 applications per year are submitted by girls under the age of 14.

Roughly two thirds of recipients are German.

Over 60% of approved applications are submitted after the twentieth week of pregnancy, and a third between the thirteenth and the twentieth week. The rest (around 8%) are submitted within the first twelve weeks.

⁶ Statistics cover the period from 2006 to 2008



A large number (over 40%) of recipients are married. Almost the same number (roughly 36%) live alone or in their parents' homes. According to the information provided, roughly one fifth of recipients live in marriage-like relationships.

The average allocation per recipient amounted to €629 in 2008 (€604 in 2006; and €606 in 2007).

If one looks at the individual cases, nearly half of the allocations granted are under €600 and one third are below €1,000. Allocations of under €300 account for roughly 12% of total grants, as do those between €1,000 and €1,500, while allocations over €1,500 account for only 1%.

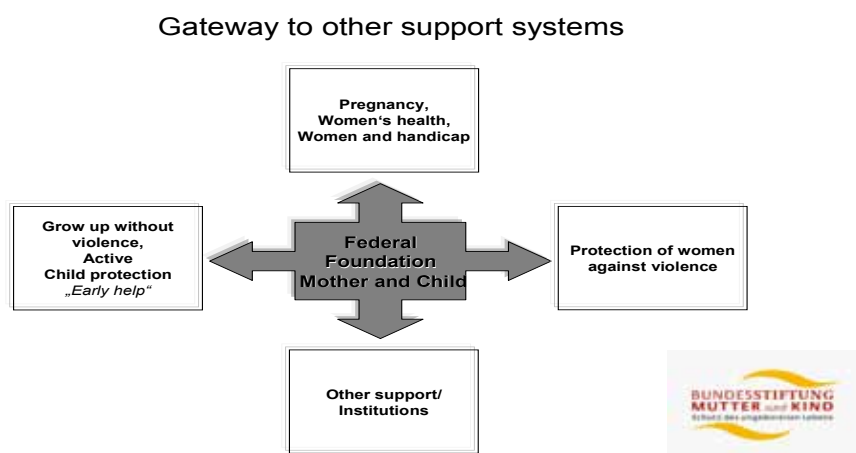
Nationally, around 1,270 pregnancy counselling services are involved in allocating the Foundation's funds each year. Most of these are organised voluntarily by private welfare organisations (Caritas, Sozialdienst katholischer Frauen [Catholic Women's Welfare Service], Diakonie, Donum Vitae, Arbeiterwohlfahrt [National Society for Workers' Welfare], etc.) and only about a fifth of them are organised by state or municipal authorities.

Outcome and impact

During its more than 25 years of operation, the Foundation has come to realise that its activities not only provide financial support to individual families, but that they also help the local pregnancy counselling services to better reach their target groups. In many cases, the request for financial support serves as a starting point for other important forms of help and accompaniment in different domains, whether in the fields of education and employment. The prevention of domestic violence against women is also an important side-effect of the Foundation's activities. Indeed, local information centres can detect such risks and link women up with specialised support services. In this sense, the financial support provided by the Federal Foundation is considered to be a "door opener" for the federal government's "Early Prevention and Intervention" Action Programme, as well as a crucial tool to counter the downwards spiral sometimes faced by pregnant women in emergency situations. The host country paper notes that: "When young

families feel burdened by worries and feel that no help is in sight in their living situations, terrible developments can emerge within a self-perpetuating process: difficult living conditions become a burden, burdens become risks, and risks can result in a child being endangered, abused, or neglected.”⁷

The gateway function of the Foundation is graphically represented in the host country paper as follows:



This gateway function of the Foundation is realised thanks to the network of local counselling services.

The German Peer Review representatives recognised that it would be worthwhile conducting more in-depth studies on the impact of networking on the success of the Foundation’s undertakings, not only in terms of delivering financial support, but also in terms of the wider social, educational and labour market inclusion of the target population. Policy evaluations should also examine the links with other elements of modern family policies (such as benefits, conciliation services or gender equality).

Efforts are currently underway to reposition and further develop the Foundation, namely by analysing and improving its communication strategy so as to raise its visibility, increase public awareness of its work, provide

⁷ Host country paper, p. 17

an umbrella brand for all Länder activities and supply a constant flow of information to the population. The new communication strategy targets four main groups — key opinion leaders, potentially affected women, journalists and experts, and possible individual and corporate donors — and is built around six central messages — prevention, support, easy non-bureaucratic access, networking, transparency and a sense of perspective. In 2010, the Foundation further plans to further develop its website, establish specific media-related activities and participate in events and congresses held by other organisations.



3. Input from European stakeholders

Three European stakeholder organisations shared their opinion of the Foundation Mother and Child in papers provided ahead of the Peer Review meeting, namely:

- the Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union (Coface);
- the European Social Network (ESN);
- Eurochild, the European organisation promoting the welfare and rights of children and young people.

COFACE

Many of the issues that the German Foundation for Mother and Child seeks to address are of EU-wide concern, namely: poverty and social exclusion, gender equality, violence against women, children's rights and demographic challenges. Yet Germany is the only country that has established financial benefits specifically aimed at addressing the risk that pregnancy and birth could result in a drift into poverty, with the difficulties this can create for families.

According to COFACE, the Foundation's activities fit into a modern approach towards family policy and children's rights, by looking to protect children from poverty even before they are born. Among the Foundation's strong points are local delivery, networking of services and user-friendliness, which enable it to reach one out of five pregnant women in Germany, of which one third are from a migrant background.

However, COFACE also points out that certain questions and challenges remain unanswered. There are discrepancies between the different Länders and the adequacy of the financial support that is provided is unclear: what effect does 600 Euro really have in terms of reducing poverty? What's more, there is no automatism when it comes to the Foundation's declared door-opening function, as this depends largely on the professionalism of the



counsellors. According to COFACE, more emphasis should be placed on empowering parents and involving fathers. However, as the organisation points out, there has been no evaluation with regard to any of these issues.

While COFACE believes that there is certainly a transfer potential to other European Union countries, it notes that this will depend on financial constraints and political priorities. What's more, as a convinced advocate of universal child benefits as an equal right for every child, COFACE would promote a more universal application of Mother and Child Foundation-like support.

ESN

According to the ESN, one of the Foundation's key strengths is that it ensures there are no gaps in the delivery of services to pregnant women, while also respecting the principle of subsidiarity. The pregnancy counselling function acts as a door opener when a woman's needs go beyond immediate poverty support and the Foundation's work is particularly timely in the context of the current crisis, in which budgets are cut and more has to be done with less. It can help meet a peak need.

The ESN also emphasises the importance of targeting vulnerable groups, such as migrant women and children, who not only face a higher risk of poverty, but can also find it more difficult to access services. Specific professional qualities are required to meet their needs and a diverse workforce could also prove beneficial. Specific training is also needed with respect to the handling of referrals and the legal issues involved.

According to the ESN, the early warning system, namely in cases of women facing domestic violence, is an important element of the scheme that could be transferred to other countries. For instance, it could serve as an example in countries like Spain, where there is currently talk of a legal reform of healthcare services to tackle domestic violence. This item is high on Spain's domestic and EU agenda, as the country holds the EU Presidency during the first half of 2010.

The ESN also highlights the need for effective coordination between services for children and parents, as well as for tackling the problem of sharing confidential information between services and the exceedingly heavy case loads some people carry. It is important for individual services to know where they fit within the overall framework and, according to the ESN, the Foundation is a good example in this respect. Nevertheless, the ESN also feels more attention should be paid to evaluating outcomes.

Eurochild

Eurochild emphasises that the socio-economic status into which a child is born is probably still the most important determinant of his/her future health, education and employment outcomes. To break the cycle of inherited poverty, assistance should be provided as early as possible and Eurochild thus welcomes Germany's initiative to protect children.

Asides from financial support, Eurochild highlights the need to address good parenting practice at a much earlier stage of educational curricula. It believes the importance of programmes to support children's education and promote cooperation between schools and parents should not be underestimated. It nevertheless stresses that advice on bringing up children should be shared with, not taught to, parents. Indeed, supporting parents in crisis situations is about empowerment, not 19th century morality.

While the ESN believes the German programme has potential for transfer, it notes that its implementation is fairly linked to the German system of regionalisation and to the involvement of private and church-related social welfare organisations.

It recommends that the Foundation's work be evaluated against a number of criteria, such as:

- The fact that assistance should value parents' empowerment and not be seen as a handout or charity.



- The need to take into account the psychological maturity and social network of parents, namely through the involvement of “significant others” in the mother’s life and social networking among peers.
- The involvement of fathers — a factor that healthcare and other services sometimes overlook.
- The sustainability of measures offered to improve the situation of mothers and their children over time, i.e. does the Foundation’s work achieve this and manage to ensure that children are not abandoned or obliged to be taken into care in the long run?
- Outreach to the most vulnerable (e.g. irregular immigrants, ROMA population, teenage mothers, single mothers).



4. Policy and the situation in the peer countries

Bulgaria

Bulgaria places support for children and families at the centre of its policies for limiting the intergenerational transmission of poverty and social exclusion. Indeed, the risk of poverty is especially high among families with many children, with 28.6% of households with three or more children living in poverty. The risk is even higher for children from vulnerable ethnic minority groups. A specific issue faced by Bulgaria concerns the placement of children from such risk groups in institutions. According to figures from June 2009, 7109 children are in specialised institutions, among which more than 80 % have families and have been placed there due to the impossibility of them being raised in the family or a family-like environment.

Bulgaria's social assistance system contains two separate branches: one for the family, the other for child protection. Different allowances are available. Unemployed pregnant women and mothers on a low income receive financial support once at childbirth and then on a monthly basis for a year.

The national programme "In support of motherhood" has proved to be a successful measure in the domain of reconciliation of professional and private life. Under the programme, the professional development of the mother and her return to work after maternity leave are enhanced by the intervention of unemployed persons to take care of the baby. This not only supports a smooth transition from maternity leave to work, it also creates jobs for the unemployed.

Next to this, pregnant women and mothers whose children face the risk of being abandoned enjoy a special status under the Child Protection Act — the main piece of legislation guaranteeing children's rights in the country. The text provides for special measures if there is a danger of a baby being abandoned. In the past few years, a series of community-based services for family support has been developed. These provide for assistance from professionals, day-care facilities, temporary accommodation, mediation and other back-up facilities. Over the past two years, measures to prevent



babies being abandoned by their mothers have been given a higher priority and appropriate support services have been developed. One of these is the Mother and Baby unit, a residential shelter for mothers with children up to three years old. Women may stay for up to six months while deciding whether to keep their child or not.

Ensuring care for children with disabilities represents the most serious problem in Bulgaria. When they are born, disabled children are generally abandoned or placed in an institution. Such decisions are usually influenced by the medical profession, but efforts are now underway to develop a more integrated approach between medical and social services so that the best interests of both the mother and the child are taken into account in such circumstances.

Overall, the shift from institutional to community-based care and services is a matter of changing financial provisions but also, to a great extent, one of changing attitudes among the medical and other care professions.

Denmark

Denmark takes a very broad approach to poor families and a large range of universal services covering general health and parental relief are available. The country has high-quality day-care facilities and considers Kindergarten as a key support factor, as it is socially inclusive and provides mothers and single parents with an opportunity to enter the labour market or to complete their education. It further contributes to the inclusion of ethnic minorities by giving them more cohesion and helping them to learn a language. The system is not forced on people but rather an offer they can choose to take up.

On top of the general services offered, specialised services are provided for citizens with special needs, including social services and support schemes under the Danish Act on Social Services, and health services and treatment under the Danish Health Act. Specific measures are taken to assess people's needs, especially in the case of children at risk, and can result in the provision of financial support, treatment and/or a contact person.

Local authorities, private players and independent organisations may also apply for pool funds to initiate targeted projects aimed at improving the life situation of young, single and vulnerable mothers. For example, in 2008, funds were allocated to the “Equal Opportunities” initiative, which aims to strengthen the personal resources of disadvantaged (or at risk of being disadvantaged) children and young people, as well as of their parents, thus enabling them to create a meaningful life for themselves, with complete personal responsibility. Another example is the “Project Get Going”, initiated in 2006 by the private, humanitarian “Mothers’ Aid Organisation”, which advises and supports disadvantaged families. The aim of the project is to help and support young pregnant women and mothers to return to education, employment or training. The programme also provides women with parenting support and helps to establish networks.

In October 2009, all political parties in the Danish Parliament but one approved a number of legislative changes and new initiatives under the “Child’s Reform”. The reform emphasises the importance of close personal care, and stable adult contact and relations when a child is placed outside the home. It further increases the emphasis on early intervention and on the rights of the child, for example on issues such as children’s access to and contact with parents. Additionally, the reform contains initiatives aimed at improving the quality of special support provided to children at risk and their families. A comprehensive bill with the Child’s Reform initiatives is expected to be passed by Parliament in early 2010.

Denmark has learnt a lot from British and Swedish evidence-based programmes. However, there is always room for improvement, especially in terms of earlier intervention. A cross-professional approach should be adopted, with a duty to notify social authorities if factors that could endanger the child become apparent. However, in a country with three administrative layers — state, regional and municipal — this remains a particular challenge. The above-mentioned reform should help to clarify some rules on the need to signal and communicate among professionals when encountering families and children in need. A campaign has also been launched to make school teachers aware of their responsibilities in this area.



Greece

In Greece, family ties remain extremely important when it comes to supporting pregnant women and young mothers. However, the government recognises that single, abused and neglected women represent a serious issue, especially among non-documented immigrants, and has taken the following measures to address this challenge:

- Free medical care (including preventive examinations) during pregnancy and delivery;
- Priority in public nursery schools;
- Bonus when applying for a job;
- Free occupational training that meets market demands;
- Increased annual leave for working single mothers;
- Financial support (benefits) to: uninsured working mothers before and after delivery; single mothers for the nutrition of the children; families after the birth of a third child and for each next child; single mothers renting a house; women appearing in urgent need.

Next to this, the Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity finances two State institutions that provide shelter for single mothers or mothers with financial problems. Furthermore, a number of Non-Governmental Organisations, such as the “Centre for the Protection of Mother and Child”, “SOS villages”, “Smile of the Child” and the Orthodox Church Foundations, provide help to mothers and children, in the form of food, commodities, shelter, economic assistance and/or psychological support. Many non-documented immigrants prefer to approach NGOs since they trust them more than government authorities and they can help to find shelter, education and food. To some extent though, these NGOs are in fact supervised by the government.

In terms of outreach, an interesting methodology has been developed in the form of the so-called “Guardians” or “Sponsors” of children. “Guardians” are volunteers selected among respected members of the local community.



Their role is to identify people in need (in this case, pregnant women and poor children and families) and to bring them into contact with affiliated foundations. They can also report on the implementation of programmes and help to define parameters that should be monitored. This approach helps to ensure continuity, sufficient supervision and evaluation of the implemented programmes.

In Greece, addressing the issue of parental and child support is not just a question of helping children from an ethical point of view and trying to give them a good start in life, there is also a demographic perspective. Indeed, low fertility rates and a very liberal attitude towards abortion have caused the country's birth rates to fall sharply. It is not easy to encourage women to have a second or third child given the costs involved. For instance, while education is free, many Greeks prefer to send their children to fee paying schools as, in big cities, over 50% of pupils in public education are immigrants.

Hungary

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Hungary continues to face a series of major challenges in the fields of demographic developments (birth rates among the lowest in Europe), active inclusion (few women re-entering the labour market) and children's rights (in particular with regard to Roma and other vulnerable categories).

The following issues deserve particular attention:

- Lack of economic independence and impoverishment of women;
- Helplessness of single mothers: lack of appropriate support via special means and services;
- Child poverty, with many children in extreme disadvantaged situations (particularly Roma children);
- Domestic / partnership violence: The existing institutional framework is designed to protect abused children, but fails to provide adequate protection to women. This, in turn, affects children as they too are implicated in gender-based (partnership) violence.



The five state secretariats of the Hungarian Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, dealing with employment, social policy, equal opportunities, NGO liaison and administration, are in charge of helping women to re-enter the labour market and providing child protection, family support and family allowances. Efforts are made to ensure all this is done in an integrated manner, often through informal channels. More formally, high-level meetings between the state secretaries are held every week to allow for an exchange of views and coordination.

Various forms of assistance exist to support child-raising. Most of these are available after the baby's birth although professional help is also offered to pregnant women through the network of district nurses and child welfare and family support services. Through these networks, pregnant women are provided with a "beginners' pack", including leaflets, a maternity planner, advice on dealing with employers and pamphlets to increase the involvement of fathers. Hungary tries to make it compulsory for fathers to go to meetings with nurses (as is the case for mothers), but this has not always proven successful. District nurses also pay regular visits to families during the first year after a child's birth. Recent surveys however show that healthcare services do not have good relations with Roma families. This inability of nurses to reach out to certain families, despite the valuable support they can offer, often reflects fears and misunderstandings, a certain suspicion of institutions among the Roma community, and a view that the professionals are paternalistic and doctrinaire.

The traditional policy of allowing maternity leave to run to three years makes it difficult for women to find employment after giving birth. A more balanced approach is thus now being sought so as to ensure an easier re-entry into the labour market. An annual "Family-Friendly Workplace Award" was launched in 2000 to promote a better reconciliation of work and private life. The criteria covered by the award includes: composition of the workforce, recruitment and career policies, equal opportunity measures, reconciliation of work and private life facilities, and organisational culture.

Italy

The issues dealt with by the German Foundation Mother and Child are covered under the heading of “Parenthood Support” in Italy. This relates to domains of intervention as diverse as:

- Financial support to families in precarious economic situations;
- Policies for the reconciliation of work and family life;
- Social and educational services for early childhood;
- Parental responsibilities and family upbringing;
- Motherhood support as a tool for preventing child abuse;
- Family guidance centres;
- Separation of parents.

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A special fund has been established to support the development of childcare services, which are particularly sparse in Italy, especially in the South. In addition, a housing fund is available to help families with special needs. Finally, the government provides young mothers in situations of poverty with a social card that they can use to buy various services for the newborn baby.

Next to this, a ten-year old financing law has provided a strong basis for the development and strengthening of innovative programmes supporting the wellbeing of children and adolescents. Money is provided to regions and municipalities with special needs and towns with a high incidence of children’s institutions. If experimental projects prove to be effective — and this is often the case of projects supporting parenthood and families — municipalities may decide to support them.

One example of these locally-developed projects is the “Reaching the Unreachables” initiative in Rome. As part of a larger outreach programme, it emphasises participation as key to the empowerment of women and families. Home visits and birth counselling are organised, with teams visiting single



parents, drug addicts and marginalised families, or those with low levels of education. The contacts aim to strengthen the relationship between mother and child in the early years, as well as to create social support and facilitate access to public and private services. The services provide information on all the resources available in the municipality of Rome to support birth and child-raising. The holistic approach emphasises continuity of care and integration of services and offers a wide range of assistance in sexual reproductive health. The project's three key principles are quality of care, continuity of care and integration of services. It aims to empower people and strengthen their resources and skills. It stresses the ability of operators to support women's capability and awareness. It has also started to organise campaigns for fathers and recently held its first fatherhood congress.

Serbia

Low birth rates represent a major problem for Serbia. Annual births are currently 30% below what is needed to maintain existing population levels. Last year, the government adopted a strategy to address this situation and social legislation is being adapted with a view to reducing the economic costs of childcare, reconciling work and parental responsibilities, promoting the role of the father in the family, reducing the psychological costs of parenting, and promoting reproductive health. Concrete measures include the provision of different types of benefits, wage compensation and special child care for some types of disability.

While national legislation provides social and (minimum) income protection for citizens, municipalities can provide extra benefits. In Belgrade, for instance, additional maternity protection benefits and support for pregnant women who are ill or encounter complications are available. What's more, a new act on employment and unemployment insurance aims to encourage young jobless people and single mothers to take up a job.



5. Discussions at the Peer Review meeting

The Foundation's work can be assessed in two ways: one way is to focus on delivery, efficiency and outreach; the other is to consider its activities in a wider context, taking into account both links with other interventions and with broader social policies. This latter approach places a strong emphasis on the need to combine financing for a broad spectrum of measures ranging from education, social assistance, treatment of abuse, labour integration, social networks and community support to help people to manage in their own environment, to empower women and to reach out to the most vulnerable. It also underscores the need to take into account the growing importance of local responsibilities and the role of men and young fathers. In such a life-cycle approach, particular attention is also paid to transitional situations, such as moving from school to work and entering parenthood.

In the other approach, which seeks to appreciate the efficiency of service delivery, important considerations are respect for cultural and religious differences in target populations, diversity of service deliverers and continuity of support, especially when many services are provided through NGOs. A strong emphasis is also placed on the need to guarantee parents' freedom of choice as to the type of (child)care chosen, including the choice between public and private services, as opposed to a model of overwhelmingly state-funded care. Moreover, this approach underscores the need to reach out to a broad audience, both by specifically targeting vulnerable groups, and by ensuring a more universal access to the wider population.

Governance, delivery, efficiency and evaluation

The specificity of the German situation, in which the implementation of social policy is conducted by public as well as by various private not-for-profit institutions with different philosophical backgrounds was discussed at length. A key question was that of how to ensure that private institutions respect the necessary objective professional criteria in order to perform their public tasks in an appropriate manner.



For example, under the legal framework for abortion, pregnant women who are considering ending their pregnancy are under the legal obligation to go and see a pregnancy counselling service of their choice. The role of these counselling services is to get in touch with particularly vulnerable women (and their family and social network), not to try and lead them towards one decision or the other, but to professionally support them in their own decision-making process and to point them towards available support measures, such as the financial support provided by the Foundation Mother and Child.

In this context, the delivery of counselling through private institutions with specific philosophical (religious or other) backgrounds is not easy to understand outside of the German context. It is clear that such a system would not work in countries with a different institutional and political history and culture. Also, the obligation for women to go and see a pregnancy counselling service before having an abortion would not be easily accepted in many countries.

And yet, these local counselling services are at the very heart of the German scheme. Indeed, a site visit to one of the Länder institutions (Assistance for Families in Emergency Situations — Foundation of the Land Brandenburg) made it perfectly clear that, at Federal and Länder levels, the delivery of the Foundation's support is a purely technical and administrative matter. The Länder implement the financial support (processing of applications) and can increase the Federal means with extra budget. The actual social impact of the Foundation's support stems only from the local counselling services and their networks, as the visit to one of these (Donum Vitae in Berlin-Pankow) showed.

In terms of outreach, the Foundation supports one in every five pregnant women in Germany, which is an impressive figure. However, reaching out to vulnerable groups, such as undocumented migrants and people with no or weak knowledge of German, remains a challenge. The Foundation is attempting to address this issue by improving its communication strategy and providing information in different languages. Discussions also emphasised the importance of networking among different grassroots professionals to improve outreach, as well as efficacy and efficiency of service delivery. Many

different types of professionals should be consulted, as this will also help to improve early signalling of problem situations: gynaecologists (e.g. signals of partner violence or abuse), general practitioners (identifying those in need), teachers (children in need, neglected or abused), etc.

Such cross-professional and cross-institutional integration is vital to the quality and success of support policies. This is a widely shared concern throughout Europe, where the organisation of social service (in a broad sense) is often fragmented and accountability is vertically organised. However, this will require a change in institutional and professional routines and attitudes.

The monitoring system established by the Foundation to assess its outputs was highly valued. In the early days, the Foundation did not pay much attention to analysing its impact but this changed with the introduction of social welfare statistics seven years ago. Now, the Foundation compares its figures to official data, such as the birth register. Originally, this was done on a voluntary basis, but it has now been replaced by professional management. The Foundation is in contact with the pregnancy counselling services, which provide their data to the Länder, rather than directly to the Foundation. A more in-depth evaluation of the Foundation's outcomes and impact, including of its "door-opener" function, is a challenge that the Foundation is planning to take up in the near future.

Parental leave and return to work — reconciliation of work and private life

The impact that different durations of maternity leave can have on women seeking to return to work is an issue of concern throughout the EU. In the past, the emphasis on developing parental leave has mostly been on increasing the possibilities for mothers to take care of their small children by staying at home full time during rather long periods. Yet, there is increasing awareness for the fact that such measures also serve to keep women (temporarily) away from the labour market, in this way hiding the lack of available jobs and masking unemployment. More recently, increased attention has been paid to the return issue, with a focus on the role of fathers in sharing care tasks and thus also on their parental leave possibilities.



In a European context, parental leave schemes are regularly benchmarked⁸ and there is a trend towards convergence. However, in times of economic crisis, there is no great enthusiasm to decrease the length of parental leave. Yet, at the same time, studies show that returning to work becomes more difficult after a too (how?) long period of absence. Moreover protections against gender discriminations (career promotions, being fired), although they exist in most countries, are not always effectively implemented. Good examples of protection can be found in the Appeal Boards in Denmark and the Act on Equal Treatment in the Netherlands.

Support methodologies: empowerment — systemic approach — role of fathers

The need for a “cross-professional” approach raises the issue of methodologies to be used in support to vulnerable people, such as pregnant women in (financial) need. While it seems crucial to include the social system of the service user (in this case, notably the future father), other broader support networks are also important within an empowering process. Indeed, the importance of empowering users was underlined throughout the Peer Review meeting. This empowerment involves positive parenting messages, showing people that they are good parents and involving fathers. In this respect, the education and training of professionals is important, and specific training in relation to the emotional and social needs of pregnant women in precarious situations (and of their children and partner) is needed.

Institutional versus community care: abandonment of children

A very specific issue of concern in a number of European countries is that of child abandonment or (overly easy) placement in institutional care. In some countries, EU funding has been used for many years to finance the development of large social care institutions. More recently, this approach has changed and financial support is increasingly directed away from institutional care towards community-based services and encouraging

8 See e.g. the reports of the European Experts Group Gender and Employment (EGGE — <http://www.fgb-egge.it/homepage.asp>)

families to look after their own children. In Bulgaria, for instance, support is also provided to family carers who look after children with disabilities.

As is the case with many other social issues, dealing with child abandonment and placement will not only require institutional change, but also a change in attitudes among professionals, including medical staff. The practice of taking children away from their parents on the grounds that they are unable to cope and of placing them in an institution remains a major concern in certain countries.

In Germany, a recent amendment of the country's legislation on the early detection of possible disabilities seeks to deal with this issue by requiring that pre-natal examinations enable couples to imagine how they would cope with caring for a disabled child and that counselling to be made available. However, as experience in Germany has shown, medical reactions to such situations are not always in line with the social policy approach.

Teenage pregnancies and sexual education

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Another topic of concern relates to the occurrence of teenage pregnancies and the availability of sexual education. European statistics on teenage pregnancies show that the phenomenon is most prevalent in the UK, where pregnancy is often considered as a way for young girls to escape from their family environment, thanks to the extensive state support available. The German government has recognised that misguided support could serve as an incentive encouraging teenage pregnancies and changed its system five or six years ago, leading to a fall in their numbers. The country has also developed targeted measures to prevent teenage pregnancies and a specific programme is directed at 8th grade pupils to discuss gender issues and the role of the father. The programme is widely accepted, but financial constraints prevent it from being deployed on a wider scale.

Overall, three sets of reliable figures with regard to teenage pregnancies can be consulted: teenage pregnancies, terminated teenage pregnancies and births by young mothers. In Germany, the share of teenagers under the age of 17 choosing to have an abortion or to give birth is split 50:50. As



pregnant teenagers are less likely to attend ante-natal classes than older parents, Germany has established a programme funded by the federal health education centre to help young people to become parents.

In Hungary, a school sex education programme for 12 year-olds has been set up. The level of teenage pregnancies is not that high, but most occurrences are in poor parts of society and among the Roma. Data protection rules prevent information being collected on whether the young mothers are Roma or not, but visits to settlements confirm that girls of Roma origin tend to have early pregnancies. The real problems start after the pregnancy, as the young girls will not return to school and thus considerably reduce their chances of finding a job. A similar phenomenon was noted in Italy. While early pregnancies among Roma girls may appear to be purely cultural, they are in fact also due to the Roma population's extensive social exclusion and lack of opportunities. Education is a crucial factor. However, sex education should not appear as a form of indoctrination, but rather seek to simply explain that, by waiting a few more years, girls will have better prospects in terms of education, employment and social inclusion in general.

Denmark has developed a successful scheme in which young mothers at risk can choose to stay in a private dormitory and continue their education. Fathers may visit, but are not allowed to live there. To date, every mother using the facility has completed her education.



6. Conclusions and lessons learnt

The 2008 EU Recommendation on Active Inclusion has acted as a strong stimulus in the fight against poverty and social exclusion, thanks to its emphasis on providing a decent income and access to the labour market and quality services. In parallel, recent years have seen a renewed European-wide interest in family policies. The activities of the European Alliance for Families are testimony to this.

This is largely due to the fact that, as birth rates decline, it is becoming evident that men and women will have to work more and longer to meet the necessary participation rates in the labour market to cater for our social and economic wellbeing. And, achieving this will require modern family and child-care policies that make it easier to reconcile work and family life, namely by promoting a better balance in the share of parental responsibilities between men and women. In turn, this will require a combination of youth and family policies, an effective application of gender equality, increased decentralisation, deregulation and subsidiarity to ensure efficacy of service delivery, and a combination of targeted and universal policies.

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The German government considers the Federal Foundation Mother and Child as a successful example of modern family policy, in that it seeks to provide answers to demographic, employment and social inclusion challenges in an integrated manner.

Germany's focus on combating child and family poverty through the provision of family allowances has in fact succeeded in making it one of the few countries where the child poverty rate is lower than the overall poverty rate. However, like many other European countries, Germany continues to face an important fertility problem, and money alone will not suffice to achieve the population replacement level.

The cash benefits provided by the Foundation have no equivalent in other European countries, although some other sources of financial assistance are available. Thus, rather than looking at the transferability of the whole German package, consideration should be given to the principles that lie behind it. These include targeted benefits, local delivery, links with social



support and between public and private providers, and real freedom of choice for people.

If one looks solely at the cash benefits, the scheme appears to be reaching its goal of helping vulnerable people. Delivery, through local bodies and non-governmental organisations is rather impressive, although it remains difficult to reach out to non-documented people like refugees. What's more, it remains unclear to what extent the scheme manages to act as a gateway to other services.

Lessons learnt

The Peer Review discussions enabled participants to gain a better understanding of the Foundation's policy objectives and operations. The scheme has already achieved many of its aims, but it still has plenty of leverage potential for promoting active inclusion.

It was considered that a clear distinction should be made between the role of the counselling services in general and their role in helping users to obtain support from the Foundation. Moreover, the work of the counselling bodies should not be seen only in the limited and potentially controversial framework of abortion, but in the wider context of support to pregnant women and their families. This support should not centre on pregnancy alone, but should cover other issues of concern to the early life of a child. What's more, such practice should be universal and not remain targeted solely at people in emergency situations.

Another important point that was made was that evaluating output and outcome is important. While the former is fairly clear given the large outreach of the Foundation, the latter is less evident and concerns the Foundation's door-opening function for active inclusion. This comprises issues such as access to income, quality employment and quality services with an overall impact on a sustainable quality of life. Germany performs well when it comes to tackling family and child poverty, but this wider dimension is also important. Policymakers should capitalise on the extensive experience

of counselling services acquired in their day-to-day work with vulnerable groups.

It was felt that an important feature of the Foundation was its flexible and non-bureaucratic nature. This enables it to fill gaps between various support systems at a key turning point in women's lives. Such flexibility would not be possible if conditions were laid down on the use pregnant women make of the Foundation's payments. Of course, this also means there will always be a risk of some misuse in the way personal grants are spent.

The local-level design of the Foundation's operations and the inclusion of different services were also viewed very positively, as the best ways of filling in gaps in support and satisfying needs where they appear. Guaranteeing locally available quality services for vulnerable women and families are crucial in preventing social exclusion. The services have to be easy-to-access, community-based and integrated. The approach should involve family, friends and social networks to empower parents and develop their potential (holistic, systemic). Outreach is important, as is case management, so that any referrals to other services are followed up on. This also requires horizontal accountability, with responsibility taken for colleagues in other services.

It is also essential that strategies be integrated, as real empowerment also implies active participation in society. Tensions inevitably exist between different policies and these cannot be avoided, but should be used positively where possible. For instance, the relationship between parental leave schemes and labour integration depends on many factors, such as the economic situation, as well as the opinions and attitudes of users and other stakeholders, including employers, governments, parents and children. Innovation is needed to address such situations and this is especially true when working with the most vulnerable, such as Roma, teenage parents, undocumented migrants and victims of domestic violence. Developing imaginative initiatives will require a lot of investment and energy. Peer Reviews could play a role here and the idea of a Peer Review on teenage pregnancy was suggested.



Very early intervention was also underscored as being key and the German practice provides a good example of intervention well before birth to improve children's quality of life and prevent them being abandoned later. The support offered by the Foundation helps to bridge the gap before a mother becomes eligible for children's allowance. This represents an important assistance for women in vulnerable situations, especially in the current economic crisis. But the initiative can also serve as a catalyst to tackle domestic violence and to promote a network for parents who are in a similar situation and need support. The German experience was therefore viewed positively but participants largely felt that positive parenting programmes should be directed towards all parents, regardless of their status and background.

Finally, it was pointed out that although all Member States face the similar challenges of teenage pregnancy, unwanted pregnancies, stress in pregnancy and disability complications, identical starting points do not automatically lead to the same solutions. This is namely due to differences in healthcare systems and national political and professional cultures and traditions. These differences are often so strong that individual answers have to be sought, even if there exchanges between different countries can prove useful.



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Federal Pregnancy Information Centre: www.schwanger-info.de



Europe :

European Alliance for Families: http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/emplweb/families/index.cfm

Experts Group Gender and Employment: <http://www.fgb-egge.it/homepage.asp>

European Stakeholders Organisations : Coface: www.coface-eu.org

European Social Network: www.esn-eu.org

Eurochild: www.eurochild.org





<http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu>

Federal Foundation Mother and Child for pregnant women in emergency situations

Host country: **Germany**

Peer countries: **Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Serbia**

The aim of the Federal Foundation is to prevent pregnant women with low incomes or in households where they are the main breadwinner from falling into poverty during pregnancy and/or following the birth of a child.

The Foundation provided additional, immediate and unbureaucratic support tailored to their specific needs, if unemployment or social welfare benefits are either not paid in due time or fail to be paid at all. It also provides pregnant women with support and counselling via local pregnancy information centres.

With an annual budget of at least €92 million from the Federal budget (and around €97 million in 2009), the Foundation and its network of Länder foundations and implementing organisations currently provide assistance to around one in five pregnant women.

In the Peer Review, the German model will be presented to other Member States as an example of good practice in terms of supporting pregnant women in difficult situations, reducing family poverty and preventing child neglect.