International Conference on Child Rights
Child Rights, the Role of Families and Alternative Care Policies
Developments, Trends and Challenges in Europe
Bucharest, 2/3 February 2006

Working Group 1 – Family Support Policies in European countries: challenges and constraints

Families: resources and responsibilities in a changing world

So much has been said and written about this present day paradigm. So much has been said and written about the interaction of parents, children, siblings, grandparents and other relatives within the family and in many different forms of families. So much has also been said and written about the need for a protective family environment and for family-sensitive policies.

But, what exactly does this mean in real life? Are family support policies and their materialisation a priority in political agendas? How are we responding to the present paradigm of families in a changing world?

Every opportunity to share our ideas and experiences on these issues is very welcome and I am therefore very grateful to the Council of Europe and the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity and Family of Romania for the invitation to participate in this working group.

I am here wearing 2 hats. In my national capacity, I work at the General Directorate for Social Security, at the Portuguese Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity. But since 2003, I am also a member of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. One of the main tasks of the Committee is to assess national reports of States Parties that have ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and have to present a periodic report on its implementation as part of their ratifying obligations. This reporting exercise by approximately 30 States Parties (from 2003 to 2005) has also provided me with the opportunity of putting family support policies and the challenges faced by policy formulators and field workers in a broader context of developed and developing countries.

What I would like to do during the time of this presentation is to share my personal and professional experience with you with the hope of pinpointing some aspects that I think are important for this discussion.

Knowing that the other working groups will devote particular attention to the interface between families and children, I have chosen to deal with family support policies at a general level.

Turning, first, to my own country:

1. The Portuguese socio-economic context

The economic, social and cultural changes in Portugal over the last 30 years have had consequences that are not very different from those you have had in your own countries. I would like to refer to some that are more relevant to our discussion.

Although demographic ageing began a little later than in the majority of the European countries, the intensity of the process has brought us close to the "oldest" Member States of the EU.

We are faced with demographic ageing at the two ends of the pyramid – at the base, due to the fall in the birth rate and at the top, due to the increase in life expectancy, which is longer for women. Based on the mortality rate for 2000/2001, a man can expect to live for an average of 73.5 years, while the average life expectancy for a woman is of 80.3 years.

Family patterns and behaviours have also changed tremendously in the last decades, as elsewhere in Europe. The increase in divorce rates and separation, has given rise to new types of families - lone parent families, in their great majority made up of single mothers with children, and reconstituted families. Other trends are the decrease in the average family size, increase of one person families, specially made up of older women, and of childless families. Older persons are especially vulnerable to isolation due to the living habits in the urban areas and the migration of young adults from the rural areas.

Not only do the Portuguese women have less children, they are also older at the time of the birth of their first child, because they study for more years and hold more demanding jobs. Portugal has one of the highest full-time employment rates for women in the EU MS¹. The great majority of Portuguese women with full time jobs try their best to reconcile professional and family lives, but with great difficulties in terms of caring for children and older family members.

The unemployment rate for the third term of 2005 was of approximately 7.7%. Women have been particularly affected, since their unemployment rate has come up to 8.9%.

Lack of formal education and gaps in professional training and retraining continue to impact negatively on access to the labour market and job maintenance.

Immigrants and ethnic groups raise difficult issues. There are considerably sized communities from the former Portuguese African colonies living in the outskirts

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¹ two in every five women have paid jobs whereas the EU average is one in every five

of the major urban centres. The older African families are faced with specific income, employment and housing difficulties, while the younger 2nd and 3rd generation migrants often experience difficulties in social adaptation (ability to use the means through which they are enabled to act) and a lack of social competence (ability to live with others). More recently, and on a lesser scale, we have received migrants from Brazil and the Eastern European countries.

2. General framework for family policies

The family is recognized by the Portuguese constitution as a fundamental element of society. Families are entitled to the protection of the State and of society as well as to the materialisation of **all** the conditions that enable the well being of **all** their members. Our framework document for national planning² recognizes the essential contribution of families to national cohesion, social balance and sustainable development. I underline the **all** before conditions and before members, because we are still far from achieving such a high level of protection.

We also have a global plan entitled 100 Commitments for Family Policy³ being developed from 2004 to 2006. It is divided into 9 areas and seeks to coordinate cross-cutting measures reflecting the obligations of the State and of other actors vis a vis different family realities, in the legislative, economic, social, educational and cultural fields.

The evaluation of what has been done so far, in the context of this Plan, reflects the difficulties of mainstreaming to put the concerns of families at the heart of the policy formulation process and in achieving an effective planning and coordination of family support measures and family-related activities. I shall refer to this aspect in greater detail further on.

3. The Portuguese social security system

Let me now move on to family support within the Portuguese social protection system, including social security schemes and benefits and social action and social services, which is the main focus of my presentation.

Social protection models in EU member states are certainly influenced by political and institutional systems, economic and social development levels and cultural backgrounds, but social security and social action are inextricably linked to combating poverty and social exclusion and to promoting individual, family and collective well-being. Not withstanding different contexts, one can say that the European countries to a greater or lesser extent inspired by the European Social model can be grouped under four historic social protection models – the Scandinavian, Continental, Anglo Saxon and Mediterranean models.

² Grandes Opções do Plano 2005-2009 (Diário da República, nº 167, I Série-A, 31/08/2005)

³ 100 Compromissos para uma Política de Família

Portugal belongs to the Mediterranean model and I have picked some of the characteristics of the model that are interesting for today's discussion.

Mediterranean model (Portugal, Italy, Spain, Greece) ⁴				
Nature	Guiding principles	Access	Funding	Formal and informal social care services
redistributive	Work related and family oriented; traditional solidarities (family, neighbours)	Individual access to work-related social rights or means- tested benefits	Taxation/ Contributions	Collective and informal care of children and adult dependents

The most recent Portuguese social security framework law (Law n° 32/2002) reaffirms the constitutional principle of the universal right to social security. Some of the overarching objectives of our public social security system are to:

- Protect workers and their families in situations of a lack of capacity for work, unemployment and death (compulsory contributory system for workers);
- Protect individuals and families that do not have sufficient means for subsistence (non-contributory schemes / means-tested benefits)
- Protect families through the compensation of family charges

One of the innovatory aspects of this law is the fact that it establishes a specific subsystem for family protection within the public social security system. It provides universal coverage and comprises family benefits, as well as benefits for persons with handicaps and dependent persons⁵.

According to present legislation on family benefits⁶, these benefits privilege poor families and families with more children so as to ensure positive differentiation. The amounts of the benefit for children and young people are therefore variable, depending on the family income⁷.

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⁴ countries grouped together may not share all the characteristics of the model; some of them may in fact have a certain mix of elements from more than one model

⁵ benefit for children and young people; special education benefit; increased amount of family benefit for children and young people with handicaps; 3rd person attendance benefit; life time benefit; funeral benefit;

⁶ Decree-Law 176/2003 (02/08/2003)

⁷ 7 income brackets, ranging from a first bracket for families whose income is equal or more than 0,5 of the minimum monthly wage and the last is for families whose income is over 5 times the minimum monthly wage.

Maternity, paternity and adoption benefits also provide support for families⁸.

Among the means tested-benefits, the social integration income is very relevant for low income families. Eligibility criteria are directed towards individuals and families in situations of severe deprivation.

It follows a two-thronged approach: a financial benefit calculated on the basis of household composition and resources and a social integration programme jointly drawn up by the recipient, his or her family and a social worker. This programme is monitored by a local committee made up of representatives of various public departments (education, health, employment, vocational training, social security and social action), the local authority and non-profit institutions.

The number of families receiving the social integration income has been growing.

The social integration income has had a positive impact on poor and very poor families. It may not account for profound revolutionary changes in their lives, but it does certainly, support "small changes" that are crucial in reducing the negative effects of certain life cycles. But there is the danger of the evaluation of its impact being excessively focussed on individuals and families, losing sight of the fact that social exclusion is not simply the result of individual motivations and decisions, but rather of the lack of policy articulation and coordination, that allows individuals and families to fall through the cracks of sectorial policies.

4. Social services

The Portuguese social security system also comprises social action intended to provide special protection to the more vulnerable groups (children, youth, people with handicaps and older persons). This special protection is ensured through a national network of personal and family social services.

Social services respond to a variety of needs. A first case assessment is made by a social worker from the Local Social Security Services that operate as front line open for all attendance services. The aim of this first contact is to provide all the information, guidance and support that individuals and families need.

Social services are provided by public social security departments or by non-profit private social solidarity institutions (the great majority) or by for profit institutions. Non-profit institutions are entitled to technical assistance and funding through cooperation agreements with public social security services. Payment for services offered by public and non-profit institutions is based on family income.

⁸ maternity benefit; paternity benefit; adoption benefit; benefit to care for sick or handicapped children; benefit to care for severely disabled or chronically ill persons; benefit in case of particular risks; parental leave benefit; benefit for special leave for grandparents

Different social services provide support for families and their members, namely children and older persons, promoting equality of opportunities and the reconciliation of professional and family life.

To give you a brief overview of these services, I will refer to creches and childminders, leisure time activity centres, for children and young people; specific services for disabled members of the family, like early technical support, occupational support centre and home help; day care and get together centres and home help for older persons; integrated support centres and home help for dependents; and community centres, life support centres for adolescent mothers, family support and parental guidance centres and sheltered housing for victims of domestic violence.

I am sure some of these services are of a similar nature and pursue objectives that are identical to those of social services in your own countries, while others are adapted to our specific cultural context.

5. Global trends and challenges

Let me now move on to an assessment of trends, challenges and constraints with which countries in all regions of the world are faced on a bigger or smaller scale and have to look for adequate solutions.

According to Article 10 of the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the over 150 States Parties that have ratified the Covenant recognize that:

"The widest possible protection and assistance should be accorded to the family, which is the natural and fundamental group unit of society, particularly for its establishment and while it is responsible for the care and education of dependent children" (...).

The information gathered from the national reports presented by UN Member States to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in compliance with their ratifying obligations, has made me more aware of the fact that many of the trends and challenges faced by policy makers in different regions of the world are common and recurrent. I shall refer briefly to 5 of them – mainstreaming of family policies, rights-based social inclusion, individual and collective ageing, reconciliation of professional and family life and international migration.

The greatest challenge in my opinion lies in overcoming the obstacles in the field of mainstreaming and policy coordination and therefore I place this challenge before all the others. These obstacles are of:

 an institutional nature, in so far as public services have difficulties in working together through the coordination of sectorial policies;

- a cultural nature, because family policies are considered to be social policies and therefore, under the purview of the "social" Ministries;
- a financial nature, because the public budget is decided on a sectorial basis and sectorial priorities do not always coincide in terms of target groups and proposed protection measures
- an operational nature, because policies are influenced by a wide range of conflicting objectives and countries are faced with the need to find an appropriate balance in pursuing these different objectives.

This understanding if of even greater concern in a globalised world, where:

- social development policies are often mistakenly considered as being contrary to economic growth and international competitiveness;
- economic and employment growth certainly contribute towards the improvement of living conditions but pockets of poverty and social exclusion remain and persist and therefore call for targeted measures for specific groups.

At the EU level, the National Action Plans for Inclusion provide the framework for Member States to design and make operational instruments for integrated policies for the social inclusion of persons and families. They are simultaneously an opportunity and a challenge, especially because they call for medium term strategic priorities that are some times absent from the political thinking process, in some Member States too closely linked to changing party politics cycles.

The important issue for some, I dare say for many, Member States, is to make optimal use of the NAP at national, regional and local levels, establishing a policy cascade that enables Ministries to work together towards common social inclusion objectives translated into tangible targeted actions that provide measurable results, especially for individuals and families that need them the most.

But, mainstreaming policies are difficult to put in place when it comes to protection of specific groups and one classical example is gender mainstreaming.

Other challenges to a protective family environment are bound to become increasingly important in the future.

One of them is the rights-based social inclusion challenge, as against needs based social support measures and mechanisms.

Families living in poverty or social exclusion are normally unaware of their rights and certainly at a loss of information on what the system offers by way of support to enable them to find solutions to their problems. Problems may be different, but they all have a common root cause, and that is the lack of policy articulation and coordination that allows individuals and families to fall through the cracks of sectorial policies. They have the right not to fall through these cracks.

Another challenge is the demographic challenge. The world is ageing fast at both ends of the age pyramid. Lower fertility rates and higher life expectancy contribute to a larger share of older persons within the overall population. Globally the number of older persons (60 years and over) will more than triple from 606 million to 2 billion by 2050. The oldest old (80 years or older) is the fastest growing segment of older population.

Active ageing is simultaneously an opportunity and a challenge. It calls for a shift in strategic planning of policies and measures towards a pro-active vision that recognizes the right of persons of all ages to equal opportunities in order to enable them to participate in the economic, social and cultural development of their communities and societies. On the other side of the coin, the dependency ratio (number of retired persons in relation to working people) is increasing putting enormous strains on pension systems.

Increased life expectancy also entails physical and mental dependencies that call for adequate financial support for families and integrated social and health services. We must privilege flexible forms of intervention, especially in terms of services of proximity so as to help older and dependent persons to remain in their normal living environment for as long as possible. The social and health sector need to work hand in hand to provide integrated home help and residential care adapted to the capacities that the very old and frail are still able to exercise.

This challenge of providing families with the necessary support to care for their children as well as their dependent adults is closely interlinked with the changing gender balance and with profound alterations in family structures. The increased participation of women in the labour market, the shift from extended to nuclear families as well as the rise of one person households has reduced the availability of unpaid informal family carers, increasing the demand for childcare, family support services and residential long-term care facilities. Informal care that was traditionally provided free of charge by women is decreasing and care is now paid for, increasing family expenses. Families thus need additional financial support to be able to afford care for children and adult dependents and this can be quite a burden for less favoured and disadvantaged families, especially when health care and permanent assistance costs in situations of mental disabilities caused by the ageing process become very expensive.

This discussion about the importance of income support and social services for families has to be shaped, in my opinion, by the following assumptions:

- the challenges need to be tackled in the context of modernisation, reduced coverage and dwindling resources without diluting the sociopolitical content and the ethical approach of public social security systems;
- the State is no longer the sole provider of social security and social services but rather the enabler of an overall favourable environment for social inclusion through an effective legal and financial framework and an accountable public sector, with increased responsibility in ensuring the social inclusion of less favoured individuals, families and groups;
- the gap between the rich and the poor is considerable both within Member States and between them. Over 25% of EU citizens live in regions whose output is below 75% of the EU average⁹.

The challenge of adequate reconciliation measures for professional and family life has been high on national agendas, but the great majority of national policies all over the world are far from being satisfactory. It is true that the rate of female participation in the labour market has increased but it is equally true that in many countries this participation hides situations of inequality, since it is maintained through a double burden for women who simultaneously hold a remunerated job and take care of non-remunerated domestic work and a persistent gender wage gap.

The disadvantages women face in their access to the labour market, and in combating vertical and professional segregation in their careers are gradually decreasing, but the difficulties they face in reconciling professional and family lives still hinder their full participation in the labour market on an equal footing with men. It is clear that the positive evolution is much more the result of women's attitudes in pursuing their professional realisation than of the positive effects of social support measures. It is still the women that continue to bear the greatest burden of family responsibilities (home care, childcare and care of dependent adults).

We still need to implement far reaching changes in order to bring about a greater flexibility in the traditional division of time - time for work and time for the family - that no longer corresponds to the real needs of men and women.

Reconciliation of professional and family life is a right and an obligation of men and women workers as well as a social responsibility, of which not only the public sector but especially private corporate business has to be made aware.

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⁹ in Draft Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament "European Values in the Globalised World". Contribution of the Commission to the October Meeting Heads of States and Government. Brussels, COM (2005).

Turning to the migration challenge.

175 million people (3% of the world population) reside outside their country of birth; there are over 20 million refugees all over the world. Religious and ethnic violence, discrimination and the hope of better living conditions have been the main factors for migration. In all our countries, we have examples of the major stress migration can have on family life due to racial and religious differences and lack of professional and social integration. Trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children have increased.

Because I have done some research work on national support policies for migrant families, more specifically African migrant families, I would like to spend some time on the practical materialisation of a protective family environment for this specific group of families and the challenges it poses to social workers.

6. A protective environment for migrant families: the economic, social and cultural role of social workers

Portugal is a country with a long colonial background that is simultaneously and growingly a reception country for people from its former colonies. In our context, an ethnic group is a group with a national identity, since almost all 2nd and 3rd generation migrants have Portuguese nationality, but with specific cultural traditions, norms and references, that are distinct from those of the native Portuguese communities. Working with these migrant families poses specific problems for social workers.

Of course I mean social work, in the broad sense, which includes the different types of intervention in the field of social action that imply working with individuals in their natural living environment - within families, groups and communities – in order to help them achieve individual autonomy and the realisation of their citizenship rights.

The bottom line is that social workers must pursue a rights based approach involving individuals, families, groups and communities in the choice of measures to be undertaken to enable them to exercise their rights.

Social workers, in this perspective, are no longer the traditional social workers, prepared with an academic degree in social work and professional skills to solve first line immediate problems. Irrespective of their academic backgrounds, they need to have a global vision and understanding of the real problems and the economic, social and cultural contexts in which they occur and the personal and professional skills for a qualified social intervention, of a holistic and integrated nature, as opposed to the traditional overspecialised specific sectorial interventions.

Social workers face specific challenges in relation to the inclusion of migrant ethnic families. Different ethnic groups have different reactions and therefore require different attitudes on the part of social workers in multicultural contexts.

First of all, there is the need to involve families from ethnic groups in decision making and to support social support networks and links in a joint effort to improve social integration without losing sight of cultural differences. This is easier said than done, because family involvement is not easy to get in deprived neighbourhoods due to a variety of reasons we are all familiar with and, therefore, social workers involved with ethnic families the need to change intervention procedures, by creating informal opportunities for direct contacts, so as to enable people to freely express their feelings, frustrations and opinions.¹⁰

They also need to be fully attentive in order to understand different communication codes, to decodify the messages, and identify the real problems in different social and cultural contexts.

The second issue is the development of social services that contribute towards a more friendly and constructive surrounding environment. ¹¹

The third issue is the promotion of a multicultural approach that implies a two way relationship between people with different cultural roots who need to discover and respect each other's culture and living patterns. Part of this approach is to promote empowerment as a fundamental tool to look for new development models and discover hidden capabilities, new avenues for cultural and artistic expression, as essential components of identity building and a democratic culture. In all ethnic communities, cultural and recreational associations are strong supporters of social networks. All of them provide

At one Community Centre, mothers and grandmothers attend open workshops, for example to learn *arraiolos* – a typical Portuguese carpet embroidery. The relationships with their children who also attend the Centre are not always easy, especially for mothers who are disorganised or over protective and resent their child's growing autonomy. The children in turn tend to shift the responsibility of decision making to their mothers. But as both become more self confident and more comfortable in their respective roles, the emotional and functional ties become stronger.

In one pilot project, school success in the context of a continued process of close cultural exchange was pursued through a mixed model of early intervention through community involvement that covers:

- Young school age children of African origin;
- High school students of Portuguese origin and a higher social economic background who lived outside the neighbourhood and came in to provide individual support for a time period that increased as the emotional ties grew stronger:
- Social animators of African origin who acted as liaison between children, families, students, school and community;
- Project coordinator

¹⁰ encouraging children to bring food recipes from home, having grandmothers or other family members come in and tell stories or talk about how it was back home or simply to sing have been proved to be important tools to reinforce the self esteem of children and families as well as to promote cross cultural understanding.

African children, for instance, need outdoor activities. Having come from rural community villages, their parents encourage them to play and live outdoors. They need to have the same feeling of open space in after school care initiatives. Sports and martial arts give them the feeling of freedom, but they are also important so far as they help impose functioning patterns and rules and responsibilities.

excellent resources for the reinforcement of the cultural identity of ethnic group children, besides providing the interface with the resident community and cultural and recreational associations.

7. Involvement of all stakeholders

A final reference I would like to make is to the crucial importance of the involvement of all the stakeholders. I refer to this aspect not because it is institutionally correct to do so but because having worked in social security and social action for many years, I know, from experience, that a protective family environment can only be ensured as a collective responsibility. The participation of civil society actors including social partners and NGO's implies involving them right from the start so as to enable them to participate in all the stages of family policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. Participation involves more than providing a voice or asking for an opinion in the later stages as if what is expected is a validation of the decisions already taken by the public authorities.

There remains no doubt that NGO's are closer to families and to their real problems and therefore their contribution to the assessment of policy failures that allow people to fall within the cracks of sectorial policies is of paramount importance in redirecting existing policies and designing new ones.

As a concluding note, I would like to quote Mary Coughlan, the then Minister for Social and Family Affairs of Ireland, in her opening speech at the Irish Presidency Conference on Families, Change and Social Policy in Europe, in 2004:

"It is worth pointing out that families are among the oldest institutions in our society. Over the millennia they have successfully adapted to many changes. Our focus on today's problems and challenges, therefore, should be balanced with a clear realisation of the major contributions families have been making to society and to the well-being of individuals down through the ages.

Our overall focus, therefore, should be on examining how families and family life as a major resource of our societies can be better supported and strengthened in making their key contribution to society at this time of great change".

This presentation is my small contribution to the discussion on how we can support families to continue contributing to the well-being of individuals down through the ages. Because, when they do so, they are certainly making a key contribution to society at times of great change, which means, in fact, all the time, because the times they are always changing.

Thank you very much.

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