

More support for families might help increase birth and employment rates

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Having taken up an initiative of the German Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, the European Commission has just presented proposals for more European-wide cooperation in the field of family support in order to achieve more balanced work and family life.

Under the title “[Promoting solidarity under the generations](#)” the Commission seeks to stimulate debates and policy actions in order to improve family life conditions, particularly by reconciling professional and private life, what is considered to be one of the core issues in the management of the demographic change. According to the Commission, Member States should help Europeans to have their ideal number of children.

Although responsibility for family policies remains with the Member States, it is underlined in the paper that EU’s policies on employment and equal opportunities have an impact on the quality of family life. Therefore, the Commission takes up the issue of family support systems as a matter of European concern.

After having summarised various data from different European observation tools the document’s authors detected three main axes in balancing family and working life:

- Compensation for direct and indirect costs associated with the family (benefits or tax reliefs for those responsible for children or other dependent people);
- Parental help services in the form of education and care for young children, care and supervision for older children and, increasingly, services for dependent people in an ageing society;
- Organisation of working and employment conditions (appropriate work schedules and leave schemes) and access to services at the local level.

The paper confirms that nowadays the change in family policies of the Member States heads towards three main directions. Firstly, family policies are now part of a broader set of public measures which all have an influence on family situation, namely policies in the fields of education, social and occupational inclusion of young people, employment, housing, transport, health and, of course, civil law, which governs people’s obligations towards other members of the family.

Secondly, there is a trend towards the decentralisation of activities, individualisation of rights and benefits, and targeting expenditure in order to increase incentives to work and ensure a long-lasting escape from poverty.

Finally, family policies are increasingly taking account of the changes in aspirations and practices concerning the respective roles of men and women in the society, in terms of women’s participation in employment without major interruptions and men’s increased participation in family and domestic responsibilities. The family policies, thus, increasingly contribute to the enhancement of equality between men and women through the strengthened economic autonomy of the latter. In order to stimulate European exchange and promote knowledge on pro-family policies and best practices, the Commission makes proposals for implementing the German initiative. The European Alliance for Families should serve as a platform, through which an extensive cooperation and partnership between all stakeholders should be fostered.

At the same time the Commission wants the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in Dublin to set up an observatory of the best family policy practices. Last but not least, the 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development should be used to provide research support on questions related to the demography and family matters. The common concern for demographic change seems to open up a new chapter for making again family policies a centre of European policy-making.

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