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INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION FOR FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

EN

Artistas, 2 · 2º - 28020 Madrid (Spain)

www.iffd.org

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FamiliesAndSocieties

Changing families and sustainable societies, a major European study

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FamiliesAndSocieties¹ (FaS) is a major European research project that investigates the diversity of family forms, relationships and life courses in Europe. It is expected to explore the growing complexity of family configurations and transitions across and within European societies and examines their implications for children, women and men with respect to inequalities in life chances, intergenerational relations and care arrangements.²

The project is financed by the European Union Seventh Framework Program. It represents 6.5 million in EU contributions and counts with the collaboration of 25 research partners in 15 European countries and 3 transnational civil society actors, including the International Federation for Family Development (IFFD). By the very nature of its composition, FaS is therefore the most important project ever carried out on family matters in Europe. It indeed combines a wide range of expertise in social sciences, law and the humanities and partners are committed to work together, thus offering a multidisciplinary approach to the project.

Moreover, two new databases will be developed: one of the legal content of family forms available in European countries, and another on EC/EU initiatives in core family-policy areas. The researchers will finally investigate how policies address family diversity and its consequences, and identify likely paths of future changes in family compositions and related policy needs³.

A great variety of partners

The scope of the project was reflected by FaS coordinator, Livia Oláh⁴, in her message on the occasion of the launch of FamiliesAndSocieties, as she explained that: "to carry out the project, a large consortium of partners has been formed on the basis of scientific excellence covering a wide range of disciplinary expertise in family-related research, located in key regions of Europe, and also based on the active involvement of civil society actors".⁵

To be more specific, the academic partners are universities (16 partners), research institutes (8 partners), and an international organization, the European University Institute (EUI). In addition to the wide European coverage, the project coordinator also emphasized that "the selection of consortium members also ensures representation of various welfare states and care regimes: Sweden and Finland (universal Scandinavian welfare regime), the UK and Switzerland (liberal regime), France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands (a rather heterogeneous group of conservative welfare states, especially with respect to care), Italy and Spain (Mediterranean familistic regime), and Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania (another very heterogeneous group with Central-East European post-socialist welfare regimes)".⁶

¹ Available at <http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu>

² Available at http://www.vaestoliitto.fi/in_english/population_research_institute/family_research/families-and-societies/

³ Available at http://www.vaestoliitto.fi/in_english/population_research_institute/family_research/families-and-societies/

⁴ Livia Oláh is associate professor at Stockholm University.

⁵ 'Family change is not over', an interview with Livia Sz. Oláh about the launch of the FamiliesAndSocieties project.

Available at <http://www.population-europe.eu/Library/Statement/4703/en>

⁶ *ibidem*.

In addition to the academic partners, the consortium finally includes three transnational civil society actors, including IFFD as the federation that gathers 92 family associations from 65 countries all over the world. The two others are the AGE Platform Europe (AGE)⁷, which is a European network of about 165 organizations of and for people aged 50+, directly representing more than 30 million people in that age range in Europe; and the European Large Families Confederation (ELFAC).⁸

The Future of our Families⁹

Launched in February 1st 2013, the project will continue until January 31st 2017 with the objectives of investigating the diversity of family forms, relationships and life courses in Europe. A second aim is to assess the compatibility of existing policies with families' changes while contributing to evidence-based policy-making. In a nutshell, the project will extend the knowledge on how policies promote wellbeing, inclusion and sustainable societal development among families.

Key concepts¹⁰

To see FamiliesAndSocieties' commitment in all of its breadth and diversity, one has to acknowledge the premises of the project, as they were initially described to the partners. It goes from known demographic trends and behaviors such as declining fertility rates to concerns about the consequences of divorce on children and context in which adequate policy responses to families' challenges are expected to take place.

Family life courses are becoming more diverse

As introduced in the official project presentation, declining marriage and fertility rates, and increasing cohabitation, divorce and separation have profoundly shaped the image of the family of the 21st century. More people than in previous decades cohabit, have children outside marital unions, will experience the separation of their unions, re-partner, enter stepfamilies, live separated from their children, remain childless or live in same-sex partnerships. These changes in demographic behavior have also influenced the family life courses. It has indeed become increasingly diverse as the sequences and pace in which events occur have become less standardized than before.¹¹ These changes have affected family structures all over Europe and created a growing diversity of family forms among individuals and across the life course. How family forms vary over the life course, how social institutions support different types of families and how this affects the wellbeing of individuals and their children, has major implications for the sustainability of European societies.

The interdependence of lives matters

FamiliesAndSocieties project is also based on the concept that individual lives are linked: family members, kin, and the broader social networks facilitate and constrain life courses.¹² These linked lives shape which forms individual family life courses take: for example, despite one's hopes, plan and commitment to a stable partnership, the actions of one's partner may undermine the opportunities for achieving it. Linked lives shape life courses also with regard to other outcomes. Divorce can have repercussions for the lives and wellbeing of adults and children alike, childbearing and aging create demands for care, while decisions concerning families and economic activities and the availability and skills of caregivers shape the option for giving care.¹³ The linkages between individuals within and between families and generations and the decisions individuals make in these networks thus shape life courses and their outcomes, and set preconditions for any successful policy interventions.

Social contexts and policy matter

Finally, it is recognized that societal context shapes the family life course.¹⁴ Researchers indeed agree on the fact that family and social policies as well as labor market institutions provide the opportunity structure under which individuals make decisions and thus influence the timing and ordering in which family events occur over the life course. In other words, family life courses and their causes and consequences have to be studied in their structural and institutional contexts while policies have to be assessed against the background of the complexity in family lives.

IFFD contribution to FaS

As a non-governmental organization, IFFD is actively involved in matters related to foresight activities, synthesis as well as

⁷ Available at www.age-platform.eu

⁸ Available at www.elfac.org

⁹ Available at <http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu>

¹⁰ Available at http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu/?page_id=102

¹¹ Brückner and Mayer (2005), Buchmann and Kriesi (2011).

¹² Elder (1998), Dykstra and Komter (2006), Mayer (2009), Dykstra (2010).

¹³ Schenk and Dykstra, forthcoming.

¹⁴ Elder (1998) and Mayer (2009).

policy implications and dissemination of project's research results.¹⁵

Foresight activities

The main objective of foresight activities is to inform policy makers about the impact that family-related policies have on the long run on the family wellbeing and on the fulfillment of family needs. The foresight approach aims at collecting forward looking tools designed to inform and influence management, planning and policymaking and it uses qualitative and quantitative methods. Our aims are therefore to draw policy implications and to outline future major trends in family configurations.

Consequently, IFFD participated in the task force workshop during the consortium meeting in Tallinn¹⁶ and collaborated in the selection, contact and involvement process of the 25 stakeholders who took part in the workshop. IFFD was also responsible for one of the 'world café method' groups. This included acting as moderator and rapporteur of a roundtable on intergenerational linkages within families, and taking records of the discussions in order to elaborate a report on the group results. In the coming months, IFFD will also be in charge of coordinating the realization of a focus group with stakeholders and policy makers.

Synthesis and policy implications

The objective involves here two synthesis tasks. The first one is to produce a synthesis of the state-of-the-art, identifying gaps in the research areas and guidelines for research directions. And the second one consists in producing a synthesis of findings that have emerged from the work packages and to formulate policy recommendations based upon this research and the dissemination meetings among civil society actors and stakeholders.

IFFD contributed to this aim by elaborating a report entitled 'the contribution of civil society to the state-of-the-art reports'. It presented the results of a survey we conducted during six weeks (from September to October 2013) with the participation of some of our partners and other representatives from civil society organizations across Europe. Firstly, IFFD elaborated a summary of the state-of-the-art reports and future research questions produced by FaS partners. Then, we asked our correspondents to select the research questions they considered the most relevant for their respective countries and to provide some insights on facts or trends according to their experience dealing and working with families in their own countries. We sent the questionnaire to 113 experts in family related matters in 17 European countries. We received answers from the following ones: Austria, Belgium, Finland, Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland and Spain. It was then time to synthesize all responses in a document starting with the identification of most relevant topics and questions that were selected during the research period. A second part aimed at gathering main common trends observed in different European countries. The report concluded with particularities of these countries, illustrating the main features mentioned during the time of the survey and classifying them according to their belonging to different welfare regimes.

We also highlight that IFFD will keep contributing, in the coming months, to the collection and presentation of good practices that are related to public policies and civil society initiatives regarding family wellbeing.

Dissemination of research results, dialogue with stakeholder audiences and family advocacy

The general objective is to disseminate the project findings to the academic community, policy makers, stakeholders, the media and the general public. It is also about enhancing the dialogue between policy makers and civil society actors as well as researchers.

In this respect, IFFD participated in the first annual stakeholder seminar on 'Solomonic choices: Parental separation and family policies in Europe' that was convened in Brussels, on the 28th of January 2014. It gathered leading experts from research, policymakers, and NGOs to discuss the most recent evidences on children in vulnerable situations and the potential scope of policy interventions. Population Europe Secretariat, hosted by the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, organized the meeting in cooperation with Oxford Population Centre, the European University Institute, and the European Economic and

¹⁵ The FamiliesAndSocieties project is organized in 12 work packages. The WPs have been designed to complement each other and interrelate. WP1 (management) and WP12 (dissemination) serve all WPs, providing a frame for the research activities (WPs 2-11). Important aspects of the family life course are addressed in WPs 2-4. New family configurations, life goals and transitions being specifically addressed in WP2, the new roles of women and men in WP3, and the new role of children along with ART in WP4. WPs 5-9 address the implications of the changes in the family life course for sustainable societies. WP5 focuses on inequalities in children's life chances, WP6 on childcare arrangements, their determinants and consequences, WP7 on intergenerational links, WP8 on migrants and questions of social inclusion and exclusion, and WP9 on policies. Foresight and synthesis of research results constitute another group, the former activities included in WP10 and the latter in WP11. Two of the research WPs are central ones and interlink with all other research WPs; these are WP2 on family configurations and WP9 on policies. The new gender roles (WP3) interlink with WP4 (children and ART) and WP7 (intergenerational links) in addition to links with the two central WPs. WP4 also interlinks with WP7, the latter connects to WP6 as well. WP5 on children's life chances interlinks both with WP6 and WP8. More information available at http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu/?page_id=110

¹⁶ FamiliesAndSocieties Consortium meeting took place in Tallinn, from 7th to 10th of January 2014. Available at: http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu/?page_id=2097

Social Committee. The event highlighted the fact that a poor socioeconomic background and family disruptions, such as parent separation, may have an impact on the life chances of children. As recorded by Population Europe, it emerged from the discussions that when it comes to children, most European societies are facing a troubling paradox: despite the concerns about declining birth rates, many of the few children we have do not receive adequate support.¹⁷

Also in line with dissemination activities, IFFD took part in a meeting with other partners in Berlin¹⁸ where the team participated in the elaboration of a plan for the dissemination of FaS activities among press contacts, policy makers and stakeholders, including IFFD network of partners and experts. In a similar vein, the elaboration of the above-mentioned report “the contribution of civil society to the state-of-the-art reports” allowed us to promote the project FaS and its activities within our network of experts and to share ideas with IFFD collaborators active in various European countries.

Finally, IFFD took the opportunity to disseminate pieces of information about FaS project through its participation in various activities such as the debate about family in Poland¹⁹ or its participation to the Demography Symposium in Santiago de Compostela²⁰. The annual Conference of the European Local Inclusion and Social Action Network²¹ as well as the European Board of the Family Justice Centers in Europe²² and the World Summit of Families²³, are all examples of events during which IFFD contributed to the dissemination of information about FaS project.

More information

Any person interested in the project FamiliesAndSocieties is invited to visit the website that provides a broad range of information, publications, and other project-related news. We also encourage you to sign up for regular updates on the project.²⁴

Eloïse Leboutte – Project Manager, IFFD.

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¹⁷ Full event review available at <http://www.population-europe.eu/Events/EventReview/4998/en>

¹⁸ WP 12 Berlin meeting was held in Berlin at the Population Europe Secretariat on the 30th of September 2013.

¹⁹ Zabrze, Poland on October 22nd 2013.

²⁰ The Demography Symposium in Santiago de Compostela was organized, 22 November 2013.

²¹ The annual conference the European Local Inclusion and Social Action Network took place in Brussels, 18 November 2013.

²² The European Board of the Family Justice Centers in Europe took place in Derry, UK, 22 November 2013.

²³ The World Summit of Families took place in Berlin, 3-5 December 2013.

²⁴ Available at <http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu> (click on “sign up for regular updates” at the bottom of the page).