

Family policy and family support in Europe:
International and European policy frameworks and standards



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This Policy Brief presents key findings from a review of international and European policy and provision standards and frameworks related to family support and children's rights. It has been produced for policy audiences and is based on a report published by Working Group 2 (WG2) of the European Family Support Network ([COST Action CA18123](#)).

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Synthesis

While national governments have the main responsibility for delivering family policy and family support to their citizens, inter-governmental agencies such as the United Nations (UN), the Council of Europe (CoE) and the European Union (EU) have wide-ranging international and European human rights and public policy mandates. Relative to their mandates, these agencies have adopted human rights instruments and family policy measures that are highly significant for family and parenting support. Employing a policy analysis and literature review approach, WG2 conducted a review of family policy, family support and children's rights standards and frameworks adopted by the UN, CoE and EU. The review examined how these conceptualise and promote policies and services to enhance the well-being of children and young people, and to support their parents and families. The review also examined measures taken by the EU to support member states and social services during the Covid-19 pandemic. The review concluded that collectively an array of UN, CoE and EU instruments provide a substantial framework of rights to universal and targeted family and parenting support. However, the review calls for the CoE and EU to better align their commitment to children's rights with their family policies, and to promote improved and coherent implementation among member states. Overall, the review calls for European approaches to family policy and family support to be more firmly grounded in children's rights as laid out in the *1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* and to more systematically include children's and parents perspectives.

Defining family policy and family support

- ▶ The review examined policies and standards concerned with levels and types of state support and services for parents, children and families; and their role in enhancing the care and well-being of children and young people. This encompasses **family policy** (legislation and policies which regulate and support families' living standards, functions and relations) and **family support** (resources and services provided to support and assist family roles and members) (COFACE, 2019; Daly et al. 2015; UNICEF, 2019). Types of family policy and support measures considered included income transfers and social welfare schemes, work-family reconciliation measures, and family and parenting support services. 'Parenting support', concerned with parenting, relationship and welfare support for parents, is recognised as a central component of modern family support (Daly et al. 2015).

Key findings

- ▶ Multiple UN, CoE and EU instruments and strategies highlight the value of 'the family' and its rights to protection and assistance. These assert children's rights to live with their parents and families, except in circumstances where the best interest of the child requires alternative care arrangements. They assert children, parents and families are entitled to protection and support, both to ensure children can live with their parents and families as well as to safeguard rights to welfare and adequate living standards.
- ▶ Significant imperatives for family policy and support emerge from *the International Bill of Human Rights* and its emphasis on rights to economic and employment support, healthcare and education, and social services for children and families. Human rights instruments also stress the importance of ensuring human rights for minority groups, women, and persons with disabilities. These instruments promote access to family support to address discrimination, disadvantage and vulnerability.
- ▶ The *1989 UNCRC* provides a comprehensive framework of children's rights to 'protection, provision and participation'. It recognises parents and families as children's primary caregivers, entitled to supportive family policies, and promotes children's rights to wellbeing, adequate living standards and equal opportunities. The *1989 UNCRC* proclaims children have the right to be protected from all forms of violence and exploitation, and to participate in decision-making.
- ▶ The *1950 European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)* and *1961/1996 European Social Charters (ESC/RESC)* highlight the CoE's commitment to social rights and children's rights. More recent instruments build on these commitments, including the *CoE's 2006 (19) Recommendation on policy to support positive parenting*. This important Recommendation calls for comprehensive: (1) income transfer and taxation schemes to secure adequate living standards for families with children; (2) measures to balance work and family life; and (3) infrastructures for childcare and social services provision. It states all children and parents should have access to support and be treated as rights holders and partners.
- ▶ Building on these frameworks, the *CoE 2011 (12) Recommendation on children's rights and social services friendly to children and families* promotes improved and coordinated social services. The *CoE Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021)* emphasised children's rights to participation and the beneficial role of all forms of family support.

Key messages: Policy implications and challenges

Key findings

- ▶ At the EU level, equal opportunities concerns have prompted policies for gender equality, social protection, employment support and improved Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services. *The European Commission (EC) (2013) Recommendation on Investing in Children* reflected greater interest in family support. This called for reduced child poverty and improved social inclusion for children, parents, and families through improved: (1) access to adequate resources; (2) access to affordable social and ECEC services; and (3) children's rights to participation.
- ▶ *The 2017 European Pillar of Social Rights* promotes increased social investment in universal and targeted support and services for children and families. It provides an aspirational framework to strengthen social and economic rights for EU citizens including rights to work-life balance, ECEC services and social security.
- ▶ The recently adopted *2021 European Child Guarantee* takes forward these aspirations providing an EU-wide framework to promote, review and support the actions of member states to reduce child poverty and improve access to support for children and families at risk.
- ▶ Emerging research indicates the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions profoundly increased stresses and pressures for children, parents, and families (COFACE, 2020; Eurofound, 2020; Eurochild, 2020). EU economic response measures, including the *Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative (2020) and the EU Recovery Fund (2021-2027)*, potentially provided support for member states to maintain and enhance family support and social services. In particular, the latter provides ring-fenced European Support Funds (ESF+) for child poverty reduction measures.
- ▶ Although some details remain forthcoming, measures to take forward the *European Pillar of Social Rights and European Child Guarantee* have emphasised the need for additional resources and support to favour of children, youth, parents and families during the pandemic recovery.

Policy Implications and Challenges

- ▶ **A solid basis for a European children's rights framework for family policy and family support:** Informed by human rights instruments, especially the UNCRC, both the CoE and EU acknowledge children as individual rights holders, emphasise the importance of parental rights to support, and value 'the family' as a fundamental social institution and social care provider. Both agencies have adopted measures to promote children's rights to family life, quality care and adequate living standards. Both agencies promote parental and family rights to support and services including economic, housing, employment and ECEC support and services.
- ▶ **Both agencies advocate the importance of combining universal policies and measures serving all children, parents and families with targeted policies and measures** for those with additional needs, such as due to poverty and migration. Both agencies call for family policy and support to tackle gender inequality, recognise cultural diversity and provide support to persons with disabilities.

Key messages: Policy implications and challenges

Policy Implications and Challenges

- ▶ **The need for a more holistic and aligned European framework for family policy and family support:** While important building blocks are in place, there remains scope for the CoE and EU to collectively pursue a more holistic and coherent vision of children's, parents and family rights to support, welfare and living standards. Closer cooperation and synergy between the visions, policies and strategies of the CoE and EU, informed by international frameworks for human rights, could promote a more comprehensive and integrated approach to family policy, family support and children's rights. In pursuit of their distinctive yet overlapping mandates, the CoE and EU could promote improved alignment of social rights with human rights, and family policy with children's rights. Greater emphasis on the conception of children and parents as rights-holders with agency and access to support are vital to these agendas.
- ▶ **More attention for improved implementation among member states:** While the roles of CoE and EU's instruments and policies are highly important, it is member states who carry the main responsibility for social policy, family policy and children's rights. When progress is slow, should and can the CoE and EU do more to monitor and support policy implementation and evaluation? Or should more demands be placed on their member states to increase investment, improve policies and uphold children's rights? A more extensive approach to policy implementation and a more systematic effort on evaluation within and across the CoE and EU could enhance awareness and national-level actions.



References and Resources

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