



Composite analysis: synthesising cross-national differences in policy case studies

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Risks, Resources and Inequalities: Increasing Resilience in European Families

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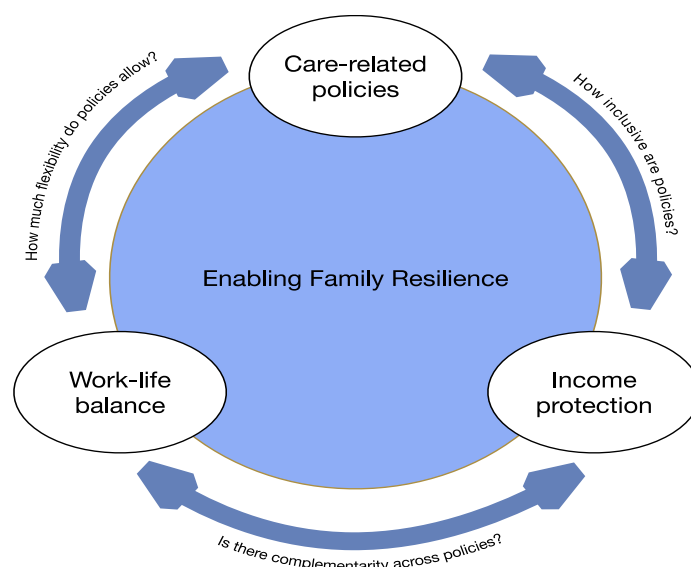
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Introduction

The overall objective of Work Package 5 is to investigate how policies contribute to family resilience. Policy is primarily conceptualised as a resource that enables or hinders the capacity of families to respond to change and satisfy their needs. For policy to play such a function, we have established that policy intervenes through three main criteria dealing with the institutional set of rules and policy design: inclusiveness, flexibility, and complementarity. The first criterion refers to the degree to which rights are available to all irrespective of their employment or citizenship status or other circumstances based on family, gender, or intersectional characteristics. Flexibility refers to the capacity of policy to be able to adapt to change either by adjusting conditions of access and benefits or by providing additional entitlements; and finally, complementarity refers to the degree of coherence across policy domains in the type of support offered.

Our focus for the cross-country comparison across the whole Work Package has been on three main policy domains that have a direct impact on families: income protection, work-life balance policies, and care services as explained in Figure 1 below. In previous reports we have paid attention to inclusiveness and flexibility in each one of these three specific policy areas: income support (Daly, 2023), care policies (León & Cerrillo, 2023) and work-life balance policies (Dobrotić & Iveković Martinis, 2023). Additionally, in the D5.4 report, we have studied the adjustments made to social protection systems in response to the COVID-19 pandemic also in these three policy domains (León & Cerrillo, 2024).

Figure 1. Conceptualising and investigating family resilience



Source: Extracted from the rEUsilience project’s proposal.

Building upon the evidence collected in the previous reports of this Work Package and in other secondary sources, our goal here is to identify patterns of cross-national differences and similarities in the three policy domains and through the lenses of the three criteria of inclusiveness, flexibility, and complementarity. With the intention to explore complementarity

of policies, we elaborate on how the different policy domains in interaction with one another intervene in the relationship between paid employment, benefits, provision or services, and demands for family care. As in all other reports of this Work Package the focus is on the policy design and how this might have an impact on outcomes although the measuring of this impact is outside the remit of this work. Our interest lies in examining the distribution of benefits – who receives what, when, and how (Lasswell, 1936) – with a particular emphasis on diverse family types and circumstances. We assess the policy mixes across the six countries based on their potential to address gaps in protection related to the relationship between employment, social policy and care. In particular, we focus on how this relationship is configured and understood in (1) national minimum income programmes; (2) in the complementarities between parental leaves and early childhood education and care (ECEC); and (3) in the specific protection offered to families affected by severe illness and disability. This analysis identifies cases where specific family types or circumstances may be better or worse covered depending on the way in which the policy is designed. As a work in progress, it aims to establish relevant hypotheses that can build ground for future research.

Regarding (1) minimum income schemes (MIS) are the most important anti-poverty policy designed to help families in need above the poverty threshold. The first deliverable of Work Package 5 (Daly, 2023) critically examined income protection, including cash transfers to families and MIS aimed at reducing relative poverty in the six countries under study with a specific family focus. From the perspective of the relationship between employment, income support and care, what becomes relevant is an assessment of the conditionality criteria and the mechanisms in place designed to create incentives for those on benefits to engage in paid work. As these activation components have become nuclear in current configurations of safety nets in Europe, it is imperative to understand how the relationship between employment, income support and care works and its implications for different family types.

As to policy complementarity in addressing childcare needs (2), the social policy literature refers to the childcare gap as to the disparity or inadequacy in the availability, accessibility, or affordability of childcare services (see Nieuwenhuis et al., 2021; Yerkes & Javornik, 2019), particularly for working parents. It is often manifested as a mismatch between the demand for childcare services and the available supply (Ellingsæter & Gulbrandsen, 2007), resulting in various challenges for families, such as difficulty accessing childcare, balancing work and caregiving responsibilities, and encountering financial strain due to high childcare costs (Saraceno, 2011). Parents who find these alternatives out of reach may be compelled to exit the workforce. This disproportionately affects women, as they are more inclined to leave or reduce their employment hours upon becoming parents (Grunow & Evertsson, 2016; Grunow & Veltkamp, 2016). Addressing this gap involves efforts to improve childcare services to better meet the diverse needs of families. From the perspective of the complementarity of policies, we understand the childcare gap as the space between parental leave provision and flexible working arrangements and provision of ECEC. This space can be reduced when policies are designed in such a way as to allow families, and specially mothers, to move smoothly from the time spent outside the labour market to be with their child to progressively resume work thanks to the availability of childcare services. This space widens when there is a mismatch in the timing of parental leave and ECEC generating as a result gaps that intensify tensions between work and care demands. As argued by Thévenon (2016), this complementarity points to policy

mechanisms that have impacts which are not linear but dependent on how their different properties interact. As such, the positive impact of childcare services on female employment will not just depend on how widespread and accessible these services are but also how this provision fits with the support offered through parental leave provision and direct or indirect transfers to families. In this report, we will measure policy complementarity in relation to the 'childcare gap' by looking at 1) the timing lapse between the end of total paternity, maternity and parental leave provision and the beginning of guaranteed formal childcare services; 2) additional provision for different family circumstances or types (including lone parenting, large families, and families with a child with a severe illness or disability); and 3) the flexibility in childcare provision which indicates easier or more complicated complementarities.

Finally, the relationship between social policy, employment and care is observed from the perspective of families affected by disability or severe illness. Participants in the focus groups conducted in Work Package 4 often spoke strongly about feelings of marginalisation in how public systems of support respond insufficiently to their needs. These testimonies resonate with other qualitative research that identifies structural institutional hostility in which families continuously fought and battled (Thomas, 2021). The intensity of caring places huge limitations on the capacity to be employed and participate in society more widely; therefore, a key issue is to understand the extent to which the specific conditions and circumstances linked to disability and illness are integrated into policy design.

This report begins by offering a background literature review on where the comparative welfare state literature stands in relation to social policy and families. The concepts of inclusiveness, flexibility and complementarity are discussed in this context, paying special attention to recent calls to understand the combined effect of social policies and institutions (Hemerijck & Plavgo, 2021). It then moves on to discuss relevant findings from previous analyses in Work Package 5 related to inclusiveness and flexibility in policy design. Section 3 looks into the ways in which different policies address protection gaps related to the relationship between employment, social policy, and care. The final section concludes and points to avenues for further research.

1. Understanding inclusiveness, flexibility and complementarity of policy

Comparative social policy studies indicate that the efficiency of welfare states in guaranteeing equal opportunities, preventing socioeconomic risks, and alleviating hardships differs significantly among countries (Huber et al., 2016). This different capacity of consolidated democracies to provide effective social support for their most vulnerable citizens is unlikely to rely solely on a single policy instrument, but rather on the quality of an entire ‘bundle of policies’ (Cantillon, 2022). In fact, countries spend increasing proportions of their budgets on both old (cash transfer payments, such as child benefits and income support) and new (more activating and employment-related services, such as parental leave and childcare) family policy in a competing context, which calls for an understanding of how different policies speak to each other to produce coherent impacts. The focus should then be on the specific social policy mix that a country is implementing, how these diverse interventions interact and what their compounded effects are.

The call for measuring the combined effect of different welfare institutions, policies, and instruments in producing a given outcome is hardly a new idea. At its core, the welfare state is an institution that connects the functioning of economic and labour market institutions with the principles of citizenship rights in liberal democracies. At a macro and meso levels, political economy and social policy complement each other to configure a given welfare regime or a type of market economy intervening not just on economic performance but on levels of societal wellbeing also. The way in which the institutional architecture of markets and states function and interact to produce more or less income inequality is central to the early comparative welfare state literature. The point of departure of Esping-Andersen’s *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (1990) was indeed that not only such complementarity exists but that there should be a correspondence between types of political economies and types of welfare regimes. A liberal economy is accompanied by a liberal welfare state that grants low levels of benefits and means-testing social assistance to ensure fluidity in labour relations at the cost of higher income inequality. By contrast, the social-democratic model is one that seeks a more harmonious balance between full employment in a state-managed economy and a highly redistributive welfare state. The concept of de-commodification is empirically addressed by looking at how different income protection schemes covering old social risks, namely old age, unemployment, and sickness, contribute to diminish workers’ dependence on the market.

In a similar vein, for the Varieties of Capitalism literature, the way in which political economy and social policy complement each other signal the distinction between liberal and coordinated market economies (Hall & Soskice, 2001). Labour market institutions—such as collective wage bargaining systems or the minimum wage—intervene on levels of income inequality (Estevez-Abe et al., 2001) whilst social policy institutions redistribute income and resources in society. Both institutions combined shape the welfare state’s capacity to protect citizens against different types of social risks. In sum, the expectation is that there should be some clustering along the dimensions that divide liberal and coordinated market economies “as nations converge on complementarity practices across different spheres” (Hall & Soskice, 2001: 22).

So, in a way the very basic idea of the welfare state is that social problems or risks are addressed by multiple institutions and policy areas simultaneously and that they should do so in a congruent and harmonious way. One single policy cannot be responsible for levels of wellbeing in a society and vice versa, a decent standard of living is acquired through access to not just one single public good but several and it crucially depends on the functioning of labour markets too.

Feminist welfare scholars of the early 90s claimed that the way in which the interaction of labour market and welfare institutions and policies impacts family structure and women's opportunities was an unexplored complementarity in comparative research. The concept of 'defamilialisation'—women's freedom from family responsibility—was a call to tailor in unpaid care work in both the theories and empirics of welfare studies. Key to this notion of defamilialisation is the understanding that different welfare models support different ideals of family arrangements. From a gender perspective, analyses focused on the extent to which welfare states were transitioning from a male breadwinner to a dual earner model. The policies that became the centre of attention from this perspective were those concerned with the tensions that originate in the intersections between paid employment and unpaid care work.

In parallel to this growing academic interest for understanding how social policy operated in this employment-care link, national welfare states were slowly but surely converging towards the defamilialisation turn (Daly & Ferragina, 2018). Since the early 90s, welfare states supporting the male breadwinner model through traditional family policy have undertaken a major policy path departure to improve and enhance their repertoire of policies giving support to dual-earner families. Welfare typologies blurred as they were decisively moving towards similar policy reforms which broadly implied a widespread growth of public childcare provision; a reduction in the generosity of universal family benefits; and changes to care leaves to reduce the time mothers spent outside the labour market (Dobrotić et al., 2022; León, 2014). All these changes had to harmoniously move in the same direction if they were to succeed in fostering the employability of women and alleviate tensions with the private sphere of the home. It would, for instance, make little sense to increase childcare provision to enhance the socialisation of care and simultaneously keep family benefit or taxation systems that offered support to nuclear families on one single income, usually that of the father.

Despite this broad convergence in family policy, comparative analyses were nevertheless still identifying country clusters with different levels and type of support offered to families. Gauthier (2002) has proposed three broad family policy regimes encompassing specific combinations of financial assistance to families; services and education for the early years; and parental leave provision and flexible employment arrangements. According to her, the comparison of family policy across countries aligns with welfare regime research in identifying the three broad liberal, conservative, and social-democratic ideal types. The Dual-earner regime offers high levels of support to families through generous paid parental leaves and good quality childcare services that enable mothers to work. This is the model typically found in the Scandinavian countries and the one that is more conducive to a better work/family balance. The General Family Support regime, associated with the countries of continental Europe, provide generous levels of financial support to families, long paid leaves, and insufficient ECEC services. This model directly encourages more traditional family arrangements where women are primary carers and men are primary earners. Lastly, in Low Family Support regimes welfare states

provide limited support to families and encourage families to rely either on the market (typical of liberal regimes) or on extended family relations (as in the Southern European welfare model).

Defamilialisation and the typologies that are expected to capture cross-national differences have however fallen short in several accounts. Broadly speaking, the virtuous circle of institutional complementarity between political economy and the welfare state of the post-war settlement is today harder to see and policies might be simply not delivering as there might even be conflicting goals in place. Intense processes of labour market deregulation and socio-economic and demographic changes linked to post-industrial transitions and the service economy have introduced greater complexity in individuals and families' exposure to risk. Allegedly positive returns of policies addressing the tensions or conflicts between the world of work and the world of care are called into question. The growth of income inequality and the rise in the number of working poor across Europe have become a stress test for existing redistributive social policy in general. The higher representation of small (mostly headed by women) and large families at risk of poverty and social exclusion questions the capacity of standardised family policy to respond to the more diversified patterns of family arrangements. Furthermore, the more unstable nature of family structures today also demands greater capacity on the part of policy to adapt to changing and volatile circumstances. Greater complexity in the composition of the social fabric calls for social policy analyses that can inquire about degrees of inclusiveness, flexibility, and complementarity of policy.

Part of the problem is that social policy today starts from premises that do no longer hold, at least to the extent they used to. The first problem is that access to employment is for some categories of workers not the route to a safe and decent living. To the extent that a growing proportion of jobs on offer in many countries are badly paid and precarious, policies that rely on workfare strategies might enhance or create new tensions between work and care. A typical example would be activation logics attached to conditionality criteria in MIS. The second problem is that family policy geared towards the participation of women in paid employment has not managed to solve many if not all of the care asymmetries embedded in unequal gender relations. To the extent that social policy has not succeeded in involving men in unpaid caregiving, changes in gender dynamics in relation to the distribution of caring responsibilities have been meagre.

This mismatch between the intentions of policy and outcomes is what has led to recent interesting discussion in the comparative welfare state literature about the need to rethink social policy to gain a fuller understanding of whether it is open enough, flexible enough, and coherent enough to respond to today's complex array of risks. Since it is difficult to understand the effect of one specific policy on a desirable outcome (for instance, poverty reduction or better work life balance), there is a growing need for looking at the wider constellation of policies targeting the same issue or problem. Not only do institutions and policies interact, but they may do so in a systematic manner. The socio-economic context within which such interactions unfold becomes also relevant (Bassanini & Duval, 2009; Thévenon, 2016).

However, even though there is growing intellectual and academic support to the idea of studying complementarities (Coe & Snower, 1997; Bassanini & Duval, 2009), there have been few empirical attempts to do so and these have mostly been circumscribed to analysis of the combined effect of a pair set of policies. Some scholars for instance have attempted to analyse

whether childcare services and leave policies (Thévenon, 2016) and childcare services and Active Labour Market Policies (Nieuwenhuis, 2022) impact on female employment when implemented in tandem. Ronchi (2023) has looked at the capacity of Active Labour Market Policies also to mitigate the potential moral hazard predicament attached to out-of-work income protection, improving instead of hindering job search. In this report we do not solve this methodological and empirical challenge but point in the direction of possible ways to study policy complementarities from the perspective of policy design through the lenses of different gaps in social protection.

2. Family diversity and social policy

The systematic cross-country analysis of entitlement conditions in the different policy domains that we have analysed in the previous reports of this Work Package has revealed some relevant findings regarding inclusiveness in policy design.

Overall, national social policy is increasingly becoming more attentive to the multiplicity of individual and family needs. In all the six countries we have studied, the complex constellations of family life are increasingly being acknowledged by policy. This recognition has happened in two main fronts. Firstly, by broadening the definition of family and, secondly, by diversifying the types of policy arrangements available to families, including offering specific support to those categories of families at higher risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Regarding the first aspect, perhaps the most profound change in the prescription of policy is the equalisation of families that do not conform to the standard family type ideal of a heterosexual couple with their biological children. Policies addressing families protect the presence of children in the household irrespective of the status of family formation. Parental leave provision is probably the one policy field that has undergone the most profound transformation in this respect with regards the gender dimension of leave policy design (Dobrotić & Iveković Martinis, 2023). There is an overall tendency to the broadening of the portfolio of parenting leaves, especially to include, improve, and expand provision for families with single parents, same-sex couples, parents with adopted or fostered children, and families with parents living apart or 'reconstituted' families. Also, there is an increasing *degenderisation* of leave provision to equalise the rights of non-biological parents, adoption, and parenting in homosexual relationships. Same-sex parents for instance have the same rights as non-same-sex parents in all countries except for Croatia and Poland, although as explained by Dobrotić & Iveković Martinis (2023) unequal access happens in practice in other countries too due to different routes to parenthood. In several of the countries we have studied, policies that protect women and men in their role as mothers and fathers have been reformed to adopt a more inclusive gender-neutral language. In Sweden and Spain, for instance, maternity and paternity leaves are now named 'birth leaves'.

Regarding the second aspect, the acknowledgment of family complexity and diversity is increasingly embedded in the assumption that a) we need more policy tools to cater for complex

needs and b) some family types and circumstances require special consideration and additional support. The adoption of the EU Work-Balance Directive in 2019 (2019/1158) has been key to boost the creation of flexible working arrangements for parents or carers in the EU as well as for diversifying the range of leaves available to non-traditional families. All the countries guarantee the right to request flexible working arrangements or remote work due to care-related needs, whether for their child or a family member. However, the specifics of this entitlement vary, with each country imposing different age limits and additional eligibility conditions. For instance, in Belgium and Croatia, employees must have worked with the same employer for at least six months to be eligible for this right. In the UK, while there is no explicit right to request flexible working arrangements specifically for care needs, employees who have worked continuously for 26 weeks can request flexible working for any reason which might or might not be care-related. Furthermore, the concept of force majeure leave is recognised in Belgium, Croatia, Poland, and Sweden, offering employees a set number of days per year to deal with unforeseen personal or family emergencies, albeit with differences in duration and generosity. Additionally, breastfeeding breaks increase in many countries the extra time mothers and fathers can spend with their new-born child. Belgium, Croatia, Poland, Spain, and Sweden each offer their own set of regulations regarding duration, payment, and eligibility criteria.

Leave provision has also expanded its scope to cover life-course risks that were not the subject of policy before, one typical example would be short paid leaves to take care of a relative in palliative care. Also, the needs of specific categories of families at higher risk might happen by either establishing prioritisation criteria to facilitate access to targeted benefits or services or by creating specifically tailored provision. Families with children tend to be the focus of all these policies in general but some specific situations known to put families at higher risk are being given special or additional protection. In all three policy domains we have studied in this Work Package, lone parenting, large families, and families with special needs' children tend to receive special consideration by relaxing entitlement criteria and/or by providing them with additional support. In the case of targeted cash transfers to families, for instance, countries recognise the extra needs of these 'atypical' or non-traditional families. In Flanders (Belgium) and Poland this protection is offered through the second tier of support that grants access and provide for additional benefits. In Spain, where all family benefits are means-tested, the system is designed to exclusively protect families on low incomes and with special needs' children. Women victims of gender violence are also granted special protection in entitlement criteria in Spain. In the case of eligibility to access ECEC when universal provision is not guaranteed, single parenting, number of children, and having children with special needs are common prioritisation factors.

Perhaps paradoxically, however, greater inclusiveness in policy design, that is, a broader and more open understanding of *who has the right to access*, does not automatically translate into more people being covered by the different policies studied. This is mainly because of two reasons. Firstly, parallel to policy becoming more attentive to diversity, stringent mechanisms designed to control the population of beneficiaries have powerful exclusionary effect. The three most important exclusion mechanisms are income thresholds at household level, labour market status, and residency status. In the case of parental leave, some countries limit provision to those who are active in the labour market and with a minimum period of contribution to social insurance. In the UK, for instance, only dependent employees are entitled to paid maternity and paternity or parental leave, subject to additional criteria such as the duration of the preceding

social insurance period, an activity test, and sector employment (Dobrotić & Iveković Martinis, 2023). Atypical employment status, which today covers an important segment of the labour force, usually translates into reduced eligibility. Of our six countries, only Croatia, Poland, and Sweden provide comprehensive coverage of parental leave to the self-employed, for instance. The unemployed and those classified as 'inactive' (students, for instance) often have restricted access. Residency status, which usually comprise a period to qualify, is another strong mechanism of exclusion. Countries generally adhere to a legal condition of citizenship or residence to claim benefits and access services, but there is wide variation in how these requirements are established in the different countries, with important regional variations in decentralised countries too. In the realm of family benefits, for instance, Sweden and Poland are the only two countries that do not impose a minimum residency period. Croatia is the most exclusionary, requiring at least three years of residency for non-EU foreign citizens to qualify for the benefits. Belgium and the UK both require a minimum of three months of residency. Overall, excluding (non-EU) migrant families and children from child and other benefits is the most common form of familial exclusion in these countries (Daly, 2023:15). In the case of ECEC, special criteria to ensure availability and affordability of the service for families in vulnerable circumstances is only needed when the service is not universally available and children do not have a guaranteed right to free schooling (León & Cerrillo, 2023). This usually happens from the age of 2.5/3, for a minimum of 15 hours/week (as in the UK) to a maximum of 30 hours/week (as in Spain). The obvious conclusion from this is that the best way to ensure an inclusive ECEC is by ensuring universal access to all children regardless of their condition (as it happens in Sweden from the age of one).

Secondly, complex social support systems in the administrative and bureaucratic front have a direct impact on access to benefits and services. In Work Package 5 we have not studied the extent to which rules, regulations, and application procedures of benefit systems carry high compliance costs, but evidence gathered in Work Package 4 showed that for low resource families this was a major source of hardship. Means-tested targeted benefits usually put in place to protect the most vulnerable families are more likely to impose greater burden in the application procedures compared to universal provision and thus, there is a need to study administrative burdens at policy design level in their capacity to function as an indirect perhaps unintended exclusionary mechanism specially for some social groups. The growing digitalisation of application and management processes of these schemes is another reason of concern. Furthermore 'bureaucratic traps' in the form of highly complex benefit rules and conditions that are in place specially in the design of MIS, combined with burdensome administrative practices might create disincentives for individuals' decisions to change their circumstances, for instance in moving from the benefit system to participate in the labour market, and thus it might be compromising the agency of families and individuals to manage and use the resources available to them.

All this points to the need for greater empirical attention to possible trade-offs between the inclusiveness embedded in specific entitlement criteria and the actual process, reach and generosity of the policy. One of the main conclusions of research conducted in Work Package 5 so far is that when policies are generous and universal, they are inclusive by default. By contrast, in targeted means-tested programmes to the extent that decisions are made as to who has the right to enter, there is a greater need to think about inclusiveness to ensure that the most

vulnerable families do indeed have access. As we have seen, prioritisation elements improve inclusiveness. But in under-resourced welfare states, last resort social programmes often underline outsider/insider logics. The analysis we did on policy responses to Covid-19 showed a similar picture. For instance, in countries where schools were fully closed with no exceptions during lockdown, governments had to retrospectively introduce special provision to mitigate the impact of the crisis on children particularly exposed to risk, such as the children of the so-called key workers. Likewise, robust, and generous MIS were able to mitigate social and economic risks during Covid-19 way better than weaker and less well funded programmes. In the latter case, governments had to implement greater emergency ad hoc social aid (León & Cerrillo, 2024).

3. Identifying policy gaps

3.1. Gaps in employment, care and income support

The poverty gap is typically defined as the amount of money beyond private incomes required to lift all families in need above the poverty threshold adjusted for family size, which provides a measure of their financial well-being (Ziliak, 2008: 40). The degree to which income support policies, including means-tested transfers, social insurance, and tax credits, bridges this gap constitutes the social safety net in a given country (Blank, 1997; Danziger & Haveman, 2001; MacDonald, 1985). The first deliverable of Work Package 5 (Daly, 2023) critically examined policies aimed at reducing relative poverty in the six countries under study with a specific family focus, that is family benefits and MIS. We draw upon this evidence and additional secondary sources to explore further the relationship between income protection, employment, and care.

As of 2022, all the six countries had non-contributory, means-tested, and centrally organised MIS in place, but they differ widely in their design, structure, and coverage. Sweden has a near universalistic system which follow social insurance principles, whereas the UK has the most widespread social MIS provision orchestrated around the idea of social assistance.

As synthesised by Daly (2023) in Table 2, Croatia, Sweden, and the UK provide an integrated system, including all the targeted population under a single scheme, while Belgium, Poland, and Spain have established separate ones depending on the different profiles of people they intend to reach. Regarding the types of provision, the most common is a periodic cash transfer, with Croatia and Poland also providing additional one-off cash transfers or in-kind benefits.

In most of the six countries, MIS operates on an individual entitlement basis (Belgium, Spain, Sweden, and the UK). However, all countries consider the household unit when calculating the amount of benefit. There are four major access conditions in income protection programmes: age, residency, means or income, and employment tests. All the six countries apply at least three of these conditions to funnel access. Sweden and Poland have broad and inclusive residency conditions, whereas Spain and the UK are the most exclusive systems in this respect. Spain requires a minimum of one year of legal residency in the country whilst the UK leaves it subject

to interpretation with the sentence ‘an appreciable amount of time’ (Daly 2023: 24). Although some exceptions apply, 18 years is the minimum access age in most cases. Croatia has no minimum age and in Spain adults under the age of 23 cannot apply.

Table 1. Key indicators on Minimum Income Schemes (MIS)

	Belgium (Social Integration Income)	Croatia (Guaranteed Minimum Income Benefit)	Poland (Periodic allowance)	Spain (National minimum vital income)	Sweden (Social assistance)	UK (Universal Credit)
Description	Simple and comprehensive scheme	Simple and non-categorical with somewhat restricted eligibility and coverage	General scheme of last resort with additional categorical benefits	Simple and comprehensive scheme	Simple and comprehensive scheme	General scheme of last resort with additional categorical benefits
Unit of entitlement	Individual	Household	Household	Individual	Individual	Individual
Unit of assessment	Household	Household	Household	Household	Household	Household
Residency	Belgian nationals, persons with residency, persons under subsidiarity protection Broad and inclusive	Croatian nationals with residency, a foreigner with long-term or permanent residence, a foreigner under subsidiary protection Broad and inclusive	Polish citizens and those with a right to stay in the country Broad and inclusive	Legal residence in the country for at least one year Narrow and mildly exclusive	All persons with a legal right to stay in the country Broad and inclusive	Legally and habitually resident or in the country for an ‘appreciable amount of time’ Narrow and exclusive
Lower age for receipt	18	None	18	23	18	18
Allow a transition to employment	Yes	Yes (for 3 months)	Yes (for 2 months)	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Extracted from: Daly, M. (2023). Inclusion and Flexibility of Income Support Policies. *rEUsilience Working Paper Series*, 2023:2. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/pm7na>

Note: The details in this table refer to the general conditions and do not take account of special cases which exist in all countries.

The design of MIS in all countries intends to allow for the transition from income protection to employment. For some time now, all countries have been introducing activation components in MIS to enhance the employability of people on benefits. Decisions to take up work are closely related to how income from employment leads to a benefit loss and what incentives are in place

for individuals on benefits to take up employment. The gap between employment and benefits can be addressed by strengthening the conditionality ties and duties of MIS beneficiaries (Moreira, 2008) on the one hand, and by facilitating a more flexible relationship between income from work and income from benefits, on the other hand. Regarding the former, conditionality usually relates to incentives for active job searching and training geared towards improving the employability profile of the person. The latter introduces complementarity between the benefit system and the labour market through the establishment of transition periods that enable a more fluid relationship between the labour market and the benefit system. Care enters the equation through the recognition of time spent caring for a child or a relative at home in the work-related conditionality requirements.

As explained in the first report of this Work Package (Daly 2023: 26), all the six countries have introduced some form of conditionality to their MIS programmes. Sweden and the UK have the most stringent conditionality while Belgium, Croatia, and Poland appear as having weaker conditionality.

With regards to the combination of benefits with paid employment, one essential mechanism is the tapering of benefit withdrawal, which refers to the gradual reduction of benefits as income from work rises. In some instances, it might also imply losing a portion of the means-tested benefit fixed amount. Depending on how this mechanism is established, recipients of income support might or might not find incentives to take up paid work. Of our six countries, Spain is the only one which does not contemplate this type of complementarity between the social support system and employment, although policy changes are under way in this respect. Further research is needed to understand how the specific design of tapering of benefits impacts on the decision of those on benefits to undertake available employment.

Using the Tax Benefit Calculator and the general statistical database on benefits, taxation, and wages from the OECD, Daly (2023) explored income programmes' incentivisation of employment, calculated as the share of additional household income when moving into employment or increasing or reducing employment that is lost due to reductions in benefits and income taxation. The analysis showed significant country differences in how much and how far employment is incentivised for different family structures and remuneration levels. Individuals taking up minimum wage jobs and one-earner families are generally discouraged from moving into the labour market. Among the six countries examined, Belgium presents the most pronounced disincentives for employment initiation, while Croatia and the UK are more conducive to labour market participation. Overall, the study underscores greater incentives for two-earner households to transit into employment. In this case, the optimal arrangement involves one parent earning two-thirds of the average wage, with the other parent earning the minimum wage. These findings remain consistent in all countries when the principal earner moves from part-time to full-time work, except for the UK, where the situation worsens. Both Belgium and the UK disincentivise this transition in all scenarios, whereas Croatia follows an opposing trend. Moreover, the study highlights that the shift towards full-time employment is particularly penalised for lone-parent families compared to two-parent households in all countries.

The relationship between employment, benefits, and care responsibilities is another important element affecting the poverty gap although so far it has not attracted that much attention in

comparative analyses of safety net programmes. An exception is Andersen's work (2020) on the British Universal Credit. Women are among the major beneficiaries of MIS programmes in all countries and yet activation mechanisms often fail to account for their caring responsibilities. Employment alone is insufficient to prevent women from poverty because of the tensions they experience trying to juggle unpaid care and paid work (Millar & Ridge, 2009). A relevant question therefore is the extent to which unpaid care work is considered as a valuable alternative to employment (Lewis & Giullari, 2006). Or, as put by Cain (2016), the extent to which entitlements and eligibility criteria include 'tailored flexibility' to adjust for time devoted to care and the cumulative responsibilities that women often have. Furthermore, activation strategies of MIS often overlook other external factors that intervene in the activation potential of benefit recipient with care responsibilities. One of such factors is precarious accommodation arrangements. High housing costs in most cities in Europe today force people on low incomes to peripheral urban districts far away from where job opportunities usually are and with deficient public transport connections. This has implications on the opportunity to find suitable jobs near home and to harmonise time demands between employment and caring responsibilities (Rowlingson & Millar, 2001).

Therefore, the extent to which care is embedded in the design of MIS programmes gives important indications of the extent to which social policy recognises the social and economic value of care (Fraser, 2016). For women and especially for those on single parenting, the recognition of unpaid care work in activation requirements of MIS is an important step towards institutionalising their own capabilities set (Yerkes et al., 2019).

In all countries there is some kind of recognition to some forms of care. Pregnancy and childbearing during the first months are considered everywhere an attenuate to conditionality criteria. The key issue becomes for how long and for what type of care such exception holds. The Spanish MIS only allows those officially registered as non-professional caregivers of a person with a severe dependency the possibility to not to comply with the activation prerequisites (all linked to job training and job seeking). The British Universal Credit fully exempts of activation obligations (also linked to job training and job seeking) to pregnant women and responsible carers and foster carers of children one year old and below. Responsible carers of a two-year-old child, adopters of a child below 12 months, and individuals with temporary child care responsibilities can also prioritise care over activation obligations (Andersen, 2020). However, the recognition of time and effort devoted to care is tied to the meeting of so many specific criteria and this speaks against care work being universally recognised as an essential and time-consuming part of family life. In this respect, Andersen (2020) concludes that despite some recognition to full-time carers, the strict conditionality criteria attached to the British Universal Credit has a negative impact on women's employment prospects and levels of well-being.

As it will be shown later on, caring for a severely disabled child is in all countries a condition that exempts MIS recipients from activation obligations.

3.2. Childcare gaps

We calculate the childcare gap as the difference between the number of months covered by parenting leaves and the child's age at the beginning of ECEC. Even though ECEC is commonly

available earlier across countries, here we use guaranteed ECEC as a reference to calculate the gap since ECEC public places are limited if there is no legal entitlement granting children’s access (see León & Cerrillo, 2023). In this sense, the gap exists when parents are not covered by either parenting leaves or granted ECEC provision. Negative figures in the third column of Table 2 imply uncovered months, while the positive ones indicate that parents are doubly covered because they can benefit from both parental leave and access to ECEC.

As highlighted by previous research (Dobrotić, 2023; Moss & Deven, 2020), statutory leaves are not enough to fully grasp the magnitude of the gaps. Table 2 shows how total leaves are considerably higher than well-paid ones in all six countries. For example, in Belgium parents are entitled to a 12-month total leave, but only four of these are paid, and guaranteed ECEC services do not start until the child is 30 months. This leads to a gap of 18 months in which parents do not have access to either parental leave or ECEC provision, increasing to 26 months for paid leave. The UK presents the largest childcare gap, with 34.6 total uncovered months. In Spain, the total leave covers the entire period until ECEC is granted, but there is a 29.9-month gap when paid leave is taken into account. Total leave in Poland is the highest across the six countries, overlapping 14.2 months with ECEC access. However, in this country there is also a 21.8 months gap between paid leave and ECEC. Croatia and Sweden are clearly outliers. Access to ECEC is not guaranteed at any age in Croatia, while Sweden is the only country without childcare gap. As a matter of fact, Sweden overlaps 6 months of unpaid leave and 1 month of paid leave with universal access to ECEC.

Table 2. Calculating the childcare gap in six countries

	Child’s age (in months) at the end of		Child’s age (in months) at the beginning of		Childcare gap	
	Total leave	Well-paid leave	Non-guaranteed ECEC	Guaranteed ECEC	Total leave- guaranteed ECEC	Well-paid leave- guaranteed ECEC
Belgium	12	4	0	30	-18	-26
Croatia	14	14	0	/	/	/
Poland	50.2	14.2	12	36	14.2	-21.8
Spain	36	6.1	0	36	0	-29.9
Sweden	18	13	12	12	6	1
UK	14	1.4	0	36	-22	-34.6

Source: Parenting leave data is extracted from Dobrotić, & Iveković Martinis (2023). Inclusion and Flexibility of Work-Life Balance Policies. rEUsilience Working Paper Series, 2023:5. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/da463> and child’s age at the beginning of ECEC is extracted from León & Cerrillo, (2023). Inclusion and Flexibility of Care Policies. rEUsilience Working Paper Series, 2023:4. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/7xzqm>.

Aspects related to availability, eligibility, affordability, and quality of ECEC as investigated in report D5.2 (León & Cerrillo, 2023) are also relevant for a comprehensive understanding of how policy design intervenes in increasing or reducing the childcare gap. Public ECEC services are generally accessible for children aged four months or older, except in Poland and Sweden, where

accessibility begins at the age of one. But except for Sweden which guarantees a public place for all children aged one and above, the rest of the countries only ensure a place for children aged three and above. Croatia is the only country which does not guarantee public provision of ECEC. Besides the age at which children enter childcare, the extent to which the service is available is also relevant. Most of the countries do not establish a minimum number of hours for childcare provision for children below the age of 2.5 or 3. Sweden is the only country which stipulates 15 hours per week. Pre-primary hours, usually for children of 2.5 or 3 years range from 15 (Sweden and the UK) to 25 (Poland) or 30 (Spain). Belgium and Croatia have not established minimum hours. The maximum number of hours in which the child is in ECEC vary, with Belgium, Sweden, and the UK imposing no limits, while Croatia capping at 50 hours per week. As we analysed in D5.2, flexibility in the policy design of ECEC is enhanced by its availability during non-standard hours also. In the UK and Sweden services operate during weekends, evenings, and holidays. Belgium extends these schedules for younger children, while Croatia offers evening and holiday care. These diverse ECEC availability approaches reflect different family support strategies, though information on potential extra costs for families is lacking (León & Cerrillo, 2023:19). Also, ECEC in a non-standard schedule is likely to be considered an additional service, which may incur costs beyond the regular fees.

Whilst the childcare gap is inextricably linked to the different ways parenting leave schemes and ECEC provision are designed and synchronised as shown in Table 2 above, these are not the only sources of child rearing support available to families. Many countries have additional provisions specifically targeted to families deemed to be at higher socioeconomic risk: large families (with more than two children), families caring for a child with a severe illness or disability, and lone-parent families receive special consideration in the different policy domains we have studied. Table 3 summarises whether these different family types are deemed to require extra support in each of the six countries, as well as the kinds of resources available to them.

Table 3. Family profiles receiving additional child-related support

	in Income support					
	Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	UK
Larger families (2+ children)	Yes, different rates of the base benefit	Yes, supplement to the child allowance (3+ children)	Yes, supplement to the family allowance (3+) and family care capital	Yes, supplement to the family allowance (3+ children)	Yes, supplement to the child allowance	No
Child illness/disability	Yes, as part of the Growth Package	Yes, supplement to the child allowance	Yes, supplement to the family allowance and care benefit	Yes, supplement to the family allowance	Yes, compensation of care costs	Yes, disability living allowance for children
Lone parenthood	Yes, different rates of the social allowance	Yes, supplement to the child allowance	Yes, supplement to the family allowance	Yes, supplement to the family allowance	No	No
	in ECEC provision					
	Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	UK
Larger families (2+ children)	More affordable	Access priority and more affordable	Access priority	Access priority and more affordable	Access priority and more affordable	No
Child illness/disability	No	Access priority	Access priority	Access priority and more affordable	Access priority	Access priority and more affordable
Lone parenthood	No	Access priority and more affordable	Access priority	Access priority and more affordable	No	No
	in Parenting leaves schemes					
	Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	UK
Larger families (2+ children)	No	Yes, extended period (3+ children)	Yes, extended allowance (2+ children)	Yes, extended allowance (3+ children)	No	No
Child illness/disability	Yes, extended parental leave	Yes, part-time work or paid leave and allowance	Yes, additional leave and allowance	Yes, additional leave and allowance	Yes, temporary parental leave	No
Lone parenthood	Yes, higher parental benefit	No	Yes, extended allowance	Yes, extended allowance	Yes, extended parental leave days	No

Source: Own elaboration based on the following reports: Daly, M. (2023). Inclusion and Flexibility of Income Support Policies. rEUsilience Working Paper Series, 2023:2. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/pm7na>. ECEC provision data is from: León & Cerrillo (2023). Inclusion and Flexibility of Care Policies. rEUsilience Working Paper Series, 2023:4. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/7xzqm>. Parenting leaves data is extracted from Dobrotić & Iveković Martinis (2023). Inclusion and Flexibility of Work-Life Balance Policies. rEUsilience Working Paper Series, 2023:5. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/da463>.

As the table above shows, all national systems of child-specific payments take into account in one way or another the conditions of specific types of families. Support to large families usually happens by increasing the amount of the benefit or by adding monetary supplements as the number of children increases. Larger families receive supplements to child or family allowances in Croatia (for 3+ children), Spain (for 3+ children), and Sweden (for 2+ children). In Belgium, different rates according to family size apply for the base benefit¹. Poland also provides additional benefits through the Family Care Capital. Poland is the OECD country with the largest increase in family benefits as family size grows, what makes this country strongly pro-large families. The value of benefits for families can reach almost half the average wage when a family has four children. Given these benefit levels (adequacy), family support in Poland may be a key factor not just in alleviating poverty but in reversing it in the short, medium, and long term. Of our six countries, the UK is unique in actually reducing the child benefit after the first child. The “two-child benefit cap” in the UK means that families with more than two children do not receive any additional financial support.

Considering parental leave provision, families with more than two children might benefit from extended parental leave (as in Croatia) or from a flat-rate maternity allowance (as in Poland and Spain). The design of parental leave in all countries extend maternity, paternity, and parental leave for families with multiple births. Belgium, for instance, extends two extra weeks of maternity leave and grants parental leave per child, with adjusted durations for twins and multiples. Croatia offers additional paternity leave and extends parental leave per parent for multiple births, with a maximum postnatal leave period of 36 months. Poland provides extra maternity leave for twins and additional parental leave. In Spain, each additional child per parent warrants an extra week of paid maternity/paternity leave, with an extended flat-rate maternity allowance. Sweden grants paternity leave per child and increases paid parental leave days for multiple birth. The UK offers unpaid parental leave per child for families with multiple births.

As for ECEC, large families are given priority in access in three countries: Croatia, Poland, and Spain. In Sweden, there is universal entitlement for children to attend ECEC, but larger families are given priority in terms of all their children attending to the same centre. Croatia, Spain, and Sweden combine priority access with more affordable fees for larger families, while in Belgium, only reduced fees apply. Parenting leave schemes are extended in Poland (additional 12 months) for the second child onwards, as well as in Croatia (+11 months) and Spain (+56 days, only for mothers) from families with three or more children. Belgium, Sweden, and the UK do not provide any additional provisions for larger families regarding parenting leaves.

Lone-parent families receive additional income support in Belgium, Croatia, Poland, and Spain. Similar to previous cases, supplements to existing allowances are the most common form of child-related economic support. Even in countries where there is no additional provision in family benefits for lone parent families as in Sweden or the UK, support is channelled through MIS. The Polish family allowance provides more than double the amount per child and adjusts it according to family size. Parental leave provision also contains special consideration for lone parenting. Belgium increases the flat-rate parental benefit for single parents (68% higher), while

¹ For children born in 2018 and before only

Poland extends a flat-rate allowance for childcare leave to single parents for an additional 12 months. Spain provides an extended flat-rate maternity allowance for single mothers, and Sweden allows one parent to use all parental leave benefit days in cases of sole custody.

Only half of the countries provide extra support for lone-parent families to access ECEC. Access priority is given in Poland, Croatia and Spain, complemented with reduced fees in the last two countries. While Sweden does not offer access priority, public places are guaranteed to all children. No extra support for lone parents in need of ECEC services is offered by Belgium and the UK. In regard to parenting leave schemes, lone parents receive an extended allowance in Poland (+12 months) and Spain (+56 days, only for single mothers). The flat-rate parental benefit is 68% higher in Belgium, whereas in Sweden one parent may use all parental leave benefit days. Croatia and the UK do not introduce any additional provisions.

As mentioned before, support for these different types of families varies widely across countries and policy domains. However, interesting patterns emerge from our analysis. We find that families with children facing severe illness or disability are more likely to be granted special protection or prioritised access than lone parenting. Larger families receive a medium level of social protection but they are clearly disadvantaged by the design of parenting leave schemes. Lone-parent families face the greatest challenges in bridging the childcare gap, as they encounter more obstacles when accessing ECEC services.

Service costs fluctuate based on these and other specific family circumstances too. Fees are often reduced for the unemployed, low income or on benefits households, single or large families and in some countries for being in full time education also. The UK stands alone in reducing fees for refugees. But what improves affordability across the board is guaranteed pre-school education. In fact, in Belgium, Poland, and Spain, ECEC is guaranteed and free for all children above the age of 2.5/3.

Families with a child facing a severe illness or disability also benefit from supplements as part of other income support measures in Belgium, Croatia, Poland, and Spain. Poland and the UK provide specific care benefits, while Sweden compensates for care costs. All the countries have some form of income support measure in place related to children with illness/disability. Five out of the six countries give priority access to ECEC, with Spain and the UK additionally providing more affordable fees for these families. Regarding parenting leave schemes, Croatia is the country offering more options, as parents can benefit from part-time work or paid leave for caring for their children. Croatia, Poland, and Spain combine additional leaves with a specific allowances (see Dobrotić & Iveković Martinis, 2023). Parents in Belgium can use parental leave for a longer time, until the child reaches 21 years of age. Temporary parental leaves are available in Sweden, allowing parents to care for their children in case of illness or disability (120 days/year until the child turns 12 or 15). By contrast, the UK does not provide any extra support in terms of parenting leaves schemes.

The following section zooms in policy responses to family situations affected by illness or disability.

3.3. Work/care disability gap

In this final sub-section, we investigate policy responses to family situations affected by illness or disability. Considering the three policy areas that we study, the support to this kind of gap might come from additional income support, specific leave provision and flexible employment, and access to special services or priority access to standard services.

The overall picture depicts a complex dynamic of inclusiveness, generosity, and inequalities across the six countries in terms of specific support for children who are disabled or have a chronic illness. More needs to be done qualitatively to compare the experiences of parents from each country who have at least one disabled child with additional care needs. In terms of support and flexibility surrounding childbirth, parental leave, and arrangements for parents who may require alternative working days to care for their child's needs, it is difficult to rank countries in order of provision and flexibility because of the multiple specific interventions to provide enhanced support for families with disabled children within each country. There is also a dichotomy between the language used and the generosity of the support parents of disabled children receive. For instance, Poland appears to operate quite a flexible system, with different kinds of support and arrangements available for parents of disabled children from childbirth and beyond, however the level of financial support is relatively low (an additional 36 months of means tested childcare leave (until the child turns 18 at the latest and a flat-rate benefit of €89.38 per month (Dobrotić & Iveković Martinis, 2023:22)).

As Table 4 shows, there are inconsistencies across the six countries because some may offer little flexibility but more generous payments to parents and carers of disabled children. However, on paper, Sweden has the most comprehensive and generous policies for parents of disabled or chronically ill children. The UK stands out as having weak coverage. It provides very little tailored or augmented support for parents or carers of disabled children, and the two-child limit also restricts the state's ability to meet the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), tackle child poverty, and reduce economic inequalities between disabled and non-disabled children (Stewart et al., 2023).



Table 4. Support for families with disabled/ill children

	Augmented Financial Support for Disabled/ill children	Parental leave provision/ Flexible working arrangements for care needs	ECEC Access and Affordability
Belgium	Care Allowance for Children with Specific Support Needs. Available for all children who meet the illness condition provided they are not in receipt of any other social benefit.	Parental leave can be used up until the child's 12th birthday (or 21st birthday if the child has a disability), and both parents can take leave at the same time.	No
Croatia	Families with a child with a severe disability receive a larger Child Allowance. Eligibility hinges on the average monthly household income per member [...] but if the child has a severe health impairment, the allowance is provided irrespective of family income	If a child requires increased care due to their health and development, and only if parental leave was fully used, one of the (self-)employed parents has the right to <i>work shorter hours until a child turns three years of age</i> , and if the child has serious developmental issues, including physical disability.	Access priority
Poland	3 different child-related financial allowances in the case of demanding or intense needs of children who are ill or have a disability: a Special Attendance Allowance; a Medical Care Allowance and a Nursing Benefit	Parents of a child with a chronic or life-threatening illness are entitled to parental leave of 65 weeks (67 weeks for multiple births). An additional 36 months of means-tested childcare leave can be taken for a child with a disability or chronic illness, until the child turns 18 years.	Access priority
Spain	Child benefit is mainly conceived as a benefit for disabled children. This is not means-tested but the amount paid differs according to the degree of disability.	If a child has a disability, <i>birth and childcare leave</i> is extended by one week per child with a disability. It is also possible to <i>reduce the working day</i> by between an eighth and a half of its normal duration, to <i>care for a child</i> under the age of twelve or a child with a disability of any age.	Access priority and more affordable
Sweden	Income support provision for children with disability are not income-tested but eligibility and amount of support varies according to the degree of disability	If there is a health risk for the child, the pregnant woman can take an indefinite leave. If a job is physically demanding, pregnant women are entitled to leave of up to 50 days during the last 60 days of pregnancy paid at 78% of previous earnings.	Access priority*
UK	Recognition of income support purposes (the only one of the three family situations that are specifically recognised). The Disability Living Allowance for children (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) and Scotland's Child Disability Payment (Scotland), are available for children aged up to 16 years.	A weekly <i>carers' allowance</i> of €88 (£76.75) is available to people caring for someone for at least 35 hours per week.	Access priority and more affordable

Source: Own elaboration based on the following reports: Daly, M. (2023). Inclusion and Flexibility of Income Support Policies. rEUsilience Working Paper Series, 2023:2. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/pm7na>. ECEC provision data is from: León & Cerrillo (2023). Inclusion and Flexibility of Care Policies. rEUsilience Working Paper Series, 2023:4. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/7xzqm>. Parenting leaves data is extracted from Dobrotić & Iveković Martinis (2023). Inclusion and Flexibility of Work-Life Balance Policies. rEUsilience Working Paper Series, 2023:5. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/da463>.

Note: *Access to ECEC is universally guaranteed in Sweden, priority is given in terms of waiting time.



More research needs to be done to identify what parents of disabled children want or which kinds of support are most important for them, for example, is extended parental leave for childbirth prioritised or is it augmented financial support for the child throughout their education? The main problem with trying to analyse care priorities of parents with disabled children derives from the understanding that every family and child will have different needs and arrangements. Thus, trying to get a consensus or generalise care priorities for a whole range of disabilities and illnesses is challenging, and thus more tailored and flexible support is the key to ensuring more children's needs are being met. As already argued, another aspect of support that is often overlooked in policy analysis is the process of applying for support. Our analysis highlights the different processes of assessment for disabled and chronically ill people within each country León & Cerrillo (2023:34). Croatia stands out as the only country assessing dependency without specific categories. Belgium and Sweden adopt different categories depending on regions and municipalities. In contrast, the UK establishes four levels, followed by Spain with three, and Poland with two. Regarding the review process, Poland and Sweden are stricter by setting an end date for the disability period, followed by revision. The UK opts for periodic yearly revisions, whereas Belgium, Croatia, and Spain conduct reviews solely when there are changes in health conditions. The often complex and traumatic assessment, and re-assessment, procedures for eligibility to health-related benefits in some countries (in our sample of countries, the UK and Spain seem to stand out) have been found to be distressing, and to cause anxiety for claimants (Pybus et al., 2022). Therefore, the policy design of how children and young people with a disability or illness are assessed for support has significant implications for those families who are in need and ensuring not only the mental well-being of prospective claimants, but also that support reaches all those who need it.



4. Concluding remarks

One important underlying assumption in rEUsilience is that families are marked by internal differentiation which leads to an uneven capacity to be resilient when confronted with different sets of risks. One of the aims of the project is to identify whether social policy acknowledges this differentiation in the way in which rules and conditions are configured and implemented. On paper, at least, there is significant recognition of the diversity that can be encompassed by the term ‘family’. It is not just diversity, though, some families are also shaped by layers of cumulative disadvantage that demand specific protection. In all countries, efforts are being made to acknowledge cases at the edges particularly exposed to social risk. In this sense, at the policy prescription level, the family is less seen as a fixed and predictable institution and more as a moving subject that is open to change.

The question remains, however, to what extent efforts to broaden the policy portfolio to include a variety of family types and circumstances are sufficient to compensate for the greater vulnerability some families are exposed to. As in the tug-of-war game, we need to know if the forces pushing and pulling at the ends reach some kind of equilibrium tension at the centre of gravity. In one end, policy innovation to improve the inclusiveness of different protection mechanisms, in the opposite end, an observable trend towards greater stringency in entitlement conditions to limit the population of beneficiaries of welfare provision.

It is this uneven dynamism that is difficult to capture when comparing countries at the very micro level detail of policy design. We see a common direction of travel with regards policy reform affecting families. Broadly speaking, this implies a widespread growth of public childcare provision, more targeting of income protection, and improvements in leave provision to make them more inclusive and compatible with employment. But we have seen considerable national variation too. These differences are calibrated in ways that clear underlying logics are hard to find. A large part of this variation can be linked to historical contexts and policy legacies. Policy rationales rest at least to some extent on the logic of past policy legacies and institutional features. For instance, Sweden exhibits the importance of universalisation and the key role of social services. Even if social inequality has increased as in the rest of European countries, protection to the most vulnerable families is orchestrated through a social insurance logic. This is the opposite to the UK where an ever more present work-first approach is combined with the actions of a means-tested subsidiary welfare state. Belgium exhibits signs of relative welfare generosity still dependent on its high value-added industrial and service sectors. As to Poland, Spain, and Croatia, in the same way that these countries never fitted into any of the classic welfare typologies, they continue to present a complexity of moves which do not necessarily follow clear patterns. This is probably why policy designs in these three countries exhibit some important contradictions. For example, in Spain the strong drive towards the universalisation of early years education and care and the equalising of maternity and paternity leave follow a social-democratic path of reform that clashes with a highly segmented labour market and dualised labour relations that find a better fit with the liberal market economy while, at the same time, policy still relies on the family as a major institution of support. In Poland, employment-based social services coexist with social insurance of a Bismarckian type and although in some respects the country exhibits a strong familialistic orientation in other respects it has made important moves towards the individualisation of social rights.



Overall, we need greater conceptual and empirical efforts to identify possible trade-offs between more sophisticated and tailored understandings of needs of specific groups in society and the actual reach and generosity of policies.

In this report, we have assessed the different policy domains across the six countries based on their potential to address gaps in protection. These gaps in protection spin around the complex relationship between employment, social policy, and care. We have firstly looked at workfare elements embedded in the conditionality criteria of MIS and the mechanisms in place designed to create incentives for those on benefits to engage in paid work. Again, although cross-country variation is significant, there is a general intention to make income from work and income from benefits complementary, although this is easier to achieve for dual earner households than for lone-parent families. To some extent MIS exhibit some 'tailored flexibility' to adjust for time devoted to care. However, some care responsibilities are recognised better than others. More research is needed to fully grasp how unpaid care work is defined and dealt with in these income protection programmes. This becomes paramount as some forms of employment impose unwanted flexibility schedules that often clash with care demands and obligations. Secondly, we have addressed the 'childcare gap' by looking at the complementarity between the duration of parental leaves and the beginning of childcare services. The analysis has shown that countries vary greatly in the capacity to reduce the gap, understood as when parents are not covered by either parenting leaves or granted ECEC provision. Furthermore, the complementarity between leaves and childcare is modified depending on different types of families. Finally, we have briefly examined the specific protection offered to families affected by severe illness and disability. This work in progress has only been able to identify the very broad picture, and further analyses are needed to fully grasp the nature of this gap and how it operates in the different countries. Overall, there is a complex dynamic of inclusiveness, generosity, and inequalities across the six countries in terms of specific support for families with a disabled or severely ill child. All countries acknowledge that the intensity of caring in these situations require enhanced protection. We will need to investigate further whether these efforts in the details of policy design make a real impact in protecting these children and their families better.



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