

# The State of Family Resilience in Europe Today: new evidence to support policy reform

## Final Policy Lab and Conference Event Report

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## Risks, Resources and Inequalities:

### Increasing Resilience in European Families

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# Contents

<b>Final Policy Lab</b>	<b>4</b>
Background	4
European Roadmap for family resilience: presentation and discussion	4
Focus on National Impact Events and next steps for implementation	5
<b>Final Conference</b>	<b>8</b>
Background	8
Programme 27th June 2025	8
Introduction to the rEUsilience project	10
Kick-start keynote interventions examining social policy from a family resilience lens	11
Deep dive parallel sessions: key areas of policy recommendations	15
Deep dive parallel sessions: key recommendations at EU level	19
Panel plenary session on what upcoming EU policy developments and initiatives can do to improve family resilience	23

# Final Policy Lab

## Background

This concluding session of the rEUsilience Policy Lab aimed to bring both stakeholder panels together, representatives from national family organisations and EU policy experts, for a last meeting before the rEUsilience final conference on the 27th June 2025. The session provided a valuable opportunity for both panels to meet and exchange based on their different backgrounds of supporting families across Europe.

Building on the prior three Policy Lab sessions, rEUsilience has **produced a roadmap with implementation pathways for family resilience** based on the policy solutions developed in the lab. During this session, the draft roadmap was presented, and its potential was discussed with stakeholders. In addition, insights were shared by the researchers from the national impact events in Croatia, Sweden, Poland, UK, Spain, and Belgium.

## European Roadmap for family resilience: presentation and discussion

*Elizabeth Gosme, Director of COFACE Families Europe*, presented **the European Roadmap for boosting the rights and resilience of European families**, which is the result of three years of stocktaking ample evidence whilst road-testing policies and potential reforms through the policy lab stakeholder panels. The results of the Lab discussions have been collated into this overarching Roadmap for boosting the rights and resilience of European Families, encompassing recommendations for EU-level

actions in line with EU and national social policy competences and key conditions for EU implementation. These conditions include competence, funding, monitoring, and evidence, which were all extensively discussed in the rEUsilience Policy Lab. Rather than a call for new EU initiatives, this roadmap builds on existing instruments, aiming to consolidate them further.

Concerning the latter, a family organisation representative raised **a question on the choice to work with existing instruments, fearing that there would be a risk to still not fill in all the existing gaps not covered by such instruments.**

A discussion unfolded where other participants and rEUsilience researchers came in to plead for filling in gaps with existing instruments to improve what is out there, to get topics on the agenda, and to see these instruments as means, rather than ends. The bottom-line of choosing existing EU-instruments and identifying the conditions which need to be in place, is to consolidate the evidence that has been built in this 3-year research project and to strengthen the instruments which we know are impacting families, especially in an EU-context which is changing quickly, and where new strategies - such as the Intergenerational Fairness and first EU Anti-Poverty Strategy – are being developed.

Another participant of a UK Family Organisation raised a question concerning **the relevance of this roadmap for the UK-context.** The rEUsilience consortium members gladly answered this question by explaining that whilst the roadmap focuses on EU policy, funding, and monitoring processes that the core message that funding and providing opportunities for cross-country exchange remains universal.

Then, the different key recommendations of the roadmap were presented, which are: (1) a European peer exchange on family support, (2) investment in family support through the European Social Fund+, (3) and improve monitoring with the Families in Household typology (FHT) and new adult care variables in EU-SILC.

**Participants thereafter shared their experiences and suggestions on the different recommendations.** For example, civil society representatives shared examples of how they have been making use of ESF+ funds to support families. Having said this, participants noted that civil society should have greater space to engage with the development and implementation of the funds. It would be positive if funds could take a broader approach to funding social and inclusion initiatives, rather than being restricted to initiatives with a strong labour market activation element.

Another example focused on the recommendation regarding the **improvement of monitoring and data collection within the current EU data infrastructure.** The presentation firstly outlined the rationale behind and the research prior to the creation of the [Families in Households typology](#), as well as the [EU-SILC ad-hoc module on 'adult care and work'](#). The aim of creating this typology and ad-hoc modules is to fill in the gaps in existing European Social Surveys and to therefore share it with EU data infrastructure such as Eurostat. Stakeholders shared valid questions on the data gathering and questions proposed in the questionnaire. **A representative of a family organisation asked whether the FHT and the ad-hoc module also had data on recomposed families, as they make up a large part of family types nowadays in Europe.** *Wim Van Lancker*, one of the rEUsilience researchers and contributors to the creation of this module, explained that both modules were built on existing information in the data sets. Although they have tried to extract this information by asking questions such as 'number of days children were spending in the different households' as well as seeking to identify different living arrangements, gaps remain. This gave an additional argument for the need to

better develop EU data infrastructure to capture families in all their diversity.

## Focus on National Impact Events and next steps for implementation

### Presentation of national impact events and conclusions

rEUsilience Principal Investigators presented the content and the feedback received from the participants of the different national rEUsilience dissemination events.

*Mary Daly, University of Oxford*, outlined key themes discussed during their meeting with representatives of NGOs working in the field of family and children's policy in the UK. The dominant theme of this discussion was conditionality, due to the prevalence of conditionality in the UK social benefits system. Secondly, the lack of adequacy of benefits, including the lack of understanding the need for an adequate income floor as well as the process of uprating the benefit levels, was mentioned. Furthermore, indebtedness or the situation where people have accumulated large debts because they got loans while their benefits were sorted out, was also mentioned as a key issue in the UK system. Overall, the complexity of the system, the issue of fragmentation and local variation, and the lack of funding for local governments when policies are decentralised, as well as the expectations of NGOs to almost act as a 'shadow welfare state' but without sufficient recognition nor funding, were the key themes further discussed. When thinking about improvements for UK policies that take into consideration families, national benchmarks for benefits which are transparent and updated, as well as a national blueprint for family services which can then be implemented locally were discussed as potential pathways. Additionally, a 'benefit lived experience test' was also discussed to better measure what happens to vulnerable families when policies regarding benefit rules change. **Overall, simplifying the benefits system, reducing conditionality, and preventing state-imposed debt were discussed**



**as essential broader reforms in current UK family policy.**

After, [Anna Matysiak, University of Warsaw](#), presented the aim of the Polish event which took place during a 'Europe and Mobility' conference in Poland. The conference brought together academics, policymakers, practitioners and NGOs. Besides presenting and discussing demographic change and the rEUsilience research findings, they also exhibited additional materials from the project such as posters with key findings, magnets with quotes from the focus groups, and quizzes to engage the audience and to inform people about the project. **The main goal was to disseminate the focus group findings from Poland and the overall rEUsilience research output.** This event allowed the researchers in Poland to actively disseminate the research findings and to really engage and discuss its implications with the audience of the conference, receiving great interest and feedback.

The Swedish event, hosted by [Rense Nieuwenhuis, University of Stockholm](#), **focused on creating awareness and capacity-building regarding an increase in inequality and poverty in Sweden.** The introduction of the event started off by the observation that child poverty in Sweden is substantially higher compared to the Nordic neighbours. The poverty rate amongst children of parents with a migration background being even higher. After the introduction given by the rEUsilience research, a panel discussion focused on the causes, consequences, and possible solutions for families facing economic vulnerability in Sweden. One of the main explanations given to this higher poverty rate is the fact that the benefits have not kept up with the wages, making ends meet difficult in a society with high living standards due to the benefit inadequacy. Other causes discussed were societal norms and structural expectations of policies that focus on 'making work pay' and on policies which take the nuclear household of a 'dual-earner-dual-carer family' as the norm. Additionally, discrimination in decision-making, for example amongst street-level-bureaucrats was discussed, as well as current political and public views, narratives, and attitudes towards people

in vulnerable situations. The panel also highlighted possible interventions which could support vulnerable families in Sweden, with a holistic view of families and their situation at the heart of these different policies, for example regarding family centre services.

Moving on to the next dissemination event, [Ivana Dobrotić, University of Zagreb](#) moderated the Croatian Stakeholder event which focused on **the role of cities and municipalities in addressing family poverty and care needs in Croatia** and which was highly attended by city representatives, NGOs, academics, governmental offices, etc. Similar to the Swedish event, the discussion opened with key findings from the rEUsilience focus groups conducted in Croatia which set the stage for a panel discussion featuring prominent voices in Croatian social policy. The debate highlighted the systemic and structural challenges faced by low-income families in Croatia, with the current social assistance systems being too fragmented, too complex, and often too difficult to access.

Furthermore, the high educational cost which deepen educational inequalities, as well as territorial disparities in public services were highlighted, including the organisation of and access to healthcare on the different Croatian Islands. Discussions also centred persistent challenges in long-term care and palliative care in Croatia. The panel also showcased local solutions, for example from the city of Zagreb and the city of Koprivnica.

**The Spanish national dissemination event focused on minimum income programs and child poverty**, as described by [Marga León, Autonomous University of Barcelona](#). The event was mostly attended by regional representatives, and the discussion was targeted towards the problem of coordination and multilevel governance regarding the minimum income programs at the national level. The systems complexity was discussed in terms of being highly fragmented and difficult to navigate, leading to a high administrative burden and which often results in non-take-up. Although organisations such as NGOs try to mediate and to navigate these burdens, the complexity of the system and the multiple, targeted conditions that are set, for example in



terms of residency and age conditions in the national minimum income programs often leaves vulnerable people even more vulnerable.

Lastly, the Belgian dissemination event, organised by **Wim Van Lancker, KU Leuven**, brought together a diverse group of stakeholders including researchers, CSOs, government representatives, and social service providers for a critical dialogue regarding **Belgian and Flemish family policy**. This highly interactive event allowed attendees to give presentations based on their research or expertise, which were focused on various types of care for and from various types of family members, in-and outside the households. The presentations and discussions highlighted multiple structural barriers to accessing formal childcare in Belgium, particularly affordability and availability; the need for more accessible and integrated information and giving subsidies to support systems for families with children who have additional care needs; and that families do not organise their lives along policy lines, but around lived experiences, needs and expectations.

### **Reactions and suggestions from Policy Lab Stakeholders on national implementation pathways**

After the presentations of the content and impact of the different national dissemination events, there was time for the policy lab stakeholders to react and suggest further pathways for national implementation.

One of the first elements discussed concerned **'non-take-up' of rights and the consequences of fragmented and complex systems regarding benefits**. Organically, the roundtable between policy lab stakeholders and the rEUsilience researchers directed itself towards **discussing strategies or tactics for persuading government officials or legislators with research findings, data, and good practices**. Several stakeholders discussed the importance of 'bringing the real stories of people to the decision-makers', and 'letting decision-makers feel what it feels like to be in a situation of - for example - trying to apply for certain benefits. The importance of storytelling, narratives and making decision-

makers listen to stories of people whose live is impacted by changing laws, was raised multiple times.

**This last Policy Lab focused on discussing how the conclusions and of the rEUsilience project can be taken forward.** By creating this network of stakeholders over the course of 18 months, informed policymaking and knowledge-sharing was facilitated. Beyond creating a sustainable and valuable network of grassroot-level organisations and EU-level policy experts, the results of these outputs can be immediately forwarded in their own organisations and countries as well, feeding into regional and national policy developments.



# Final Conference

## Background

The State of Family Resilience in Europe Today: new evidence to support policy reform

### Conference Objectives:

- **Showcase research findings:** present key empirical findings and critical approaches from the research undertaken.
- **Share evidence-based policy recommendations:** inform key stakeholders of recommendations for policy reforms to better support families.
- **Support policy learning for key stakeholders:** facilitate take up of policy recommendations and networking for impact between European and national policymakers, civil society, social partners, and researchers.

## Programme 27th June 2025

### 9.00-9.30 Registration and coffee

#### 9.30-9.40 Welcome

- **Elizabeth Gosme**, Director, COFACE Families Europe
- **Giuliana Siculo**, Project Officer, European Commission

#### 9.40-10.10 Introduction to the rEUsilience project

This session will introduce the project and its key empirical findings, mapping the accumulation of learning and conclusions about family resilience.

#### Speakers:

- **Rense Nieuwenhuis**, Project joint coordinator, Stockholm University
- **Mary Daly**, Project joint coordinator, University of Oxford

#### 10.10-10.40 The state of family resilience in Europe today: Kick-start keynote interventions examining social policy from a family resilience lens

*rEUsilience researchers will concisely introduce key findings from the research, whilst contributing key insights for future policy development.*

1. **Compounded risks facing families across Europe: responding to families' everyday realities of risks, resources, and inequalities** (*Anna Kurowska, University of Warsaw*)
2. **Back to universalism: what can a universal approach contribute to family resilience?** (*Wim Van Lancker, KU Leuven*)
3. **Packaging policies for all families: how do we move towards a comprehensive system of support?** (*Ivana Dobrotić, University of Zagreb*)

#### 10.40-11.10 Ask the researchers

*Question and Answer session, allowing participants to directly engage with the research and policy discussions presented in the morning sessions.*

**Moderator:** *Trudie Knijn, University of Utrecht and rEUsilience advisory board member*

#### 11.10- 11.30 Coffee break

#### 11.30-13.00 Deep dive parallel sessions: key areas of policy recommendations

*This session will allow participants to delve into a key policy area, beginning with a 15-minute presentation by a rEUsilience researcher which will lay out specific evidence and policy recommendations, followed by an extended guided dialogue with participants designed to facilitate policy learning and to learning and to support informed policymaking.*



1. **Better income support for families with children with a particular concern for low-resourced families** (*Wim Van Lancker, KU Leuven and Margarita León, Autonomous University of Barcelona*)
2. **Closing the childcare gap** (*Ivana Dobrotić, University of Zagreb and Anna Matysiak, University of Warsaw*)
3. **Putting in place a comprehensive set of family support services** (*Mary Daly, University of Oxford and Merve Uzunalioglu, University of Oxford*)

#### 13.00-14.00 Lunch break

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#### 14.00-15.00 Deep dive parallel sessions: key recommendations at EU level

*This session aims to allow participants to focus on one of the key areas of policy recommendations for the EU level.*

1. **EU Household data: gaps and opportunities for measuring family resilience** (Speakers: *Alžběta Bárťová, KU Leuven and Max Thaning, Stockholm University*, Reaction: *María Calle García, Chair of the Indicators' Sub-Group of the Social Protection Committee*)
2. **The need to bring countries together to review integrated family support models across Europe: a proposal for an EU peer review** (Speaker: *Holly Shorey, Senior Project and Advocacy, COFACE Families Europe*, Reaction: *Tatjana Katkić Stanić, Director, Croatian Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy*)
3. **How can the European Social Fund Plus help boost funding for family support** (Speaker: *Elizabeth Gosme, Director, COFACE Families Europe*)

#### 15.00-15.20 Coffee break

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#### 15.20-16.20 Panel plenary session on what upcoming EU policy developments and initiatives can improve family resilience

*This session aims to discuss what upcoming and existing EU policy developments and initiatives can take forward family resilience. Key developments include the revision of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the*

*new EU Gender Equality Strategy, and the next EU budget. The panel is made up of key stakeholders working to shape the future of these policy frameworks.*

#### Speakers

- **Stefan Iszkowski**, Team Leader, European Child Guarantee, DG Employment, European Commission
- **Marta Pompili**, Policy Officer, Equinet Europe
- **Réka Tunyogi**, Acting Secretary General, Social Platform

**Moderator** *Sven Iversen*, Vice President COFACE Families Europe, AGF Germany

#### 16.20-16.30 Closing, thanks, and next steps for family resilience in Europe

- **Rense Nieuwenhuis**, Stockholm University
- **Mary Daly**, University of Oxford

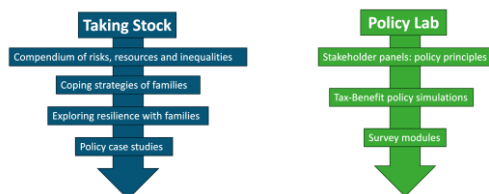


## Introduction to the rEUsilience project

**Rense Nieuwenhuis**, from *Stockholm University*, started off by defining what family resilience means in this project. He emphasised that **family resilience**:

- places the **family** at the centre stage, rather than the individual;
- **sees families beyond households**, in different forms and in all their diversity;
- emphasises **transitions** within families as being normal as opposed to family life being static.

However, although resilience is a well-used concept - aiming to grasp the need to adapt to certain developments, risks, and shocks - **the responsibility is often put on individuals and families**. When critically reviewing the literature, the family resilience framework often applies an internal focus within families, neglecting broader structural conditions. **The project challenges this by focusing on systemic inequalities, the changing world of work, and welfare state limitations.**



Therefore, the rEUsilience project focuses on two pillars: **tacking stock** of existing evidence whilst creating new evidence on family resilience through the **policy lab pillar**, where European stakeholders and family organisations exchanged to translate this research evidence into actionable policies.

### Taking Stock

**The stocktaking pillar showed that groups with the greatest need for resilience against labour market risks, had the least capacity to avoid poverty.**

Furthermore, cumulative inequalities in the need and capacity for family resilience exist.

rEUsilience research shows that those most exposed to labour market risks, such as single parents and lower-educated individuals, are also those with the least resources to be resilient, reflecting a double disadvantage. As Nieuwenhuis explained,

*“The focus on education and family groups shows that labour markets and welfare states favour higher educated and those who do not have to provide care, favouring people who have long stable work histories when it comes to eligibility for social protection.”*

When looking at adaptive strategies families would use if they had the resources they need, **the rEUsilience research showed that earlier decisions regarding the division of labour within households often persists**. For example, in traditional breadwinner households, adaptive responses to men’s unemployment (such as increased employment for women or working additional hours), remained rare.

Lastly, Nieuwenhuis presented evidence from [the rEUsilience focus groups with 300 families across Europe](#), which showed that low-resourced families face compounded adversities and decisions with difficult trade-offs, particularly around income and care.

### Policy Lab

After, **Mary Daly**, *University of Oxford* presented the **Policy Lab pillar**, designed as ‘**innovation and implementation zone**’, committed to (1) mixed methods and evidence, (2) clear goals and structured with a purpose-driven framework to align research and policymaking from the outset, and, (3) fostering multistakeholder collaboration through participatory methods, recognising families as key experts and encouraging change of knowledge and experience.

Two expert panels, one with national family organisation representatives and another one with European policy-experts exchanged four times during the project to co-develop proposals and provide feedback. Besides, EUROMOD simulations assessed the impact and costs of changes to child benefits and social assistance, and new survey modules were

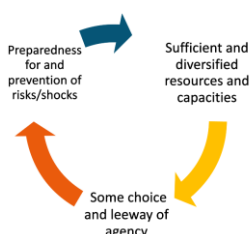


tested for EU-wide use which revealed the often hidden aspects of family life.

Over the course of this policy lab pillar, **‘Resilience’ was framed as a relational process involving shocks, resources, and adaptive agency** – going beyond seeing resilience in terms of just ‘outcome’.

Rather, Daly presented resilience as a relationship between 3rs (1) **risks** or shocks that are inevitable but that could be prepared and prevented for, (2) having sufficient and diversified **resources** or capacities available and (3) having some choice and leeway of agency to **react** to these risks.

### The Virtuous Cycle



When applying this “virtuous cycle” of resilience to families, **family resilience means**

*“families’ capacities to engage in family life, which involves caregiving, especially for children, and make transitions involved in family life and from care to paid work without incurring major risk or negative trade-offs”*



The principles that were identified by the rEUsilience research to support family resilience all relate to the conditions of (1) coverage (endorsing a universal approach), (2) adequacy (in terms of amount and sufficiency), (3) inclusion (recognition of additional needs and family diversity), and (4) the absence of gaps between policies.

Key policy recommendations include: (1) better income support for all families, especially low-resourced ones; (2) closing childcare gaps; and (3) building comprehensive family support services.

## Kick-start keynote interventions examining social policy from a family resilience lens

### Anna Kurowska, University of Warsaw

*Kurowska* started off with her intervention on **‘COMPOUNDED RISKS FACING FAMILIES ACROSS EUROPE: RESPONDING TO FAMILIES’ EVERYDAY REALITIES OF RISKS, RESOURCES, AND INEQUALITIES’**, where she presented the main findings of the focus group interviews.

First, she presented that **families in Europe face multiple, intersecting or ‘compounded’ risks** such as financial scarcity, time scarcity and scarcity of secure paid work, often due to care responsibilities. Because many families juggle care, work, and resources, this oftentimes creates substantial trade-offs where caring for children and adults is at the centre and which means that these families rarely have ‘optimal’ choices available to them. Rather, they seek to navigate this **‘care trilemma’**, meaning that making a choice in one sphere often leads to deprivation in another.

Secondly, she presented the **strategies** families use to cope, which could be split into **‘absorptive strategies’** - where managing risks with existing resources and cutting costs are the main elements - such as via reduced consumptions, looking for bargains and second-hand products, switching to cheaper product versions, and on the other hand, **‘adaptive strategies’**, where families seeking to extend the resources and changing or transforming the overall situation by seeking additional work, retraining, and entrepreneurship are the main elements. Adaptive strategies require time, learning new skills, and risk-taking.

*“If one is compounded with different risks, that intersect with each other, immersed in a care trilemma, it is difficult to undertake adaptive strategies and to transform your situation. In*



*such situation, families need support”, Kurowska said.*

When looking what the **main sources of support families use** are, the focus groups interviews indicated that extended family and NGOs contribute to the greatest support to families. **Extended family** was ranked highest, overall, especially in Poland and Spain, probably due to prevailing norms. But at the same time, participants expressed qualms about asking other relatives for help, and the availability of help was depending on the quality of relationships, as well as on whether the relatives had the resources themselves. So, Kurowska concluded, the family safety net is often too fragile to be counted on. **NGOs** were also reported helpful in many ways, for example in aiding the navigation of complex systems. At the same time, **the welfare state support was often criticised for** inadequate levels of benefits, poor access to health and care services, often bureaucratic and complex, together with a lack of transparency, delays, and disrespectful treatment by staff.

Kurowska concluded by giving away the take-away message of the focus groups findings namely that *“families exert tremendous effort but need **systemic, transparent, accessible, and generous social policies** to equip families with real capacities to be resilient to compounded risks.”*

[You can watch the video of the presentation here.](#)

### Wim Van Lancker, KU Leuven

Secondly, *Wim Van Lancker* presented in his keynote on **‘BACK TO UNIVERSALISM’** a long-standing question in welfare state research and practice, namely **‘who should get what, and why?’**

Van Lancker noted that since, at least the 1990s, and particularly within academic circles following the publication of Korpi and Palme’s *Paradox of Redistribution* (1998), it has been recognised that a universal welfare state tends to be more effective for all, especially for those with limited resources, as it achieves broader and more efficient redistribution.

However, as Van Lancker explained, the rEUsilience research also shows that universalism as a principle is getting out of fashion, with **many countries moving towards more targeting policies and services to specific groups**, where one needs to identify and delineate who these groups are. Moreover, **this happens in a context of a continuous move towards making work pay and seeing paid employment as the main way to achieving social integration.**

“These two objectives are at odds”, Van Lancker presented, “the more you target low-income families and encourage paid work, moving into paid work means losing benefit or access to support services.” This is a problem for low-resourced families in the research project.

The rEUsilience research clearly shows that in order to support family resilience, so that families can absorb shocks, **social policies should be grafted based on universalism.** This means they should be available and accessible for all families, and adaptable to (changes in) family needs over time.

Lastly, Van Lancker presented some concrete examples of what universalism means for policies to support family resilience. In terms of **financial support**, universal benefits outperform selective ones. At the same time, it is still possible to give more to families with additional needs within this universal framework, for example to single parent families, families with children with disabilities, and low-income families. Regarding, **supporting family-based transitions**, leave policies should, instead of being grafted on the employment history, aim to be more inclusive to remedy this ‘Matthew effect’, when it tends to benefit the higher up in the income distribution. Lastly, **in terms of service support**, universal childcare services need to increase accessibility and reduce inequalities since the use of childcare services in European countries is currently highly stratified. The underlying principle of support should be **to recognise family dynamics and provide differentiated support without eroding universality.**

Lastly, Van Lancker ended with stating that



*“We need to back to the roots of universalism, not to give everyone the same kind of support, but because it allows one to take care needs and labour market risk seriously.”*

**You can watch the video of this presentation [here](#).**

### **Ivana Dobrotić, University of Zagreb**

Lastly, rEUsilience researcher *Ivana Dobrotić*, presented in her keynote intervention **‘PACKAGING POLICIES FOR ALL FAMILIES: HOW DO WE MOVE TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM OF SUPPORT’**, that existing policies often exclude or inadequately support vulnerable families, such as lone parents and families with health issues. To illustrate policy shortcomings and policy gaps, Dobrotić showed a quote of a Croatian single mother with health issues, struggling with minimal benefits and seeking an income out of other resources. Although this story affected her as a researcher, she said

*“This story is actually not unique, it is one of the many stories of policies that are not working for many families, especially the low-resourced ones and the ones facing compounded risks.”*

After, Dobrotić presented what coherent ‘policy packages’ could mean in terms of holistic thinking and providing a comprehensive system of support.

Firstly, if policies want to address all families, they should be made more inclusive and should provide all families with the support they need. **This means that policies much reach diverse family structures** - not just those who match the ‘normative’ idea of what a family is or tied to ‘standard’ stable employment - and should consider intersecting inequalities (such as migration status). Furthermore, it should recognise care relationships, health issues, and family types to adequately resource families with different needs, since different families have different needs.



**Secondly, there is a need for integrated and flexible policies which support continuity and prevent unnecessary trade-offs.** Family life is dynamic, and in contrary to policies which tend to be built on assumptions of stability, family life is all but stable, when families are constantly navigating a range of transitions (such as childbirth, illness, separation, job loss, re-entry into employment) with different levels of policies recognition and support, often **creating gaps in support** (such as the childcare gap or lack of complementarity between the benefit system, between labour market and care).

**Lastly, the more policies there are, the more complexity there is.**

*“Families experience policies as fragmented and difficult to navigate, such as excessive administrative burdens, unclear information/procedures, finding out if they are eligible or not, weak coordination between different government levels and across policy sectors.”*

**On the question of how we can reduce the burden on families while navigating support and where we have to locate the coordination,** a promising solution lies in having well-resourced and locally available, universal services, connected to highly specialised support, thus having a set of **comprehensive family support services**.

**You can watch the video of this presentation [here](#).**



## Ask the researchers



During this Q&A session, many participants expressed the relevance and **usefulness of the project results for their own advocacy on supporting families.**

A government representative expressed that the presentations resonate with the work carried out by their government, **especially the role of 'choice and agency' in the dynamic of resilience, in relation to addressing child poverty.** However, the question for the researchers was **what it means to have 'choice and agency' since it is difficult to translate into practice.** *Project Joint coordinator Mary Daly* answered this question, firstly by stating that 'choice is a difficult thing to define, as one person's choice is another person's constraint. And that – "while 'agency' is considered important - the research has shown that there is little space for agency at the bottom of the spectrum, where families are instead ridden by trade-offs and impossible choices between work and family life." Secondly, she shared a **reflection on the difference how agency is understood in resilience thinking versus in a social investment or poverty paradigm. While in social investment thinking paid work is the answer, the project sees potential in resilience as a way for people to have agency, by protecting them for risks, helping them to address risks, and by giving them a range of resources that help them be agentic.** *rEUsilience researcher Anna Kurowska* also added that, in context of the welfare state, to have agency and act and use social entitlement, **one needs to be offered a real choice to use social entitlement.** This means not only having a right on paper but having accessible rights, where families do not have to navigate through

a complex welfare system which often creates obstacles for them in taking up their rights. She also mentioned that social entitlements are embedded in cultural systems, and **that norms, for instance gendered expectations regarding leaves, could also hinder take up since cultural norms interlay with benefits and service use.**

Another key theme in the Q&A focused on **challenges facing universalism in social policy, especially in a context where fiscal constraints and limited public funding are shifting focus towards mean-testing.** While some areas, such as childcare, remain exceptions, there is a growing political preference for targeted benefits, so the question was raised on how to argue for policies in favour of universalism in this context. *Wim Van Lancker* emphasised that the challenge is not a lack of evidence supporting universalism but rather a lack of political will. He explained that universal policies benefit all families, including higher-income ones, and especially during life transitions, which all families face. Contrary to targeted policies which targets specific groups – and are therefore not always popular in the public opinion - universal policies benefit all families, which could potentially foster cross-class coalition. Other country-specific examples from countries like the child benefit system in Flanders (Belgium) and the universal guarantee of childcare (Sweden) were given to demonstrate how universalism can be politically and practically viable.

Another participant asked why the focus is solely on labour market risks and shocks while risks are often driven by **health** too. *Project joint coordinator Rense Nieuwenhuis* answered that, although health risks and health care systems were not included in the research, they were to some extent studied through the focus on care for disabled and ill children/other family members. In doing so, the exploratory analysis saw similar patterns of cumulative inequalities and compounded risks concerning health. *Ivana Dobrotić* also added that, in the focus group interviews, health often came out as an obstacle and is often related to the labour market, for example when social assistance systems are not considering poor health of beneficiaries when



(re-)entering the labour market, or with regards to long-term and intensive care.

**Questions also addressed family resilience and the integration of this concept into EU policy,** since the focus is shifting towards enhancing resilience and preparedness of society. *Daly* explained that an advantage of resilience as framework is that it can encompass a variety of societal and environmental risks which can map the types of resources and capacities needed to prepare for those risks.

**Another participant raised a question on decomposed families and if the research has found any evidence on which strategies families use to retain quality of family relationships and avoid decomposing.**

*Kurowska* answered this by stating that the project did not focus on resilience of a particular family type but rather that the issue of dissolution – which was involved in the project – was identified as an additional risk. Single parents, especially single mothers, faced care trilemmas. But resource scarcity was also found to be an issue in nuclear families, revealing that the difficulty of balancing work and care affects family (in)stability across different family types.

**Responding to questions on how to define eligibility criteria and targeting-within-universalism to cover the additional needs of some families,** the researchers answered by stating the importance of designing flexible systems and adaptable, inclusive policies, especially for lone or low-resourced parent, without undermining universalism's principles. There was a call for flexibility and adaptability of the system with different levels of support so that family support systems are oriented towards family transitions.

The Q&A concluded by the remark of participants that **resilience should not only focus on avoiding negative outcomes for families but also on creating conditions for a good life for all family members.**

## Deep dive parallel sessions: key areas of policy recommendations

### Better income support for families with children with a particular concern for low-resourced families

*Wim Van Lancker (KU Leuven)*, and *Margarita León, Autonomous University of Barcelona*, presented empirical evidence on the policy aim: better income support for families. The 3 key concerns for family resilience as identified by the rEUsilience research included **(1) a focus on families, beyond the 'typical family'** to foster a degree of inclusiveness, flexibility, and complementarity to cater for family diversity and greater complexity in family needs. **Policies such as income protection are resources that enable families to buffer risks** and are important since families are becoming increasingly diverse and are exposed to different kinds of risks, whilst they are providing care within and beyond the household.

The second point of family resilience in the project centered around the **(2) universalism versus targeting debate in family- and- child benefits and social assistance.** Although there is a political tendency towards more targeted social provisions, targeted measures are found to impose a greater burden on application procedures (such as a 'bureaucratic trap' or 'digitalisation trap'), often show significant 'take-up' problems, and often underline outsider/insider logics, especially in under-resourced welfare states.

The third key observation concerns **(3) the growing conditionality on Minimum Income Programs which are now centered on a 'work first approach'** and a focus on economic returns. The underlying assumption that these employment-oriented buffers create a virtuous cycle of wellbeing and labour market participation therefore ignores the context of a growing labour market dualisation, precarious employment and in-work poverty, and a neglect of care demands which therefore entails a large exclusionary potential and puts additional pressure on families and welfare states.



By showing the empirical evidence the rEUsilience consortium has conducted through [road-testing child benefits and social assistance reforms](#), solutions to improving income protection for families - who are becoming more diverse and are facing various risks - were presented.

**The researchers state that, given family diversity and labour market risks, going back to universality should be a leading principle driving income benefit reforms.** Additionally, universality in availability and coverage of child- and family benefits can be combined with targeting specific families with higher needs. Moreover, the empirical research has shown that universality also tackles the care problem and enables work.

### Key discussion points

The discussion session engaged participants and the researchers in a critical dialogue on cost-effectiveness, public support and political arguments on targeting and universalism in family policy.

A first reaction of the audience stated **how crucial it is to communicate cost comparisons and cost-effectiveness of social policy reforms to policymakers to support informed and impactful decision-making.** The researchers further illustrated this point with an example in this paper which also looked at to what extent financial incentives influence individuals' decisions to enter employment - which the rEUsilience research findings have found to have relatively modest effects. Understanding the real impact of these incentives on behavior is crucial for designing effective policies.

Another participant reacted towards the 'targeting within universalism' principle, sketching the context of a universally targeted measure as in the UK which has a child benefit system with a high-income threshold. **This participant was wondering whether targeting lower resourced families would not be more helpful in times of fiscal consolidation.** The researchers reacted to this question by illustrating observations in the UK focus groups, namely that **a strict targeting of benefits often creates a climate of fear and uncertainty.** Many families that were interviewed expressed a fear

about changing their life circumstances – such as moving into employment or increasing working hours - because of fear to lose their benefit entitlements, discouraging risk-taking and the transitions which policy precisely aim to promote and that could truly help families, such as moving from unemployment to work.

Another participant added to the discussion that, **from a policy makers' perspective, universal systems are more costly, since everyone is entitled,** whereafter the researchers, in terms of cost-effectiveness, plead for a joint analysis of different policies, meaning to take into account one policy or policy system in interaction with other policies to adequately calculate the cost. In terms of public and political support for universal policy measures, the researchers gave the example of the investments being made in universal ECEC services. These investments are politically appealing to make, since children are seen as a deserving group, unlike 'last-resort safety nets', which require a shift in narrative to gain similar support.

Simultaneously, **the more targeted benefits, the stronger the long-term erosion of the political foundation of the welfare state,** pointing towards the fact that keeping the people that contribute to the system satisfied is crucial if you want to sustain the welfare system, favoring universal measures.

Another key argument that was identified in favour of universalism is **the ability to adapt to the growing fragmentation and flexibility in both family structures and work arrangements,** such as non-standard forms of employment. Universal policies could save policymakers a lot of navigation in this increasing flexibilisation.

**Thereafter, the challenges of conditionality** were also discussed, with researchers answering to a question **on the discussions on increasing conditionality in the UK.** As found in the focus groups, the researchers mentioned the adverse effects on particularly women, due to unpaid care burdens, and the overall further complications of the system when increasingly implementing targeted measures.





## Closing the childcare gap

*Ivana Dobrotić, University of Zagreb and Anna Matysiak, University of Warsaw*, presented evidence on the disjuncture between the end of paid leave and access to affordable, high-quality childcare, also referred to as ‘the childcare gap’. In terms of childcare accessibility, Sweden stands out as the only country in our research with no gap, whereas other countries continue to face considerable disparities. Croatia has the largest gap identified.

**These gaps are primarily produced by various inequalities in parenting leaves design.** Within this regard, statutory leave entitlements or systematic exclusion of some parents are driven by employment-related eligibility conditions, and factors such as citizenship or legal residency, family situation or sexual orientation also play a role. For example, paternity leave is often less inclusive, as eligibility is typically tied to the father's employment status.

Other factors producing the childcare gap are the absence of well-paid leaves, for example due to flat-rate payments for parental leaves or unpaid leaves, and weak attention to legal entitlement to ECEC, besides the issue of siloed policymaking.

This gap has a significant impact on **mothers' participation in the labor market, with the availability of childcare increasing women's employment opportunities and reducing wage penalties**, especially for mothers from low socio-economic backgrounds. The research has found that increased maternal employment has **shown to substantially reduce child poverty in contexts where childcare is available**. When it comes **to the effect of ECEC on outcomes for the child**, the evidence is mixed in terms of health, well-being and behaviour. However, there are positive effects on school progression, particularly among children from disadvantaged backgrounds. **In terms of fertility**, access to affordable and inclusive childcare also contributes to higher fertility rates, increasing the likelihood that families will have a first child, and potentially more children.

**To close the childcare gap, the project advocates universal access to both childcare**

**services and parental leave, regardless of the parents' employment status but as 'a right to care'.** Referring to the policy principles, the project simultaneously advocates to recognise and acknowledge the additional needs of some families in the design of leave policies and ECEC services.

### Key discussion points

The discussion session firstly geared towards including **the quality of ECEC** as part of the conversation. As mentioned by a participant, funding for public services has been reduced due to austerity measures, which results in a growing presence of private providers who focus on profit, often unregulated. **There was a strong call to ensure sufficient and stable public funding for ECEC services that are accessible to all.**

Secondly, someone mentioned that childcare policies should be mainstreamed through broader frameworks such as the anti-poverty strategy and the European Pillar of Social Rights. **And that while adequate pay for childcare must be ensured, it is currently not clearly defined in legal frameworks.**

Discussions also geared towards **better support for families with flexible or non-traditional working hours**. The example of Flanders was given, where they wanted to give priority in ECEC to parents who use services five days a week, which would exclude others with irregular schedules. **Atypical working hours** present a challenge for parents, and while some ESF+ funded programs have addressed this, there is often institutional resistance from schools and childcare providers, particularly in Croatia, as someone mentioned. Additionally, someone raised concern that **parents often prioritise cost over quality** once childcare becomes too expensive, which shows the need for **affordable public options**. **Furthermore, someone raised the issue of measuring 'unmet childcare needs' which is complex.** Some families may not report a need for childcare simply because they have no access, though they would use services if available.

Another participant **raised the staffing crisis in ECEC as a serious concern**, giving the example of facility closures in some countries. A contrary



example was giving regarding Malta's investment to successfully staff free childcare facilities, showing that it is possible with proper investment. Overall, it was agreed that there is a need for adequate pay and professional recognition for ECEC staff, acknowledging their crucial role in both child development and societal investment.

**Fragmentation within the system** was also mentioned by a participant, with childcare sometimes managed at the national level and other times at regional levels, making it difficult to develop cohesive policies. Another growing issue that was raised is that many families rely on grandparents for childcare, but as the retirement age increases, this informal support option might become less viable. Someone else also mentioned **cultural norms** which might be at stake too. In countries like Croatia for example, someone mentioned that there is sometimes a reluctance to place children under the age of three in formal childcare settings.

Lastly, participants raised concerns about the need to shift the public discourse on fertility, stressing that we should emphasise **the positive role of childcare in supporting fertility**. At the same time, participants also discussed the broader reasons behind declining fertility, including lack of affordable housing, job insecurity, erosion of reproductive rights, and individual choices not to have children.

## Putting in place a comprehensive set of Family Support Services

**Mary Daly**, University of Oxford and **Merve Uzunalioglu**, University of Oxford, presented an overview of how policies are designed for comprehensive family support.

They set the scene by sharing what families need and the policy responses that are there to meet them, for example material needs such as money and housing, and health-and development related needs, such as care and wellbeing. Although this is a crude grouping, they identified five general needs: (1) **material needs** such as money and housing, (2) **health-and development-related** needs such as care and wellbeing, (3) **family functioning needs** such as management of emotional life,

relationships, family functioning and transitions, (4), **parenting related needs** such as child raising, and child well-being and complex needs, such as health and cognitive disabilities, or suffering from marginalisation, addiction, and violence; and (5) **social support**, to feel part of a supportive community.

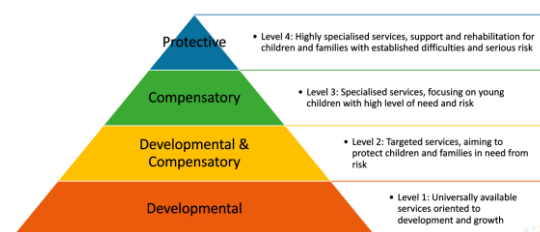
However, even though there are services and policies, current systems often lack comprehensive, inclusive coverage, meaning that some groups are often overlooked or that all needs are not (adequately) or not at the same time addressed.

In rEUsilience's definition, family support must be universal yet responsive to specific risks and challenges. Daly and Uzunalioglu defined in their presentation **family support** as

*"a set of (service and other) activities oriented to improving family functioning and grounding child-rearing and other familial activities in a system of supportive relationships and resources (both formal and informal)".*

Furthermore, services should be organised in tiers, from developmental to highly specialised services. Three key policy principles guide this, the first one entails that (1) family support services should be **universally available** and range from **general to highly specialized support**. This universal aspect ensures the development of family life for all, for example through ensuring access to resources. **This goes back to the idea that all families need support, but some families need more support, and they should be compensated for already suffering from disadvantages or being at risk of it.**

## Degrees of family support through services



A second level, targeted services, aims to protect children and families in need from risks, where the third level, specialised services, focuses on young children with a high level of need and risks where the services take this into

account. At the top there are highly specialised services, for families with children with established difficulties and serious risks.

The second guided principle is centered around the idea that (2) **there should be a national-level framework for family support services premised on local-level provision.** When services – both informal and formal are provided through local level provision, this decentralisation aims to adequately address the specific needs of communities. The national framework aims to guarantee that, while there is local level provision, there is consistency in services for everyone across the country instead of risk of fragmentation. Third, the last principles states that (3) **family support services should be guided by a holistic approach.** Since family life is dynamic and not static, there is a need for a continuum of services, which respects that transitions and multiple and different needs at the same and different times, are a normal facet of family life. The researchers call for an active imagination of how we can improve existing provisions.

#### Key discussion points

After the presentation, *Daly* and *Uzunalioglu* facilitated a rich discussion on family support systems across Europe, highlighting good practices and systemic challenges. Several participants acknowledged the **growing needs of a diversity of families**, ranging from ‘nuclear units’ to ‘intergenerational households’ or people living alone and raised the question on how to best support these different types of families and needs, without being intrusive or

A recurring theme was the **fragmentation of services and the lack of national frameworks that should ensure consistent access and funding.** While local authorities often play a key role, participants noted that without national commitment and the adequate funding to go with that, inequalities persist.

*Daly* highlighted Croatia’s family centres as an example of a national framework with local responsiveness. A participant from a Croatian family organisation expanded on this, describing how this centralised national framework regulates the services and ensures - in theory - the availability of those struggling with

accessibility. These family centres - which are now state funded by becoming part of social welfare centres - aim to support the diversity of families, through universal and targeted support, including programs for the elderly and intergenerational care.

**Family support models like “House of the Child” in Flanders (Belgium) and the UK’s Family Hubs program were explored,** with varying degrees of universality and sustainability. A participant from the UK noted that while outcomes have been positive, challenges remain in scaling and ensuring access for hard-to-reach groups. The importance of holistic approaches, including education, healthcare, leisure, and peer support, was emphasised.

Discussions also tackled the philosophical question and at the same time organisational issue on how to define ‘family’, the value given to ‘family life’ and, overall, the influence of political ideologies on family policy. Several speakers also highlighted the gender dimension, pointing to the disproportionate burden on women within families.

The need for better coordination, comprehensive information systems, adequate funding for NGOs which are important in facilitating peer support and supporting professional providers, cross-sectoral collaboration, and **co-designing services (centres) with families themselves, was clear.** Participants agreed that services must be inclusive, culturally sensitive, and designed to support all aspects of family life. *Daly* concluded by reinforcing the need to value family life as a set of dynamic relationship and to ensure policies reflect this complexity through both universal and targeted interventions.

#### Deep dive parallel sessions: key recommendations at EU level

##### EU Household data: gaps and opportunities for measuring family resilience

In this session, researchers *Alžběta Bárťová* and *Max Thaning*, presented an overview of the



**'Families in Household Typologies' (FHT)** that was developed in the rEUsilience project and builds upon the Household Typology developed in 2004. The aim of proposing this typology to the EU-SILC is to provide insight into the possible interdependencies and organisation of care and support across countries, since families and their measurement in social surveys are currently almost completely absent. Different from the 2004 typology, **the Families in Household Typology of 2021 developed twelve different household types** that now considers the partnership status and the number of dependent children. In doing so, this typology could provide essential information on the relation between household members and can map multi-generational households, the latter showing a high prevalence, particularly in Eastern European countries.

#### Household types (EU-SILC)

Household type I (since 2004)	Household type II (since 2021)
One person	One person
2 adults, no dependent children, both adults under 65 years	Lone parent with at least one child aged less than 25
2 adults, no dependent children, at least one adult >=65 years	Lone parent with all children aged 25 or more
Other households without dependent children	Couple without any child(ren)
Single parent household, one or more dependent children	Couple with at least one child aged less than 25
2 adults, one dependent child	Couple with all children aged 25 or more
2 adults, two dependent children	Other type of household
2 adults, three or more dependent children	
Other households with dependent children	- partnership status - dependent children
Other	

The second module presented was the **Family Dynamics and Labour Market Risks Questionnaire** which was piloted through **The Social Study (TSS)**, a Belgian probability panel. The introduction of basis indicators of 'adult care', both provided in-and outside of people's households, can complement the picture to whom and by which intensity adults provide care in Europe. An example of one of the findings was the prevalence of young carers (between 18 and 23 years old), providing care during their school-to-work transition.

The proposed Families in Household Typology and the 'adult care and work' module are both increasingly important to unpack interdependencies in the organisation of care and work responsibilities, and completes the pictures of the relation between care, work, and the risk of poverty in Europe.

#### Key discussion points

In this session, **María Calle García**, Chair of the **Indicators' Sub-Group of the Social Protection Committee**, served as reaction speaker, acknowledging that the family perspective is currently lacking in EU-indicators and praising the Families in Household Typology to consider the richness and the variety of different families and how it affects them. She mentioned that, although they use the 'Portfolio of EU social indicators for the monitoring of progress towards the EU objectives for Social Protection and Social Inclusion', which includes for example a monitoring framework for the long-term care recommendation, progress in these areas is often evaluated separately or where families are considered as 'with our without children', overlooking the family perspective and other multi-generational relationships within households. A second point made concerned the **data quality**, raising the issue of cross-country comparability, precisely seen the family variety between different member states. This does not take away the relevance for policymaking on the national level, she said. Another issue raised concerned the **integration in the EU-SILC module**, since the survey is already very full and takes a long time for respondents to answer all questions, fearing that the more modules being included, the higher non-response will be.

After this reaction, the floor was given to participants in the room. A question was raised concerning data on **blended families**, a **lack of data regarding care needs for teenagers** - since the survey only focuses upon care for children under 12 years - and the **dynamic between caregivers and care receivers, since caregivers might also receive support from others, a participant raised**. There was consensus on the need to reflect both giving and receiving care within and beyond households. Cell size issues were also discussed, especially when the sample sized is narrowed to low-resourced families facing compounded inequalities. A potential solution discussed between the audience members is to combine the administrative data – information from countries' population census or administrative registers – together with surveys. Participants discussed that, although there are also difficulties in using administrative



data, for example when data on children, parents, and families are spread across multiple data bases, and in general the issue of the registered family situation versus de facto situation of families, a combination of registered data and asking the reference persons through surveys, was seen as a potential pathway to be further explored.

Participants stressed that existing cross-national surveys, although they are central to EU policy monitoring, often lack granularity needed to reflect real family structures. **A call was made to better incorporate family diversity into EU-level statistical tools since it has important policy implications.** Finally, it was suggested that the European Commission could promote this effort by engaging the SPC indicator group with outcomes from the rEUsilience project, pushing for a more inclusive and realistic data strategy that supports evidence-based family policy.

### **The need to bring countries together to review integrated family support models across Europe: a proposal for an EU peer review**

The next deep dive session focused on a proposal advocating for an EU-level peer review of integrated family support models across Europe. Presented by *Senior Project and Advocacy Officer at COFACE Families Europe, Holly Shorey*, the goal is to bring countries together to exchange experiences and practices, enable mutual learning and policy improvement.

Shorey set the scene by presenting that the **rEUsilience research** found out that many families today in Europe are lacking support, while it is needed in many different areas, such as parenting, education, health, digital, housing, etc. In this regard, integrated family support services are an under-considered and underdeveloped type of policy response while many countries have a (re)newed focus on this area.

After, she presented **the EU policy context**, with the **European Child Guarantee** (adopted in 2021) aiming to guarantee the effective access of children in need to set a key of services: free

ECEC, free education, free healthcare, healthy nutrition and adequate housing. Being linked with funding under the ESF+, many Member States have taken a holistic family approach to their actions under the European Child Guarantee, with several highlighting integrated family support service models as a key preventive policy response.

Therefore, **the proposal presented on the conference consists out of bringing countries together to review and exchange on integrated family support service models**, under the framework of the EU Social Inclusion peer review process. This could potentially boost the implementation of the European Child Guarantee at its mid-point, and can build on previous peer reviews, for example the one on 'prevention and early intervention services to address children at risk of poverty', hosted by Ireland in 2016. The publication of the roadmap will involve a guide for setting up a peer review.

### **Key discussion points**

After Shorey's presentation, *director of directorate of the Croatian Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, Tatjana Katkić Stanić*, explained that a peer review process would be extremely useful for: comparing Croatian models with established practices in other Member States; exchanging knowledge on sustainable financing, evaluation, and management models; strengthening intersectoral cooperation and supporting the expansion of the model to other countries; developing a national framework for child and family/resource centres aligned with the goals of the ECG and the EU Pillar of Social Rights. Overall, she explained that a peer review process represents a valuable opportunity to further develop and institutionalise integrated family support models, ensuring their long-term sustainability and effectiveness.

After her reaction, participants raised valuable feedback on this proposal for an EU peer review. Someone raised the comment that a country that wishes to initiate a peer review within the Social Protection Committee (SPC) must submit a narrowed and specific proposal, which also requires support from other Member States. **A key recommendation from the audience was to**





better bridge the gap between the SPC and the Child Guarantee Mechanisms, as both touch on family support, but often operate separately.

From a communication and implementation perspective, participants emphasised the importance of assessing the general public's awareness of family support services. It is also important to understand whether these services are supported by parts of society that do not directly rely on them. Regarding this point, the Croatian context revealed that the support for these programmes varies by programme. There are currently six national programmes, including universal offerings, such as Growing Up Together and the Fathers' Club, which are quite popular and well received. However, challenges remain in reaching disadvantaged groups, who may be unaware of these services or reluctant to engage. Even when initial contact is made, dropout rates among these target groups remain high.

**A positive outcome raised is that these programs have become well-known among professionals, such as social workers and educators.** These professionals can act as intermediaries, helping to raise awareness and improve uptake among potential beneficiaries. Moreover, someone mentioned that the structure of some programmes which were previously underserving hard-to-reach groups by universal approaches have been adjusted to include these groups. An example was given, namely that adoptive parents tend to be more actively engaged in these programmes while engagement is lower in sectors like social protection. **Furthermore, participants raised the reflection that programs specifically targeting minority groups such as religious or ethnic communities must be handled and be carefully designed with cultural sensitivity, to prevent backfire.** An example was shared from Germany, where drops in the OECD performance statistics were publicly blamed on migrant populations, exacerbating social tensions and undermining inclusion efforts.

Lastly, participants strongly recommended that any EU-level peer review process should go beyond involving just policymakers and researchers. A crucial point that was discussed is **the essentiality of including local stakeholders,**

such as family organisations and community representatives, as family support is often a deeply local issue that requires grassroots insights.

### How can the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) help boost funding for family support

In the last deep dive session, *Elizabeth Gosme, director of COFACE Families Europe*, presented **the guidance on the use of EU funds for boosting investments in family support**, an idea that arose from the rEUsilience Policy Lab. In this regard, the proposal was to use the rEUsilience findings **to develop guidance on one specific fund and its role in family support investments:** the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). A core value of any guidelines or toolkit would be to include the definition of family support as understood by the rEUsilience project, since this definition recognises all types of families, without discrimination. In this presentation, Gosme explained that the ESF+ was chosen because it is well-known among EU citizens and plays a major role in supporting social rights, families, and workers at the local level. It is a key EU budget instrument focused on social inclusion, employment, education, and it has some streams earmarked for EU policy implementation such as the European Child Guarantee and Care Strategy, backed by a strong transnational community of practitioners.

The **scope** of the guidance is focused on the ESF+ up until the end of the current 7-year budget, so until 2027. To ensure a strong social fund moving forward, this guidance could also provide pointers to strengthen the ESF+ post 2027, making families in precarious situations an explicit target group of the future programming period (2028-2035). The guidance covers integrated family support models, with a focus on one type of family support service which are family centres/hubs.

#### Key discussion points

After the presentation, the floor was opened for questions and thoughts on this proposal, especially in terms of the target audience (who could benefit from this and is the content



relevant?) and how to disseminate the guidance.

Participants highlighted both opportunities and gaps. **Firstly, online hubs were mentioned as an important alternative for families who are unable to access services** in person, though these should complement rather than replace in-person services, since the need for social contact was also emphasised. There was a call to better connect ESF+ with the European Care Strategy, as current examples primarily focus on the Child Guarantee. Gosme explained that the Care Strategy was developed before the Child Guarantee and the implementation thereof is not linked to structural funds in the same way but did suggest that greater flexibility could be implemented to allow argumentation for other strategies as well, for example regarding long-term care.

Questions were raised about the **sustainability of ESF+ funded projects**. While some countries, such as Estonia, are moving toward mainstreaming successful models into permanent services, others face discontinuity once the funding cycle ends. Participants stressed that sustainability should not fall solely on NGOs but must also be addressed at government level. It was noted that in some funding applications, long-term sustainability planning is required, though this is not consistent across all contexts.

The role of **transnational cooperation was highlighted as essential in spreading good practices**. NGOs can contribute by sharing expertise and offering peer-to-peer support, especially when engaging with local authorities unfamiliar with certain funding streams. Strategic engagement, framed as offering expertise and solutions, was seen as a productive way to encourage uptake. Finally, participants emphasised the importance of embedding economic arguments in advocacy and recognising the **long-term value of investing in family support**. An example was giving on Estonia, where the ministry of Estonia is not just testing, but actually rolling out the model and funding the centres, because they acknowledge that it is a good model which should not suddenly stop because of lack of funding but should be made sustainable.

## Panel plenary session on what upcoming EU policy developments and initiatives can do to improve family resilience

This session aimed to discuss what upcoming and existing EU policy developments and initiatives can take forward family resilience. The panel was made up of key stakeholders working to shape the future of these policy frameworks and was moderated by **Sven Iversen**, *Vice President COFACE Families Europe, AGF Germany*.

**Regarding the revision of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan**, **Stefan Iszkowski**, *Team Leader, European Child Guarantee, DG Employment at the European Commission*, highlighted that, despite commitment for some targets, progress remains limited. He gave the example of the poverty reduction targets, where the commitment is to reduce poverty by 15 million people by 2030 but where the targets are far from being met. Furthermore, he encouraged civil society to influence upcoming policy planning for the next action plan, for example through position papers as the rEUsilience consortium has done.

After, **Marta Pompili**, *policy officer at Equinet Europe* presented her view on the **EU Gender Equality Strategy**, stating that the strategy marked a bold and decisive step towards EU's commitment towards gender equality, not just as a fundamental right, but also in relation to fairness, competition, and resilience. She highlighted progress in areas like gender pay gap reduction and combating gender-based violence. However, she noted that the gender pension gap remains significant, and that this is a critical issue because it leads to accumulated disadvantages. She also called for more work on gender stereotyping and intersectionality.

Lastly, moderator **Iversen** asked **Réka Tunyogi**, *Acting Secretary General of the Social Platform* **what the next long-term EU budget can do to support families and family resilience**. She emphasised the importance of the EU Social Fund Plus (ESF+) in funding essential family support services and structural investments through the EU budget. A notable feature in the



current budget is the earmarking of funds to combat child poverty, especially in countries with above EU-average rates, and the financing of the EU Child Guarantee, both of which Tunyogi stressed must be retained in the next budget.

However, there were growing concerns about possible changes in the next MFF, suggesting that the ESF+ may be experiencing cuts in budget or be weakened, as it could lose its status as a stand-alone fund. This shift would risk decoupling policy from funding.

Tunyogi also warned that the new narrative around **competitiveness and growth** may dominate funding priorities, potentially sidelining social inclusion. For instance, if programmes like Horizon Europe are required to align strictly with this narrative to get funding, valuable research may be left underfunded.

She concluded that the upcoming MFF proposal may reflect a shrinking budget with expanding priorities, threatening available resources for social policy.

After this introduction, *Iversen* asked *Iszkowski* how they look at this discussion of increasing efforts needed to reach the EU-targets that were set for 2030 (regarding reducing child poverty) whilst potentially experiencing cuts in funding. He replied by stating that “funding is not a zero-to-one variable”, but a matter of scale. Besides the EU budgets, national governments contribute additional funds, meaning that most of the funding must and does come from national budgets. The EU contribution is important, but the **Child Guarantee’s success relies heavily on national-level commitment and financing**, he replied.

The audience contributed several thoughtful interventions. **The importance of complementing the Gender Equality Strategy with existing EU-frameworks** such as the recommendation on long-term care and the Barcelona Targets concerning closing the childcare gap was mentioned. A suggestion was made towards the rEUsilience Consortium to submit input for **the open consultation on the upcoming Gender Equality Strategy** as there were many valuable lessons from the rEUsilience Conference today. While the EU

**budget consultation** has closed, she encouraged to continue advocacy to put pressure on Member States and flag important aspects or missing elements.

When the moderator asked what she would add to the consultation for the gender equality strategy, *Pompili* called for recognition of the **feminisation of poverty**, meaning that poverty is a gendered phenomenon and underscoring the link between poverty and gender-based violence. She urged measures needed to support mothers, and especially single mothers. Furthermore, she advocated for the **inclusion of socio-economic status** as a ground for discrimination and its intersection with gender, a stronger focus on **intersectionality** (especially for racialised and disabled individuals) and the participation of discriminated groups, and for **engaging men and boys** in tackling harmful stereotypes. Besides, she emphasised the need for strong implementation of existing legislation (for example the Work-Life Balance Directive), more data on gender-based violence and stereotypes, and stronger institutional mechanisms that promote women’s rights, to uphold gender equality.

In response to *Iversen’s* question about budgeting for resilience, *Tunyogi* noted that the upcoming years of negotiations will shape the next EU financial period. Member States need to be encouraged to bring **family and social inclusion priorities** to the negotiation table and highlighted the **European Semester** as a key process to channel findings and recommendations. She warned that if social inclusion is not protected through **earmarked funding**, and if Member States can choose their priorities, funding for social inclusion may be deprioritised.

During the Q&A session, participants raised broader concerns about **democratic resilience**, **questioning how aware EU institutions and Member States are of the link between social policy and public trust**. One speaker questioned governments’ underinvestment in families, especially young children, calling it a case of **“long-term social costs if investments in children and family policies are not made due to inaction.”**







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