



Confédération des Organisations Familiales de l'Union européenne
Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union

COFACE Seminar
'Dependent persons in the European Union:
who cares about their family carers?'
Sofia, 20 October 2009

Report

The COFACE Seminar “*Dependent persons in the European Union: who cares about their family carers?*” was held on 20 October 2009 in Sofia, Bulgaria. The seminar was organized by COFACE in cooperation with its member organisation the Centre of Women’s Studies and Policies Foundation from Sofia, Bulgaria, who acted mainly as a partner responsible for the organization and for the logistics of the event.

The event gathered members of COFACE as well as Bulgarian NGOs dealing with the rights of people with disabilities, carers’ organizations, service providers as well as state officials responsible for the issues discussed.

Keynote speeches

Keynote speakers at the event were Mrs. Valentina Simeonova, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy of Bulgaria, and Mrs. Zinaida Zlatanova, the Representative of the European Commission in Bulgaria who addressed a congratulatory letter.

Mrs. Simeonova underlined in her speech that the new Government of Bulgaria intends to apply an integral family policy integrating the views of all partners in its developing. She acknowledged the event as a step towards building a partnership for a policy that will promote the solidarity between the generations and will improve the quality of the family life. She also emphasized the need of establishing a modern vision on sustainable system of long-term care in Bulgaria. By now the existing concept in the country divides the care of the elderly from the care for people with disabilities. According to the statistical foresights 31.3 % of the population in Bulgaria by 2050 will be elderly people and many of them will be in need of care.

The reform of social care in Bulgaria includes:

- 1) reform of the institutional care towards de-institutionalization and development of services in the community and in home of the needed persons;

- 2) development of new types of services – micro homes for 3-4 persons;
- 3) training of the personnel in new skills and approaches;
- 4) development of methodology and standards for the offered types of services.

What still needs to be done is to develop these services in all parts of the country including the underdeveloped regions; to encourage the municipalities and the private service providers to enrich the types of services provided; to improve the system where “the money follows consumers”; to modernise the legal basis for these services; to improve the standards of quality of the long-term care; and many other measures including specific measures for those who take care for dependent family members.

Session 1: Challenges and best practices at national level

The first panel of the seminar was dedicated to the challenges and best practices at national level. Presentations were given by the representatives of non-governmental organisations from “old” (Ireland, Spain, Luxemburg) and “new” (Bulgaria, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania) EU member states. This provided opportunity to the participants to create a broader picture of developments in the discussed field all over Europe; to compare approaches, practices and results; to learn from experience and to recognise best practices. The accent was put on the development of long-term care and the problems of carers in the new members states having in mind that many of these countries go through tough for them process of “Europeanization”. As the representative from Lithuania stressed “the carers are the invisible persons in Eastern Europe”. The reasons for that are many: the difficult financial situation, the understanding that caring for a dependent family member is an internal family matter that families have to solve by themselves; the underdevelopment of the care infrastructure; the lack of recognition of carers as workers; the weak carers’ supporting system; the lack of common efforts from the side of carers to express their needs and expectations to solve the problems by the institutions including local and central government.

The experience of the old member states in this respect was very important for the participants. In many countries already exists specific legislation which recognises and regulates the status of the carer. In many countries the scope of services is really very broaden and includes legal, psychological and other services. In many countries exist organisations and institutions which recognise the carers as a specific group with its own needs and provide specific services to them. Other organisations are lobbying, organising support groups and giving publicity and visibility to the carers’ work and needs: to the fact that they are very much disadvantaged because they are not recognised as workers; to the fact that they do not have rest-paid services; to the fact that in very few countries they receive appropriate training and advice how to do their job better, etc.

The rights and needs of carers were also discussed from the perspective of the global financial and economic crisis. It was emphasized that in many countries the governmental support for those types of social services is diminishing.

The discussion after the first panel was very intensive. Mrs. Zoya Slavova from the National Social Security Institute, gender expert, proposed the vision of further development of the social benefits for carers by recognising the years of caring as a length of services that will be taken into consideration for pension. Many of the present representatives of organisations of people with disabilities or of their families expressed their concerns that the existing governmental programmes which support dependent people by providing them assistance are limited in scope, in number and in financial contribution. It was stressed that the needs of dependent people are not diminished by the financial crisis, but the financial support which is provisioned to be offered to them is. Aneta

Genova, a lawyer in the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, expressed the concern that in Bulgaria are lacking programmes which provide legal support to dependent people and their carers as well as training for legal professionals how to empower these target groups to become an active side in seeking for their rights. Many of the representatives of the parents' organisations also discussed different issues connected with their status as well as with the legal, institutional and financial framework of provision of state support for dependents and carers. Despite the fact that the majority of the contributors and discussants were representatives of Bulgarian NGOs which were focused on the situation in Bulgaria and how to improve the support for dependents and carers, the issues they rose for discussion were common for many countries in the EU, especially in its Eastern part.

Session 2 : The role of the European Union

The second panel of the seminar was dedicated to the role of the European Union in this process.

The contribution of the COFACE as an European network which deals with family policy issues on EU level and informs the partners in member states on the future developments in terms of legislation and strategic policy visions, and the ways to influence them was presented. The representative of the EUROCARERS – another European level network – stressed on the importance of the research for planning services and for lobbying for carers. The importance of the internal family relationships – between the carer and the other family members, between the carer and the employers and trade unions, between the unpaid carer and the paid service providers was also analysed in order to outline the complexity of the discussed issue and of the importance of understanding of the role of each and everybody involved for descent and quality life of dependents.

Speakers in this panel stressed on a number of issues: how to increase awareness on the issue in the EU policy debate; where to find money for care in the future; who will be future carers; how universal and effective are best practices. The role of other players was also emphasized – employers/trade unions and their support for family care initiatives; relationship between formal and informal care, etc. The efforts of the European Commission were also presented. The statistical facts are impressive – 19 million people provide care in EU member states and reduce their participation in labour market; 2/3 of them are women; the number of elderly family carers is increasing; formal care is given mainly by migrant workers. 13 countries provide payment for family carers but their format and scope of the financial support depends on the national welfare system. The importance of the EU level initiatives such as the European Charter for Family Carers was also discussed. The common understanding was that the family carers issue has to be put into the policy agenda.

The global situation is a good challenge to turn from discussion to actions. It depends on the national situation but has to be translated from guiding principles to common practice. The need to unite in national associations that will coordinate and elaborate joint platforms, priorities and principles and will communicate through media with the broaden society and with political level was also articulated. This need occurs from the fact that there are no rights and benefits that are given forever. In times of crisis the needs of vulnerable groups have to be discussed and put into the social agenda because they are not so acute and pressing like in time of prosperity.

The Open Method of Coordination provide framework to define the problems of carers in European context and to try to solve them at national level. The suggestions at the seminar were to organise a special meeting at EU level on family carers including definition of goals concerning family carers

which will be specified in numbers and among them a directive on leave for children who take care for their parents. Social partners and public authorities have to be engaged in this process.

Conclusions

In his concluding statement Mr. William Lay, Director of COFACE, stressed that care is a natural function of the family and expression of family solidarity, but there is a risk of exclusion and poverty for carers, especially women. Carers are still invisible and are not in a public debate. The family policy is not in the EU competences. However, the EU level organisations and their national partners will continue to work on the improvement of family life in Europe in practical terms because where there is a will – there is a way. The role of NGOs in this process is very important: new forms of family solidarity and social solidarity towards family need to be shown; the new role of men in family has to be better presented; definition of family policy in terms of financial resources, time and services has to be better elaborated. Enormous differences between EU member states have to be minimised and the role of the EU in this is of crucial importance.

The press release on the seminar was distributed broadly to the national media. Interview with the organisers were broadcasted in the National Radio programme as well as on the number of news programmes of national TV channels.



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