



ELFAC – European Large Families Confederation

Meeting of the Intergroup Family and Protection of Childhood
Strasbourg, 12th of December 2007

"European Year of Equal Opportunities for All: the situation of large families"

The demographic challenge

1 - Introduction

This paper was prepared by ELFAC – European Large Families Confederation to be presented at the Meeting of the Intergroup Family in Strasbourg about the situation of large families in Europe, on the occasion of the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All.

In this paper, the demographic challenge is analysed, showing that much more can be done in order to successfully win it.

Here, the term “large family” is used for the families with three or more children, but can be extended to families with three or more “dependents”, i.e., children or seniors.

2 – The demographic challenge

In broad terms, the EU has been concerned about this issue, as shown, for example, by the most recent reports, refs 1 and 2.

In summary, it is recognized that:

- There is an important demographic challenge resulting from the increased life expectancy and a drop in the birth rate;
- Both derive from progress: these two effects follow from the progress in science, hygiene and living standards and women’s emancipation with higher levels of women’s participation in professional life and public responsibilities. (2)

Most part of the reports look only at the “big picture”, i.e., what the majority of people (namely women) think and work on “averages”, namely the average birth rate in Europe, right now about 1.5, well below the needed 2.1.

It is interesting to note that the important role of parenting and family care is never seen as work, which is the main reason why, right now, people speak about the need of reconciliation between work and family life. “Family life” is, then, seen as a kind of a hobby, that people are free to choose and are entitled to have, but no value is given to it. It is curious to note that this role is only understood as “work” made by “foster families”, which are reasonably paid for it, however well below the equivalent cost at state or private owned institutions.

A meaningful change must be made in social attitude regarding this matter.

In order to clearly understand what is going on and the solutions to be adopted, it is important to go into a more detailed analysis, using refs 3 and 4.

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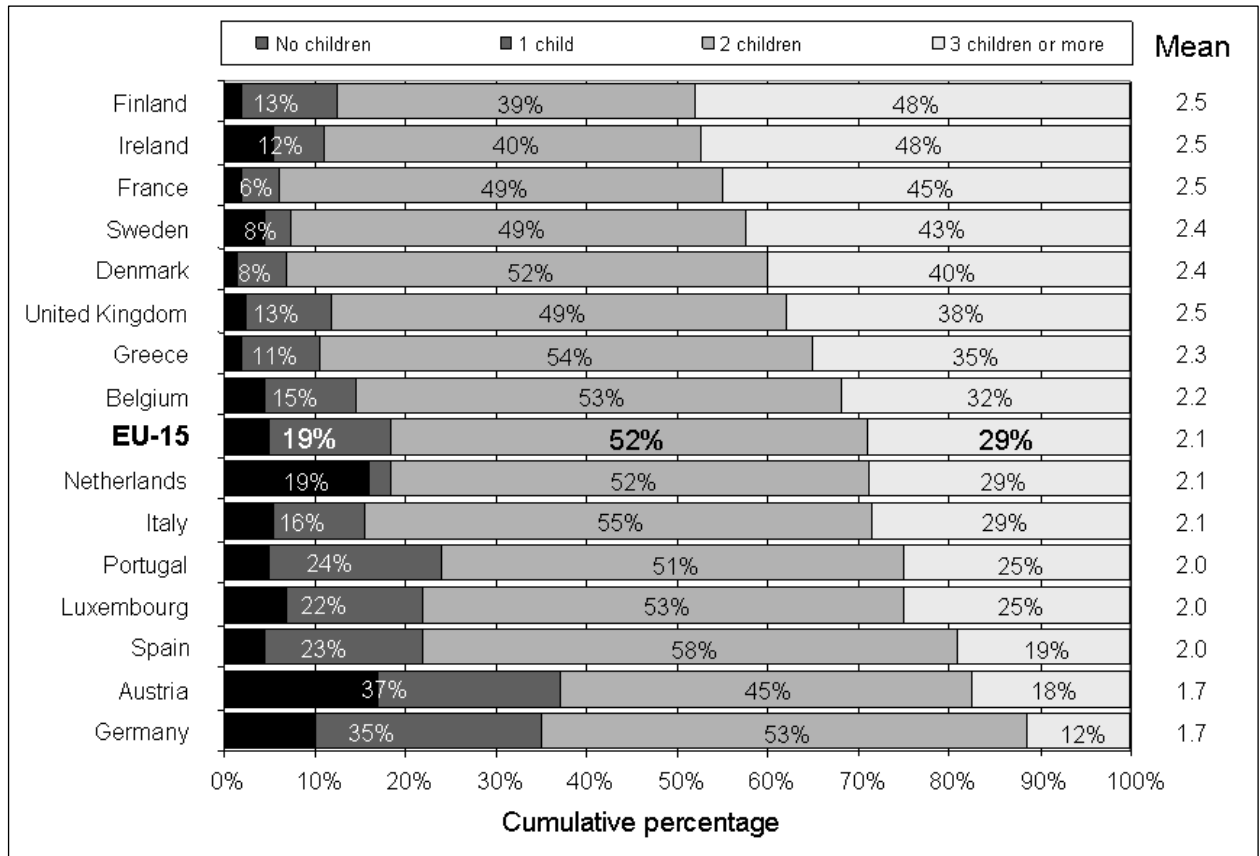


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3 – Personal ideal family size

Ref 3 is a very interesting paper that allows to better understand the demographic challenge and solutions. A careful reading of this paper is advised. A small analysis follows.

Picture 1, taken from ref 3, shows the number of desired children for women aged 20-34 years, in 15 EU countries.



Picture 1 - Distribution of personal ideal family size, women aged 20–34 years

It is quite clear that:

- The average number of desired children in these 15 EU countries is 2.1, well above the actual 1.5, and, also, exactly equal to the needed 2.1.
- The number of women desiring to have three or more children is well above those that desire to have one or less.
- The great majority of women want to have two or less.

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- The average of 2.1 is attained because there is a minority of women that want to have 3 or more children, i.e., if that minority of women would be free to have the children they want, the demographic challenge would be won! The opposite is also true.

Of course, in order to allow those women free to have the children they want, and that the EU needs and desires, it is necessary to listen to them, instead of listening solely to the majority of women who want to have two or less.

4 – Fertility in EU27 (26, in reality, since there is no data from Malta)

Picture 2 was taken from ref 4, with computed columns “Needed %”, “Ideal #” and “Dif ideal %”.

Explanation follows:

Country	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	Needed %	Ideal #	Dif ideal %
France	:	:	:	1.78	1.81	1.89	1.90	1.88	1.89	1.92	1.94	2.00	5.00%	2.50	25.00%
Ireland	1.84	1.88	1.93	1.94	1.90	1.89	1.94	1.97	1.97	1.94	1.86	1.93	8.81%	2.50	29.53%
Sweden	1.73	1.60	1.52	1.50	1.50	1.54	1.57	1.65	1.71	1.75	1.77	1.85	13.51%	2.40	29.73%
Finland	1.81	1.76	1.75	1.70	1.74	1.73	1.73	1.72	1.77	1.80	1.80	1.84	14.13%	2.50	35.87%
United Kingdom	1.71	1.73	1.72	1.71	1.68	1.64	1.63	1.64	1.71	1.77	1.78	1.84	14.13%	2.30	25.00%
Denmark	1.80	1.75	1.76	1.73	1.75	1.78	1.76	1.72	1.76	1.78	1.80	1.83	14.75%	2.40	31.15%
Netherlands	1.53	1.53	1.56	1.63	1.65	1.72	1.71	1.73	1.75	1.73	1.71	1.70	23.53%	2.10	23.53%
Luxembourg	1.70	1.77	1.72	1.68	1.74	1.76	1.66	1.63	1.63	1.25	1.66	1.65	27.27%	2.00	21.21%
Belgium	1.56	1.59	1.60	:	:	:	:	:	:	:	:	:	31.25%	2.20	37.50%
Estonia	1.38	1.37	1.32	1.28	1.32	1.39	1.34	1.37	1.37	1.47	1.50	1.55	35.48%		
Cyprus	2.03	1.95	1.86	1.76	1.67	1.64	1.57	1.49	1.50	1.49	1.42	1.47	42.86%		
Greece	1.31	1.28	1.28	1.26	1.24	1.26	1.25	1.27	1.28	1.30	1.33	1.39	51.08%	2.30	65.47%
Latvia	0.38	1.18	1.14	1.12	1.19	1.24	1.21	1.23	1.29	0.55	1.31	1.35	55.56%		
Spain	1.17	1.16	1.17	1.16	1.19	1.23	1.24	1.26	1.31	1.33	1.35	:	55.56%	2.00	48.15%
Hungary	1.57	1.46	1.37	1.32	1.28	1.32	1.31	1.30	1.27	1.28	1.31	1.34	56.72%		
Czech Republic	1.28	1.18	1.17	1.16	1.13	1.14	1.14	1.17	1.18	1.22	1.28	1.33	57.89%		
Italy	1.19	0.10	1.21	:	1.23	1.26	1.25	1.27	1.29	:	1.32	:	59.09%	2.10	59.09%
Lithuania	1.55	1.28	1.47	1.46	1.46	1.39	0.97	1.24	1.26	1.26	1.27	1.31	60.31%		
Slovenia	1.29	1.28	1.25	1.23	1.21	1.26	1.21	1.21	1.20	1.25	1.26	1.31	60.31%		
Poland	1.62	1.59	1.52	1.44	1.37	1.35	1.32	1.25	1.22	1.23	1.24	1.27	65.35%		
Austria	1.42	1.45	1.39	1.37	1.34	1.36	1.33	1.39	1.38	1.42	1.41	1.40	50.00%	1.70	21.43%
Portugal	1.41	1.44	1.47	1.47	1.50	1.55	1.45	1.47	1.44	1.40	1.40	1.35	55.56%	2.00	48.15%
Germany	1.25	1.32	1.37	1.36	1.36	1.38	1.35	1.34	1.34	1.36	1.34	1.32	59.09%	1.70	28.79%
Romania	1.41	1.37	1.40	1.40	1.39	1.39	1.31	1.26	1.27	1.29	1.32	1.31	60.31%		
Slovakia	1.52	1.47	1.43	1.37	1.33	1.29	1.20	1.18	1.20	1.24	1.25	1.24	69.35%		
Bulgaria	1.23	1.23	1.09	1.11	1.23	1.26	1.21	1.21	1.23	1.29	1.31	0.71	195.77%		

Picture 2 – Analysis of birth rate in EU 27 (except Malta – no data available)

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4.1 - Order and colours

Countries were ordered by the last known birth rate, if more than 1.4. For those with a birth rate below 1.4, a distinction was made between those where birth rate is recovering and those where it keeps falling.

Colours were used as follow:

- **White** – birth rate above 1.9
- **Light grey** – birth rate between 1.9 and 1.8
- **Grey** – birth rate between 1.8 and 1.4
- **Dark grey** – birth rate bellow 1.4, but growing
- **Black** – birth rate bellow 1.4, but lowering

4.2 – Extra columns

In order to help the analysis, following columns were added:

- **Needed %** - The percent increase in the last known birth rate needed in order to have the desired 2.1.
- **Ideal #** - The average desired number of children, taken from figure 2.
- **Dif ideal %** - The difference, in percentage, between the actual and the desired birth rate

It is well visible that:

- There is not a single country where the actual birth rate is equal to the desired one, what implies that not enough opportunities are given to women that want to have children.
- There are big differences in the “Dif ideal %”, showing that opportunities to have the desired children differ a lot from country to country.
- The percentage of needed birth rate goes from a few of 5% in France to more than 50% in more than half of the EU Member States.
- Six of the countries are not paying attention at all to the dramatic low birth rate, since the birth rate is lower than 1.4 and keeps falling. This does not mean they are not doing anything but, rather, that if any measures were taken, they were ineffective, possibly because they were driven by the majority that wants to have two or less children.

It is neither fair nor wise that only a few countries are taking this issue seriously and the others are ignoring it, spending their funds on other matters, possibly with better and easier electoral results.

It is quite clear that EU authorities must speak louder and clearer to those countries!

5 – Unequal opportunities for large families in Europe

It is quite clear from the above, that women are not entitled to have the children they want, particularly the minority that wants to have three or more children.

Also, that the opportunity to have the children they want varies a lot from country to country.

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It is also already clear that the dramatic low birth rate will have a great impact in the European economy and, subsequently, to the Europeans' well being. That is to say that the fact that a minority of women does not have the right to have the children they want is a problem not only for the few existing large families but, rather, of the whole European population and society.

6 – Some issues that affect families (mainly with three or more children) and must be taken into account

- It is not understandable why first needed products for children do not have reduced VAT. Even products that are of obligatory use, such as the sitting chairs for cars, pay normal VAT. Is it fair and logical that the EU States charge families for having children?
- It is not understandable why parenting is not seen as “work” and that time is not taken into consideration when determining their pensions, in contrast with what happens with “foster families”. Is it not the same work? To equal work, are we not entitled to the same salary?
- It is not understandable why tax deductions for children are, in most EU countries, ridiculous. EU States know very well how much a child costs, since, unfortunately, some children are in state institutions, where huge amounts of money per child are spent.
- It is not understandable why in lots of EU countries allowances per children suffer a big cut as soon as they are three years old. Why does this happen? The EU States do not know that a child is more and more expensive as he/she grows? Is it not the States experience with the children they are taking care in their institutions?
- It is not understandable why in lots of countries large families' opinion is not taken into consideration and, rather, family policies are driven by the majority that have two or less children. It is quite clear that countries that get the best results are those that support large families the most, namely through universal and growing allowances per child as a function of their number and reasonable tax deductions per child.
- It is not understandable why women with three or more children keep being socially pressured in order not to have more, namely in the secrecy of the health services. Doctors and nurses have never heard about the dramatic low birth rate in Europe? Do they not recognize the right of women to have the children they want, in particular the rights of those who want to have three or more? Reproductive health they are responsible for does not include the right to have children they want?
- It is not understandable why in some countries married and widowed parents are strongly penalized in taxation as compared to separated, divorced and single parents. Is it fair that children are strongly discriminated based on the marital status of their parents, mainly if they formally affirm their union, asserting the job to raise, support and educate them as a “team job”?

7 – Conclusions

Large families are the only key to the demographic future of Europe, which is seeing economic performance in the long term seriously compromised.

There are big differences in the opportunities for large families in the different EU Member States.

Half of EU countries must have the birth rate increased by more than 50%. However, some of them are not taking this issue seriously, and their birth rates keep dropping.

EU authorities must have a stronger speech towards those countries.

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Even countries with higher birth rates must keep improving the support to large families, at least until their birth rate is equal to the “desired” one, recognizing the right of women to have the children they want.

Large family associations must be heard about the family policy to be followed so that the minority of women that want to have three or more children are free to have, raise and educate them.

In the same way, ELFAC – European Large Families Confederation is ready to help EU authorities in this vital issue, namely to provide a team of up to five specialists to work for five years close to EU Parliament and/or EU Commission.

8 - References:

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- 4 – Eurostat – Population and Social Conditions – Population – Fertility – Total Fertility Rate
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