

Families in vulnerable situations: from challenges to solutions

Welcome by Annemie Drieskens, President COFACE Families Europe.

Good morning,

As President of COFACE Families Europe it is a great pleasure to welcome all of you to our expert meeting.

Thank you to Anna Nagy (Director of the Single Parents Foundation Hungary), to Kinga Józó (Vice-President of NOE, the large families), and to the COFACE team led by Director Elizabeth Gosme to make this event happen. Together we harness the full potential of technology to reach out to our speakers and to all participants for our discussion of today.

I would like to extend a special welcome to our speakers, our panelists and to the national representatives from 10+ countries with us today representing the great diversity of families.

For over 60 years COFACE Families Europe, our pluralistic network, stands up for families fighting for strong European social policies. In close cooperation with our members, our dynamic COFACE team and with the financial support of the European Commission we provide a strong voice for all families.

*We want to ensure that all families without discrimination have access to sufficient financial **resources**, available quality **services** and adequate **time** arrangements. This **RST** continuum of support is essential to give all families real choices to thrive, to care for their children and their family members.*

In our “New Deal for Families of Today” we call on the European Institutions to recognise and support all families without discrimination and to ensure targeted support to families in vulnerable situations. We also call on Europe to invest in child well-being and ensure all children have equal opportunities regardless of their family setting.

Children will thrive only if their family thrives and if the whole society cares enough to provide for them. It is thus fundamental to ensure the well-being of both children and families through European and National Policies that focus on the needs of both generations.

To do so, policies must have a systemic 2-generational approach based on the interrelated well-being of children and their parents. Let’s keep this 2-generation approach in mind for our discussion today.

We know that the way in which families are formed, function and evolve varies from country to country. But in each culture families provide the natural structure in which people and especially children receive emotional, financial and material support that is of great importance for their development

The family is a key learning environment and in so many fields the solution begins at home. Families can be considered as “natural” social protection systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic is devastating our society and putting families under huge pressure. More than ever families need support!!

Last week COFACE published a policy brief bringing Work-life balance measures across Europe together.

Today we want to put the spotlight on the specific situation of single parent and large families allowing us to exchange information on the latest trends, challenges and solutions.

The story of single parents and large families is the story of ordinary fathers and mothers with common questions and needs but at the same time their situation is very different and they have specific needs.

We know there is a great diversity in both groups and I would say the diversity is growing.

Large families are households with three or more children under 18

Demographic reports show that the proportion of large families decreased in most EU Members States with a few exceptions.

Large families are under pressure and need targeted support. We must acknowledge also that across Europe important benefits for large families have been cut in recent years.

Large families are also more heterogeneous because of the growing number of so-called recomposed /blended families.

Lone parenthood is usually not a chosen path but rather provoked by separation, widowhood or unexpected pregnancy.

The largest group emerges after break-up of relationships. Referring to EU-SILC and Eurofound findings we see today in Europe a rise in the number of lone parents with the increase in divorce rates in European countries.

And although lone father families have become more common, the biggest share of lone parents are still mothers.

In addition life-course analyses reveal that over time the composition of lone parent households can change.

They are increasingly transitional due to an increase in re-partnering, blended families.

Even if for many lone parenthood is a transitory state in life course, it interferes severely with many life domains.

And even if the heterogeneity of the group lone parents, the great diversity among large families, makes it more complex for policy makers, we must ensure all those parents are not in vulnerable situations and are sufficiently supported by effective measures.

What it means to be a single parent or a large family depends heavily on the financial situation of the family!

If families already have to run and fly to combine work and family life it is for single parents and large families a real fight.

Life in single parent families and in large families is determined by different factors that go beyond their family structure and are strongly related to their job and financial situation, their living and housing conditions, the problems they have to find a balance between work and their family, the lack of public services and social benefits they can rely on.

All those topics are on our agenda today! Hungary is the right place for our discussion of today:

- It has a large proportion of single parent and large families in Europe with specific support needs (a recently adopted family protection action plan and the Hungarian Housing benefit programme to support large families)*
- Single Parents foundation and NOE are two important civil society actors at the service of families defending the interest of families and their children.*

We would have loved to be in Budapest today to visit the Single Parent Center and learn more about the initiatives of NOE.

Although our visit and our discussion will be virtual, I am very much looking forward to the way you address the challenges of lone parent families and the programmes you developed to support large families.

We have the ambition to take a European perspective and to exchange information about support programmes worked out by our COFACE members and others.

We are happy to have Daniel Alvarez from Isadora Duncan to learn more about the Spanish families and Elke Valgaeren from Gezinsbond to bring in the Belgian perspective.

*Gezinsbond, a Belgian family organization started 100 years ago to support large families and affordable housing for large families and child benefits for all were the first achievements. Next year Gezinsbond will celebrate his 100 years as very active organization for **all** families.*

We invite all participants to bring in their perspective and inspiring practices! We must work together to ensure greater European solidarity and pave the way for coherent European and National policies to guarantee all families:

- A warm and affordable nest;*
- A suitable job that can be combined with the family; and*
- Access to care and support services they can rely on.*