



The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

Support to lone parents
France, 21-22 October 2015

Comments Paper - Greece



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This publication is supported by the European Union Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020).

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Policies to support lone parents in Greece

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Introduction

When considering the policies to support lone parents in Greece, one should take into account two crucial facts: (a) that, in line with the Mediterranean welfare regime model, welfare policies in Greece, including those regarding single parent families, have traditionally been largely ineffective in addressing welfare needs, even before the outbreak of the crisis, with the informal support networks (especially the family) acting as a substitute for a residual social state, and (b) that, following the drastic cuts in social spending imposed through the two fiscal adjustment programmes introduced in 2010 and 2012, these policies have been further dismantled. This paper will focus on the period 2010-2015 and describe the policies to support lone parents.

As a preliminary remark, it would be useful to point out the methodological difficulties in providing an accurate and reliable account of the policies pursued in Greece to support lone parents and their children. To begin with, in the absence of a universally accepted legal definition, there is confusion as to who is considered a lone parent. Depending on the authority, the term may or may not include divorced parents. The statistics authority and the Greek administration employ the term 'single parent families', which includes a broad range of family situations, with no distinction made regarding unwed mothers, divorced mothers that receive no alimony and the rest. The available data are usually erratic, fragmentary and difficult to access. The institutional framework regarding social policies is complicated and susceptible to frequent changes. The above difficulties are exacerbated by the absence of a public institution responsible for family policies, let alone an agency dedicated to the particular problems of single-parent families. Overall, our research indicates that this type of family is far from being at the centre of attention of policy makers, whilst its invisibility in the social policy agenda is quite striking.

1. Policies to support lone parents

1.1. Background and general policy context

1.1.1. Low incidence of single parent families in the Greek context

The share of single-parent households in Greece has been increasing very slowly over the past decades, to gradually reach 15 % of total households. According to the 2011 Population Census, there are 3,021,133 nuclear families in Greece, of which 463,713 are single parent families. The vast majority, 84 % of these households, are headed by a lone mother (389,292 families), while 74,421 (16 %) are headed by a lone father. This low incidence of single-parent families is a sign of the resilience of traditional family patterns in Greece.

The low share of lone parents in the total number of households is a possible explanation why this type of household has never been the focus of welfare or family

policies, although single-parent families have indirectly benefited from the marked improvements in childcare arrangements and equal opportunities policies initiated and funded through the 2nd and 3rd Community Support Frameworks over the past 25 years. Another reason for the low visibility of problems faced by this type of family is the absence of political leverage of lone parents, as opposed to large families that traditionally are powerfully represented by their interest groups.

1.1.2. The dismantlement of the welfare state during the crisis

Although social spending as a share of GDP had gradually risen in Greece during the 1990s and 2000s, and even during the crisis, to reach **31.2 %** in 2012 (above the EU-28 average of 29.5 %), the impact of social transfers on poverty reduction has been very limited (just below 5 p.p. in 2010, and even lower, 3.5 p.p. in 2014),¹ as **51.3 % of total social benefits go to old age** (compared to 39.1 % for the EU-28), while **pensions absorb 17.5 % of GDP**.²

The sub-protective Greek welfare system has, thus, been unable to mitigate the impact of the austerity-driven drastic cuts in social spending – estimated by the OECD at 18 % – on the weakest segments of the population. The social implications of these cuts are further exacerbated by the absence of an adequate safety net in Greece³, but also by the diminishing capacity of the family – the other pillar of support – to provide a series of vital social services and functions to its members⁴, owing to the severe loss of disposable income⁵. The erosion of the family-centred welfare system is exposing a growing number of individuals to new forms of social exclusion. Not surprisingly, the at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion rate (AROPE indicator) for the Greek population has increased from 27.7 % in 2010 (2009 incomes) to a staggering 36 % in 2014 (2013 incomes), one of the highest in the EU-28.⁶

In a context of the on-going deterioration of the social situation of a large part of the Greek population, the two groups more severely hit are the unemployed and the single-parent households. The poverty risk for single-parent households went up from 33.4 % in 2010 to 37.2 % in 2013, marking a significant (and inexplicable) fall the following year at 27.8 % (see Table 2 in the Annex). Other alarming developments over this period, regarding children under 17 and SPFs, include:⁷

- the growth of the number of children living in poor households, from 23 % in 2010 to 28.8 % in 2013 and 25.5 % in 2014;
- the dramatic rise in the number of children facing material deprivation from 9.9 % in 2005 to 23.8 % in 2014;

¹ See Tables 1 and 2 in the Annex.

² See <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/social-protection/data/main-tables> and Table 3 in the Annex.

³ Greece is one of the very few EU countries that lack a universal minimum guaranteed income scheme. A pilot scheme was introduced in 13 municipalities in late 2014, covering 2,400 beneficiaries for a 6-month period. It is hoped that the scheme will become universal as from April 2016, covering initially 350,000 beneficiaries, with a total cost of about 500 million EUR.

⁴ These services range from childcare and elderly-care to housing, income supplement, psychological support and access to employment through family networks.

⁵ In 2010, the Greek households had declared a total income of 100.3 billion EUR. In 2014, the amount had fallen to 75 billion EUR, reflecting the dramatic fall in earnings and disposable income (see Tsolis, TO VIMA, 4-10-2015).

⁶ See ELSTAT, 2015(a) and 2015 (b)

⁷ Ibid.

- an increased risk of poverty for *single parent families* compared to couples with 1-2 children: 27.7 % for SPFs, as opposed to 22.6 % for couples with 1 child and 22 % for couples with 2 children.

1.2. Support policies before the austerity driven welfare reforms

1.2.1. Cash and non-cash benefits for lone parents

Cash benefits for lone parents were “peanuts”, even before the outbreak of the crisis, confined to a **44 EUR** monthly allowance for every ‘un-protected’ child until the age of 16.⁸ Additional cash transfers targeted at low income families in general (with no distinction between single parent and dual parent families) included a 300 EUR annual school allowance for children in compulsory education, an annual allowance ranging between 300-600 EUR for families living in mountainous and/or disadvantaged regions, rent allowance, subsidised housing and a 35 EUR monthly family allowance for unwed parents (as for married employees) paid by the employer. Single parents also benefited from some non-cash, institutional arrangements (see Box 2 in the Annex for a detailed account).

Some of these benefits continue to be in force whilst others were gradually abolished between 2010 and 2013 (see section 2.3).

1.2.2. Labour market policies for lone parents

Regarding labour market insertion initiatives, a number of activation programmes targeted at various disadvantaged groups (including women lone parents) were implemented by the Public Employment Service OAED until the introduction of the fiscal adjustment programmes in 2010 and 2012. However, since then, rising unemployment levels have been exerting increased pressure on public authorities to prioritise passive labour market measures (unemployment benefits) over active measures (training, individualised approach, etc.). At present, the few on-going programmes to combat unemployment for the socially vulnerable groups do not cover lone parents. Overall, active labour market policies in Greece are heavily under-financed, as they account for a mere 0.22 % of GDP (2010 figures).

1.3. Family support policies under the fiscal adjustment programmes

Following the two bail-out programmes signed with the EU-ECB-IMF in return for 240 billion EUR in loans, the successive Greek administrations introduced drastic cuts in welfare spending. **In 2013, a number of cash and non-cash social benefits were either severely curtailed or altogether abolished.** These include all universal non-contributory family allowances (such as third child benefit, large family benefit, life-time pensions to mothers with four or more children and birth grants to mothers giving birth to a third child), the family allowance for working parents (whether married or single), subsidised housing programmes (for all categories of beneficiaries), and free access to health care services for the

⁸ A child is considered as ‘un-protected’ when it is orphan from both parents, when it is born out of wedlock, and if the father is absent, sick, disabled, imprisoned or serving in the armed forces. To qualify for this benefit, the monthly family income should not exceed 294 EUR for three-member families, plus 24 EUR for each additional member. The amount has remained stable since 1997.

uninsured (recently re-established). In return, two new means-tested child/family benefits were introduced: a) a flat child support allowance of 40 EUR per month per child, for the first time granted from the first rather than the third child and, b) a special large family benefit (for households with three or more children) of 500 EUR per child per year. Both benefits are strictly conditioned upon the total income of the family/household, with the amount of the benefit going down as the family/household income goes up (see Table 4 in the Annex). In 2014, 751,517 families received the flat child support allowance (total cost: 433,362,059 EUR), and 129,001 families were granted the special large-family benefit (total cost: 210,395,000 EUR). Both benefits are administered by the Agricultural Social Insurance Organisation (OGA).

Apart from the two new measures, three pre-existing cash benefits targeted at families on very low income (whether single or dual parent) continue to be granted. These are: (a) the 'un-protected' child allowance (in 2014, 11,247 children received this benefit with a total cost of 6,439,004 EUR); (b) the school allowance; and (c) the allowance given to families living in mountainous and/or disadvantaged areas (see Box 1 in the Annex for more details).

Some favourable adjustments were also introduced in the area of tax policies for families with children, targeted to the vulnerable groups: these include a reduction or exemption from the Special Property Tax, increases in the amount of the heating allowance depending on the number of children, as well as reductions in the income taxation for low income families with children. However, these piecemeal and low-impact arrangements can barely address the needs of the low-income households.

A belated attempt to address the humanitarian crisis was made in March 2015, when the new SYRIZA-ANEL coalition government introduced legislation (Law 4320/2015) aimed at covering basic needs of families that have been hit hard by the economic crisis, through the provision of free electricity, free food and rent subsidy (see Box 2 in the Annex for details). The 87,541 beneficiaries of this programme will receive the benefits they are entitled to for a 9-month period, after which it is unclear what will happen. The first instalment was paid in July 2015.

2. Policy debate

Policies to support lone parents, hardly considered as adequate even before the crisis, have fallen victim not only of the dismantlement of the welfare state, but also the shift of focus of attention towards the growing pauperisation of the Greek population and the emergence of new forms of poverty and social exclusion. The same is true for gender equality issues, which have been marginalised, in a context of rampant unemployment, profound uncertainty and economic hardship that makes the gender equality agenda look out of tune with the more pressing social issues.

In the absence of a comprehensive policy aiming at ensuring adequate living standards for families with children in general and for lone parent families in particular, the prospects for more targeted policies in favour of lone parents in the near future are quite bleak. In addition to this, one can also discern a growing sense of futility on behalf of single parent organisations and lobby groups (e.g. women's organisations, gender equality authorities, etc.) that in the last few years, discouraged by the overall economic uncertainty, abstain from pushing forward any claims for the most disadvantaged amongst the lone parent families.

3. Transferability aspects

3.1. Assessment of the transferability of the French and German good practices to the Greek context

Given the dire fiscal situation of the Greek economy and the limitations imposed by the 3rd loan agreement signed in August 2015, how realistic is to expect the transfer of good practices from the two countries under consideration, France and Germany? What are the major constraints and the windows of opportunity?

The lack of material resources does not necessarily mean that the particular problems faced by lone parents in Greece cannot be addressed at least at the institutional and organisational levels, to ensure a minimum of information, co-ordination and attention (see section on recommendations).

One lesson that can be learned from the **German** experience is that targeted support to lone parents is a multi-dimensional task that requires concerted actions on behalf of all stakeholders and a comprehensive understanding of the diverging and changing needs of the lone parents. The integrated approach adopted, with the involvement of local actors and all three sectors of the economy has delivered positive results regarding the labour market activation of lone parents, although the number of beneficiaries was rather small for the German population and the duration of the programmes short. **There are no serious financial constraints in transferring the positive organisational aspects of the German good practices to a different national context, only cultural and political ones.**

The financial and institutional support provided to the **French** lone parents is quite impressive: generous cash benefits, activation policies, free and high quality childcare facilities with extended opening hours, easily accessible information, and last but not least a strong focus on the particular problems faced by lone parents, that are not lumped together with other disadvantaged groups. As in the German case, an integrated approach is taken, involving different areas of public policy, all levels of government and a broad range of associations, to ensure the highest impact and cumulative effect of the benefits. The full cost of these measures is financed through the state budget, as part of the family, social and employment policies.

It is hard to envisage a transfer of most of the above practices in the present-day Greek context, as the two overarching objectives of the good practices, to support the purchasing power of lone parents with low income and to facilitate their labour market integration are out of reach for Greece, given the continued contraction of the Greek economy (27 % since 2008), the high levels of unemployment (26 %) and the limitations imposed by fiscal adjustment programmes. What could be transfused, however, is the totally different mentality prevailing in France with regard to lone parents and the different approach to their problems.

Raising awareness for particular problems of lone parents, changing the mentalities of the authorities and the other stakeholders, involving as many actors as possible at all levels of governance, diffusing the available sparse information, gaining a clear focus of the issues at stake and adjusting solutions to the special needs of the targeted population does not require material resources, like building and staffing childcare facilities or granting generous cash benefits. It requires a vision, an understanding of the problem and a will to find solutions with restricted means.

4. Recommendations and conclusions

Recommendations at the national level

The following initiatives can be taken by the central government in Greece, regardless of the difficult financial situation, as their cost is low and their potential impact high:

- Establishment of a single national authority responsible for collecting and disseminating all information regarding single parent's rights and entitlements and for coordinating the different ministries and agencies involved;
- Construction of a user-friendly website (like the French site www.monenfant.fr) addressed to parents and to lone parents in particular, with all the necessary information;
- Increasing the visibility of lone parents in social and family policies, raising awareness of their particular problems through seminars and campaigns;
- Prioritisation of lone parents in labour market activation programmes;
- Encouraging co-operation between the various levels of governance and delegating the necessary competencies and resources to the local authorities;
- Exploiting the untapped potential of the social economy (social cooperatives, social enterprises), as well as of the private sector through Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives.

Recommendations at the European level

The EU authorities can play a crucial role in upgrading the status of lone parents by:

- Disseminating good practices across the EU through organisation of seminars and conferences;
- Encouraging the adoption of family-friendly policies in organisations and companies;
- Re-asserting the importance of social spending as a productive factor with beneficial macroeconomic implications;
- Imposing benchmarks to Member States regarding the improvement of the lone parents' social and professional situation.

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Annex

Table 1
Impact of social transfers on poverty reduction, 2013 (in %)

	Before	After	Difference
GREECE	28.8	23.1	- 4.9
Ireland*	39.3	15.7	- 23.6
Denmark	28.1	12.3	- 15.8
Finland	26.	11.8	- 14.6
EU-28 average	25.8	16.7	- 9
Bulgaria	26.7	21.0	- 5.7
Romania	27.8	22.4	- 5.4
Latvia	26.0	19.4	- 6.6

* 2012 data

Source: Eurostat, 2014

Table 2
At-risk-of poverty rate by population group
2010, 2013 & 2014, in %

	2010	2013	2014
Total population	20.1	23.1	22.1
Individuals over 65 years	21.3	15.1	21.6
Children 0-17 years	23.0	28.8	25.5
Single parent households	33.4	37.2	27.8
2 adults with 3+ children	26.7	31.4	32.4
Unemployed	38.5	46.3	45.9
Part-time workers	29.4	27.0	27.9

Source: ELSTAT (Hellenic Statistical Authority), Living Conditions in Greece, 2012, 2014 & 2015

Table 3
Social benefits by function as % of GDP, 2012

	GREECE	EU-28
old age	51.3	39.9
sickness/healthcare	21.4	29.2
family/children	5.5	8.4
disability	4.5	7.3
survivors	8.0	5.6
unemployment	6.3	5.6
housing	0.8	2.1
social exclusion	2.1	1.9

Source: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/social-protection/data/main-tables>

Table 4
New child support allowances, 2013

Total household income (EUR)	Annual flat child benefit (EUR)	
Up to 9,000	480	1 CHILD
Up to 18,000	320	
Up to 27,000	160	
Up to 10,000	960	2 CHILDREN
Up to 20,000	640	
Up to 30,000	320	
Up to 11,000	1,440	3 CHILDREN Special benefit EUR1,500
Up to 22,000	960	
Up to 33,000	480	
Up to 12,000	1,920	4 CHILDREN Special benefit EUR 2,000
Up to 24,000	1,280	
Up to 36,000	640	
Up to 13,000	2,400	5 CHILDREN Special benefit EUR2,500
Up to 26,000	1,600	
Up to 39,000	800	

Source: <http://www.taxheaven.gr/>

Box 1**Cash and non-cash benefits for lone parents until 2012**

- 300 EUR annual school allowance for children in compulsory education until the age of 16, in families earning less than 3,000 EUR per year (both single parent and dual parent families);
- 600 EUR per year for families with or without children (including single-parent families) living in mountainous and/or disadvantaged areas with an annual income up to 3,000 EUR and 300 EUR per year for families with an income between 3,000 and 4,700 EUR;
- family allowance for unwed single parents (as for married employees) paid by the employer, until their child is 18 years old, or 24 years old if a student (35 EUR per month plus 18 EUR for each child);
- free access to healthcare for uninsured and financially weak single mothers;
- priority access to public or municipal kindergartens and nurseries for children of single parent families;
- access to subsidised housing programmes and rent allowance for single mothers;
- improved working hours arrangements and additional leave for single parents;
- increased quota in public sector recruitment competitions (5 % for each child) for single mothers;
- reduced military service for sons of single parent families.

Box 2**Measures to address the humanitarian crisis in Greece - 2015**

The benefits for those who meet certain strict economic criteria⁹, include a combination of the following provisions:

Free **electricity** up to 300 kWh per month (or 1,200 kWh for four months) until 31/12/2015.

A **monthly rent** subsidy of 70 EUR for one individual, increased by 30 EUR for each additional dependant member of the household up to 220 EUR per month (for a 6-member household). This subsidy can be provided for up to nine months to a maximum number of 30,000 beneficiaries.

Food Subsidy, in the form of an electronic 'Solidarity Card', that can be used at affiliated food markets (until 31/12/2015), incorporating a value of 70 EUR per month for a single person, increased by 30 EUR for each dependant member of the family, up to a maximum of 220 EUR per month (for a 6-member household).

⁹ The annual income should not exceed 2,400 EUR for an individual and 3,600 EUR for a couple, plus 600 EUR for each additional family member. The total value of owned property should not exceed 90,000 EUR for an individual person, increased by 10,000 EUR for each dependent minor or by 15,000 EUR for each adult member, up to a maximum of 200,000 EUR. Bank deposits should not exceed twice the income limit.