Round Table Debate
‘Grandparents as carers – Trends and support services in Europe’
Brussels, 24 April 2013
Meeting notes

Opening
On 24 April 2013 in the European Parliament, Eurochild and AGE Platform Europe organised a round table debate on “Grandparents as carers – Trends and support services in Europe”, preceding the European Day of Solidarity between Generations. The event was hosted by Austrian MEP Heinz K. Becker (European People’s Party) who opened it by welcoming the participants.

The introduction was held by Jana Hainsworth, Eurochild Secretary General, Chair of the round table & Anne-Sophie Parent, AGE Secretary General.

In the context of its thematic working group on family and parenting support and as part of its contribution to the work carried by the EY2012 NGOs Coalition, throughout 2012 Eurochild conducted an on-line survey through a wide range of NGOs and produced a report on the contribution of grandparents to families across Europe. The study gives an overview of family policies with relevance to grandparents across EU countries and identifies key policies that recognise grandparent care and support, and which strengthen the extended families from children’s perspective. The report also profiles what Eurochild’s members and partners are doing in relation to supporting grandparents, and gather some useful evidence on the services offered to them.

This round table aimed to launch the results of that study and its policy recommendations and engaged experts and policy makers in a debate on the follow-up work by the EU.

Jana highlighted that the quality of relationships is paramount to children’s well-being and emotional, social, cognitive development. Grandparent/child relationship has always played a critically important role in children’s development, but family trends, growing economic insecurity, longevity means a changing role for grandparents. She emphasised the increased role of kinship caring; the increased reliance on grandparents for child care; and the importance of intergenerational transfers.

The main objectives of this meeting were:

- To share new knowledge on the role of grandparents;
- To hear from a grandparent herself on the importance of services;
- To discuss what it might mean for policy making in the future – firstly in the context of EU policy & programmes; secondly in the context of regional & local authorities.

Anne-Sophie provided background information about the common work with Eurochild in the frame of the European Year on Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. She stressed the need for solidarity between generations and an age-friendly environment, and presented AGE Platform Europe’s brochure ‘Towards an age-friendly European Union by 2020’, which seeks to explain what can be done to create an age-friendly EU by fostering solidarity between generations and enabling the active
participation and involvement of all age groups in society while providing them with adequate support and protection. She added that EU legislation should acknowledge the fact that old people are also grandparents who often have to step up as carers due to the crisis and because of the increasing number of single parents for instance. It is crucial to support families with parental leave and grandparent leave and to aim to help reconciliation between professional and family life. This is the responsibility of the local and regional authorities as well as of the EU.

**Key findings and recommendations from the report**

**Tony Ivens**, Founder member of Eurochild, co-chair of the Family & Parenting Support Thematic Working Group and co-author of the report gave a brief presentation of the study ‘Grandparents as carers — Trends and support services in Europe’.

He emphasized grandparents’ contribution to family life by:

- The provision of informal and flexible childcare

  This may take the form of occasional childcare when need arises, or be far more structured, providing regular care (often on a daily basis) in relation to specific activities. The latter is particularly important in countries where the state takes less responsibility for providing childcare services.

- Contribution to economic activity

  By providing regular childcare, grandparents allow their adult children to enter or remain in the labour market. However many grandparents are still themselves in full time employment. Contrary to popular belief, grandparents are most often net providers of financial transfers across the generations. These transfers are particularly important in the fight against child poverty.

- Intergenerational learning

  Grandparents are often important educators to their grandchildren. This may take the form of formal learning such as basic literacy or numeracy skills, or often, and perhaps more significantly, provide a whole range of life skills for children and young people through informal learning. Intergenerational learning, however, can also take place in the opposite direction, with children providing their Grandparents with a range of skills in relation to such things as social media and the internet.

- Kinship care

  Grandparents are often the primary care provider for their grandchildren as a result of a whole variety of reasons. These may take the form of a bereavement or serious illness, through to child protection issues, and increasingly through family breakdown. The number of children and young people living in this situation is almost certainly far higher than reflected in official statistics.

He presented the online survey and its main findings:

- 120 completed questionnaires from organisations in 30 European countries.

- The survey provides a snapshot of services being offered to grandparents across Europe.

- It is however important to realise that there are enormous regional variations.

- Respondents reported that grandparents in disadvantaged areas are more likely to be involved in the care of their grandchildren.
o Only around 20% of total respondents said that information specifically designed for grandparents was provided either on a local or national level.

o Of those that provided an answer to the question, 65% said there was no funding available to support grandparents in their country.

o For over half of respondents, contact for grandparents following family breakdown was seen as an issue in their country.

The main recommendations from the report are the following:

o Member States should do more to recognise and support the vital contribution of grandparents to social and economic well-being in Europe

o Flexible working should be extended to include grandparents;

o Fiscal policy should encourage financial transfers from old to young;

o Intergenerational learning good practice should be rolled out across the EU;

o Grandparents access to a child should be legally protected following family breakdown;

o Grandparent kinship carers should receive greater support.

Finally he further stressed that all Member States are currently facing the demographic challenges posed by an ageing population. However, the elderly still have an important and significant contribution to make not only in relation to family life, but also to the economic well-being of member states. The role of grandparents is changing – particularly within the context of the current economic challenges facing Europe. Member States need to ensure that their policies reflect these changes and support grandparents in the important roles they play.

A testimony from a grandmother who has been recipient of services

Gorana Hitrec (Parents’ Association Step by Step, Croatia), gave a very interesting presentation based on her own experiences as a grandparent. She showed pictures of her family and explained grandparents’ crucial role in family life and in the development of the children through every day life's common activities.

Recommendations on policies and practice in grandparenting support: the role of policy makers

Heinz K. Becker, Member of the European Parliament, stated that policy makers at EU-level have to acknowledge the fact that grandparents have a very important role in the family life. He highlighted the aspect of intergenerational learning and that parents are often not in the position to be able to transfer values to their children, so grandparents must take this role. It is crucial to foster flexible working conditions not only for parents but also for grandparents. He said that the European Parliament should support grandparents and ask the Commission to bring out strong initiatives.

Julius op de Beke (European Commission - DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion), stressed that the possibility for providing care is often limited due to different aspects such as geographical mobility. He was also talking about kinship care as a rising phenomenon. He briefly presented the recently launched Social Investment Package which has a strong emphasis on social issues and human capital, aims to support parents to be able to go back to work, and also targets immaterial areas which concern grandparents. The SIP calls for better access to ECEC and health care services, after school activities, reconciliation of work and family life and better support for disadvantaged children and families with ROMA background as well as migrant families. He expressed his hope that the EU budget for 2014-
2020 will have a bigger impact on supporting families and talked about the upcoming Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived, as well as the Social OMC and the European Platform for Investing in Children. The Commission is concerned about families, children, parents and grandparents, and interested in continuing the work with the European Parliament and all other relevant stakeholders.

**Dr. Renate Heinisch**, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee, former MEP, presented a publication in German on “European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations 2012”. She emphasized that all policies must recognize the need to promote families, children and grandparents, and that there is no equity without equal pay. She also stressed that grandparents should benefit from lifelong services in different areas. They are preparing an intergenerational educational plan for active ageing. She also referred to the on-going debates in Germany on grandparent leave and family reunification. Grandparents need a strong support in the EU and national level as well, since they play a crucial role in (healthy and united) family life.

**Sarah Wellard**, Grandparents Plus Director of Policy, Research and Communications, presented their NGO which provides services for kinship carers – 200,000 grandparents, older siblings, aunts and uncles and other relatives bringing up children in the UK because serious family problems. They also give advice and information, and have a peer support network reaching 4,000 carers across England, and their work also covers mentoring and parenting support, research, policy and campaigning.

She highlighted that:

- 200,000 grandparents and other family members bring up children due to parental drug or alcohol misuse, death, serious illness and disability, imprisonment, abuse and neglect.
- Children have high needs and many would otherwise be in state care.
- Grandparent carers experience high levels of stress, depression, poor health, isolation and poverty.
- Around half of carers who are working give up work when children move in – no entitlement to employment leave.
- High proportion on low incomes, often dependent on welfare benefits.

What do they want to change for grandparents and kinship carers:

- Better access to services and practical support – counselling and mental health services, respite, parenting support.
- Right to take leave from work to reduce the number of those who have to give up work.
- A right to financial support for the children they are looking after – a national financial allowance.
- Multiple caring roles - may be supporting the parents too.

She also presented the “Grandparenting in Europe” study:

- 3 year partnership with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Beth Johnson Foundation and King’s College London.
- Study explores the role of grandparents in providing childcare for grandchildren across 12 European countries, using both transnational data sets (SHARE and ELSA) and data on family and child policy.
- Over 40% of grandparents in 11 European countries provide grandchild care (63% in the UK).
• Young, fit, health grandmothers with younger children and not working are most likely to provide childcare. The same grandmothers who governments across Europe want to keep working longer to grow economies and pay for pensions, health and social care in later life.

• Their vital role in providing childcare, is likely to conflict with their own ability to self-finance their old age, especially as widow’s benefits in both state and employer pension schemes are eroded.

• The risk is an emerging care gap as older women remain in work longer, become less available to provide childcare and so adversely affect mothers’ labour market participation.

Their recommendations based on the study:

• Improved provision of childcare.

• Enabling grandparents to combine work and informal care – flexible working, emergency level, other leave entitlements.

• Improved parental leave – transferable to grandparents.

Recommendations on policy and practice in grandparenting support: the role of service providers

Representatives from local authorities:

Elena Curtopassi (Veneto Region, Italy) presented their organisation and the HELPS Project. They provide housing and home care for elderly and vulnerable people. They aim to promote development strategies and practices to improving the quality of life of vulnerable groups, with a strategic focus on elderly and people with disabilities, in urban areas of Central Europe. Laura Meneghin presented their two centres in Treviso (Italy), one for childcare and another for the elderly. As an intergenerational exchange, those two independent centres come together to work on different projects. Families benefit from the person centred activities that are only possible with the help and support of older carers and qualified staff, all working together in a nurturing environment. They create an environment founded on the values of solidarity and respect.

Their mission is:

• The well-being and dignity of all persons regardless of age, sex, race, social or economic status, physical or mental condition.

• Person-centred care.

• High quality education, family, parenting and carer support.

• Exchange of ideas and experiences.

• Intergenerational solidarity.

• Promoting active ageing.

• Strengthen the bridge that links the existing structures and develops a lasting and growing partnership with the local community.

Elena Echeberria (Basque Country, Spain) presented the situation in the Basque Country in regards to grandparents as carers.

The birthrate in the Basque Country is one of the lowest in Europe (1.32 children/woman). Work and childcare reconciliation strategies in the Basque Country are:
- 51.8% public or private childcare services.
- 16.2% voluntary leave or working hours reductions.
- 20% grandparents.
- 12% childminder working at home.

Grandparents as carers provide intensive care:
- 59.2% help and look after their grandchildren on weekly basis.
- 18.2% are over the age of 80.
- 25.1% need help from others for their normal daily life.
- 52.8% are women and 47.2% are men.

She emphasized that when the childminder role is voluntary and occasional, it is a positive experience for grandparents. When the role is compulsory and intensive it can be a bad experience that affects grandparent’s health and can result in a situation of dependence.

In consequence public policies must:
- Help grandparents play the role that suits them as grandparents: give affection and transmit values to their grandchildren.
- If grandparents decide to take care of grandchildren, public policy should help them to do that in a positive way for all family members - children, parents and grandparents.
- Prevent abuse that can lead to dependency.
- Recognize and praise social contribution made by grandparents

As good example, she presented two organisations in the Basque Country:
- AFAE, Basque Country Family Association, which is an association that fosters and promotes family values with the help of a training programme for grandparents, a family activity programme and a Family week in May to celebrate “Family day”.
- AMAPASE, Alava Separated mother and fathers Association’s “Experience School” programme, which builds on the fact that during the separation process grandparents give security to grandchildren helping them to adapt to the new situation. It aims to:
  - Train grandparents to play this role with self-confidence and knowledge.
  - Share experiences, worries and fears with other grandparents in similar situations.
  - Recognize grandparents contribution.
  - Prevent family violence.
  - Foster culture of dialogue and control of emotions.
  - Detect risk situations and provide professional support and advice.

**Questions and Comments**

The following issues were debated and emphasised:
The average life expectancy of Europeans is increasing by two to three months every year. It is crucial to value the role of old people in Europe’s ageing society.

It should not be an obligation for grandparents to provide childcare; a balance should be found where families are supported and grandparents’ help is only additional.

It is important to make the EU age-friendly and better adapted to the ageing population, as well as to promote intergenerational solidarity.

Participants expressed their hope that 2014 is going to be the European Year for Reconciling Work and Family Life, and welcomed that the European Parliament adopted the Written Declaration supporting this proposal.

Concluding remarks

Heinz K. Becker, Member of the European Parliament, expressed his gratitude for this event and stressed the importance of the issue. He intends to support the follow-up of the study, he is ready to motivate the Commission and plans to pressure his own country (Austria) in order to move forward and support families. He welcomed the idea of a European Year dedicated to families.

The round table was closed by the concluding remarks of Jana Hainsworth.

Speakers’ presentations are downloadable from the Eurochild website.

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