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Mapping Relations between Family Policy Actors

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In line with calls from the European Commission for greater involvement of non-governmental organisations in the policy process, this article draws on research across EU member and applicant states to investigate the potential for enhancing cooperation between political and civil society actors in family policy formulation. The authors argue that the role of civil society is highly differentiated between countries, due to three key factors: party ideology, political culture and political transitions, which determine the capacity for improving alliances. Structural barriers to development may prevent the Commission's advocacy of closer cooperation between policy actors from being successful in the shorter term.

Introduction

In its discussion paper, 'The Commission and non-governmental organizations: building a stronger partnership' (Prodi and Kinnock, 2000), the European Commission argues for the strengthening of relationships between EU institutions and the NGO[1] community. Dialogue between the political and civil society sector, the Commission argues, is 'an important complement to the institutional process of policy shaping . . . [which will] improve policy design and . . . increase efficacy' (Prodi and Kinnock, 2000: 7). In campaigning for this enhanced relationship at EU level, the Commission assumes a state of readiness on the part of NGOs and national governments for transferring information between policy actors that will, in turn, be fed directly into EU-level policy making in the interest of improved policy formulation and implementation.

Although the Commission does not make explicit reference to family policy – broadly defined as all types of policies with a family impact – it should, on the face of it, prove fertile ground for the Commission's ambitions (Dumon, 1994; Hantrais and Letablier, 1996). Family policy is an area that rarely fits neatly into the remit of a single government department. Ownership is diffuse, which means that several entry points are available for NGOs. It is also a field in which the boundary between public and private is often blurred; for any government reluctant to be perceived as over-directive in private areas of life, the cooperation or even participation of NGOs in policy formulation and/or delivery has obvious political advantages. When combined with the fact that, over the last decade, family policy has become increasingly significant on the policy agenda across many European countries, largely as a result of socio-demographic change (Millar, 1998), this is clearly an area where strong governmental–NGO cooperation might be expected to develop. Involving NGOs in policy implementation is one thing; allowing them a role in policy formulation, as envisaged by the Commission, is arguably another.

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In what follows, we draw on interviews about family policy with policy actors from political and civil society sectors in eight EU member states (France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the UK) and three candidate countries (Estonia, Hungary and Poland), representing different waves of membership and types of welfare regime. The policy actors interviewed include political actors (politicians and civil servants from central and local government), and civil society actors (service providers, non-profit organisations, research institutions and policy think tanks).[2]

Mapping the role of NGOs in family policy

In this section, we identify and map the interplay of political and civil society actors in the area of family policy. The countries analysed afford examples of what can be termed 'comprehensive' (France, Sweden), 'partial' (Germany, Ireland, Italy, the UK, Poland), 'minimalist' (Spain, Greece) and 'aspirational' (Estonia, Hungary) approaches to family policy.

France and Sweden: the comprehensive approach

Among the countries in our study, NGOs play the largest lobbying role in France and Sweden, where the civil society sector is well integrated, closely coordinates its own sector's work and cooperates with the state in formulating family policies. In both cases, the political culture facilitates integration, if for different reasons. In France, a significant disparity is found between left and right as to the action required. The right, particularly the extreme right, emphasises the importance of traditional family forms and the need to maintain the birth rate, while the left focuses on the gender equality dimension. The desirability and necessity of state intervention are, however, hardly disputed across party lines. In French political culture, the family is seen as belonging largely to the public sphere. Swedish political culture also legitimates intervention, but predominantly from the gender equality perspective. Despite these differences, the outcome is similar for NGOs: in both countries, they play a role in policy formulation and implementation. In France, family policy is a high priority, and the Haut Conseil de la Population et de la Famille coordinates and integrates the initiatives of family policy actors in different sectors. Civil society and, especially, family organisations are united under an umbrella organisation, the Union Nationale des Associations Familiales (UNAF, National Union of Family Associations), which represents a united front in policy debates, for example by organising an annual conference at which family policy actors from all sectors set the policy agenda for the coming year. In Sweden, although family policy is not conceptualised as such a distinct policy area that it is the sole remit of a government department, civil society actors do lobby on behalf of individuals to promote policies that affect them as members of families. A strong historical legacy in lobbying makes civil society an effective component in the family policy formulation process, which has traditionally taken place through the Föreningen för välgörenhetens ordnande (Association for Organising Charity), established in 1889, and the Centralförbundet för socialt arbete (National Association for Social Work), established in 1903. These organisations provide avenues of communication through which the civil society sector can cooperate with the political sector in policy formulation.

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Germany, Ireland, Italy, the UK and Poland: the partial approach

By contrast, in Germany, Italy, the UK and Poland, cooperation between the civil society and political sectors is less integrated, but within the civil society sector some organisations play a key role in feeding grass-roots ideas back into the policy process. The UK provides perhaps the clearest example of this relationship. British politics has always conceptualised the family in narrow terms, focusing on parents and children. Care of older people is a component of social security and health provision and, at least until the 1990s, gender equality was conceived almost entirely in terms of equal opportunities at work. This absence of a formal family policy field enabled the civil society sector to become the principal actor in family issues and to remain largely independent in their initiatives. As family policy developed into a more specific policy field in the late 1990s, the state came to view civil society organisations as the experts and called on some of them to work closely with government in defining the policy agenda. The public's lack of support for state intervention in the private domain has placed the civil society sector in a favourable position to mediate for government. In addition, the Deakin Commission Report, published in 1996, laid the foundations for the institutionalisation of an integrated policy network in its recommendation for the development of Compact, as 'a core of good practice for future relations between the state and civil society sector, with the state recognizing the latter's independence and diversity' (Kendall, 2000: 27).

When New Labour came to power in 1997, it endorsed the Compact as a component in its search for 'The Third Way'. The new government's engagement with the sector continued throughout its first term, marked by new tax laws concerning private donations to charitable organisations and foundations, and state support for volunteer work in the form of additional holidays for employees, particularly in the public sector, but increasingly also in large private sector companies in return for volunteer activity. The state recognised this relationship through contractual arrangements that allow civil society organisations to provide certain welfare services on behalf of the state. In the UK, family policy networks are now tightly integrated, but this relationship is restricted to the few NGOs working in close cooperation with government in drafting policies. The National Family and Parenting Institute, initiated by the Labour government in 1997 and part-funded by government, is a key contributor to policy debates, as are the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the National Council for One Parent Families and Age Concern England.

Germany is in a similar position to the UK. Family policy issues moved up the policy agenda in the late 1990s, less as the result of an increased interest in the family *per se*, and more as a reflection of impending demographic shifts in the population and their impact on the social protection system. The subsidiarity principle has provoked the development of strong relations between the two sectors by guaranteeing the primacy of the civil society sector in providing social welfare, with the state as the last resort. This principle has been shaped in a context where the state views civil society organisations as better equipped to deal with social problems. However, the strong separation between the sectors and the reliance of NGOs on state funding have hindered their input to policy formulation. Instead, the sector acts as handmaiden to the state in the implementation of family policies. Exceptions include the Christian Democratic Union and the Catholic Church, due to their strong alliance, which facilitates input from grass-roots initiatives to policy formulation.

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In Ireland, the relationship between political and civil society actors is relatively well integrated, but again largely because of the policy implementation role of NGOs rather than their function in policy formulation. Some issues have simply been too contentious for any government to take a clear lead. Abortion is an obvious example, with four referenda failing to produce any clear resolution. Irish governments have been happier to work in areas where they can seek to engineer consensus, which, as in the UK, has led to concentration on the economic sphere and, especially, employment. As in Germany, the Irish welfare system is founded on the principle of subsidiarity, institutionalised in the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 and the 1916 Constitution. Subsidiarity guarantees the primacy of the civil society sector in the provision of welfare. The state is the last resort, its main role being to fund NGOs to provide certain services. In Ireland, state funding accounts for 75 per cent of the sector's total budget, the largest amount received among EU member states (Donoghue *et al*., 1999: 122).

The centrality of the Catholic Church in society (at least until the late twentieth century), as a proponent of voluntarism and communitarianism, further fuelled the emphasis on civil rather than state intervention in family life. While this focus explains cooperation between the two sectors in policy implementation, it does not account for its inconsistent role in policy formulation. Traditionally, in Ireland the Church had dual identity as a member of the state apparatus and civil society, enabling it to sit in both circles, and ensuring coherence between the two sectors in family policy formulation. With the secularisation of society and the development of anti-clericalism since the 1960s, the influence of the Church on politics has dwindled. Other secular NGOs have not been able to replace it in public debate, and the civil society sector has remained largely underrepresented in family policy formulation. Since the 1987 Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, which outlined the idea of social partnership agreements, a concerted effort has been made to involve NGOs in policy making. The 1997 Green Paper on Voluntary Activity and its successor, the 2000 White Paper Supporting Voluntary Activity, have gone further in involving secular NGOs in policy making. Nonetheless, the government's preoccupation with economic development means that NGOs working on employment-related family policy issues, such as the National Women's Council, have been able to take advantage of legislative support to advance their role in policy formulation.

In both Poland and Italy, the Catholic Church also creates a bridge between NGOs and government in family policy formulation, while other organisations are much less influential in shaping government policies. In Poland, the legacy of a strong statist culture weakened the sector under Communism, when civil organisations and associations were outlawed. The Catholic Church did manage to maintain its role not only as a religious organisation but also as a provider of family welfare. Following the collapse of state Communism, it held a monopoly over other NGOs. Almost all the political actors interviewed in Poland, particularly on the right of the political spectrum, acknowledged the very real influence exercised by the Catholic Church on the family policy process as a whole, with its traditional family model as the paradigm. Although NGOs have seldom been involved in policy formulation, Church organisations are closely involved in government discussions regarding family issues. For example, groups from the Catholic alignment assisted in drafting the Charter of Family Rights during the parliamentary elections in 1997 and were widely represented in the *Sejm* (parliament). The close relationship between political and civil society (Catholic Church) in Poland has not been formally institutionalised in law or by financial ties, as in the UK or Germany, and the

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scope for secular organisations to be included in the family policy debate remains limited. Their inclusion in policy formulation depends on the organisation's political affiliation and the government in power, as summarised by one interviewee under the former right-wing government:

> Only the party that is currently in power matters, only its opinions, its viewpoints. . . . The situation at present is that, for example, the Family Rights Commissioner does not cooperate with any organization targeted at women and family outside the groups from the Catholic alignment. (League of Polish Women)

In September 2001, the right lost power and a left-wing party came to office. More left-wing organisations are expected to be able to contribute to the policy agenda, but policy actors generally feel that the Church will not lose its position as the most influential civil society actor in family policy making.

Similarly in Italy, the Catholic Church plays a role in partnership with the state. Most civil society organisations have a limited capacity to influence policy because they lack financial means and recognition as political actors. The sector is small and weakly developed, and its family policy agenda is not explicitly recognised, largely because the social climate rejects direct and explicit state intervention in family life, due to its traditional association with fascism and dictatorial rule. NGOs working in family policy have, therefore, not developed as a legitimate body either separately or in cooperation with the state. The Catholic Church was traditionally the only acceptable form of intervention. Recently, political devolution of social policy in Italy has enhanced cooperation between local government and the civil society sector. As in many other policy areas, family policy in Italy is at the interface of northern and southern European traditions. The split can be observed in practice in national legislation, which delegates responsibility for family matters to the regions, provinces and municipalities. In northern regions, much attention has been given to issues of work–life balance; in the south, heavy reliance is still found on the traditional extended family, and the family is conceptualised as an almost exclusively female domain. In societies suspicious of central state bureaucracy and in the absence of services to support families, grass-roots organisations often serve as important welfare providers, working closely with local government in areas with shared aims. However, Italian NGOs contribute to family policy primarily as service providers rather than as advisers to the state, with few exceptions, such as Arci Gay, which has campaigned for better housing provision for same-sex couples in Bologna.

Spain and Greece: the minimalist approach

Spain and Greece share some attributes with Italy, but the lesser influence of the Church and the greater reliance on families to assume responsibility for the welfare of their members have prevented the establishment of more integrated policy networks. As in Italy, the Spanish and Greek states have a constitutional commitment to protect families, but the social climate precludes direct and explicit state intervention in family life. They have no designated ministries for families and have not developed a separate family policy field. This lack of coherence means family issues do not reach the political agenda, and NGOs working in the field are prevented from contributing to policy formulation. Political actors interviewed were almost universally critical of the lack of cooperation and

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coordination between the relevant ministries and local government bodies. Any dialogue between NGOs and the government in Spain is largely determined by political affiliation. In Greece, it depends on the presence of a political 'insider' on the NGO's board. Party politics and influential individuals, therefore, shape contributions to policy formulation rather than the transparent framework the Commission advocates in its discussion paper.

Historically, the Catholic Church in Spain and the Orthodox Church in Greece were involved in policy debates with the state and ensured families were represented. The reliance on networking rather than more formalised institutional ties in both countries has not enhanced the role of NGOs in policy formulation. In Greece, where civil society organisations have limited scope, funds and experience, state intervention is confined to families in need, and pitched at such a low level that it continues to serve as a last resort. Political devolution of social policy in Spain has led to a degree of cooperation between political and civil society sectors at the subnational level. Regions, provinces and municipalities, which are seen as better able to respond to the needs of families, have more legitimacy to intervene. In Catalonia, Valencia and the Basque country, where family policy is more developed, greater cooperation has occurred between local government and the civil society sector.

Estonia and Hungary: the aspirational approach

Although both exhibit segregated policy networks, Estonia and Hungary are difficult to map because they are undergoing rapid change that is opening up new opportunities for NGOs. As EU candidate countries, they are aware that their membership requires them to have 'achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities', and that 'NGOs can make an important contribution to the development of democracy and civil society in candidate countries' (Prodi and Kinnock, 2000: 4). The relationship between NGOs and the political sector is therefore developing quickly. The recent experience of Communism has resulted in societies with an aversion towards state intervention in family life, although their Constitutions (as in Poland), present the family as fundamental to the preservation and growth of the nation, and as the basis for society, which must be protected by the state. Since 1989, ministries have been designated to coordinate family policy in the political sector, but despite official support for state intervention, inadequate resources have limited policy delivery, and economic development remains the priority. The end of Communism has also brought the collapse of state and employer social provision of family support services, such as workplace nurseries. The civil society sector, having barely existed under Communism, is only now beginning to develop into a distinct sector with the potential to fill this policy vacuum. The Lutheran Church in Estonia, and the Catholic Church and affiliated organisations in Hungary (especially the Association of Large Families) are pioneering state – NGO relations, building on their privileged status under Communism, though the imprint of history on the relationship remains strong.

Ten years on from transition, with the increasing political and social significance of civil society, and with EU membership pending, both countries are seeking to build stronger alliances along the lines advocated by Prodi and Kinnock. In Estonia, the signing of the Eesti Kodanikeühiskonna Arengu Kontseptsioon (EKAK, Estonia Civil Society Development Concept) in 1999 helped secular organisations to develop their contribution

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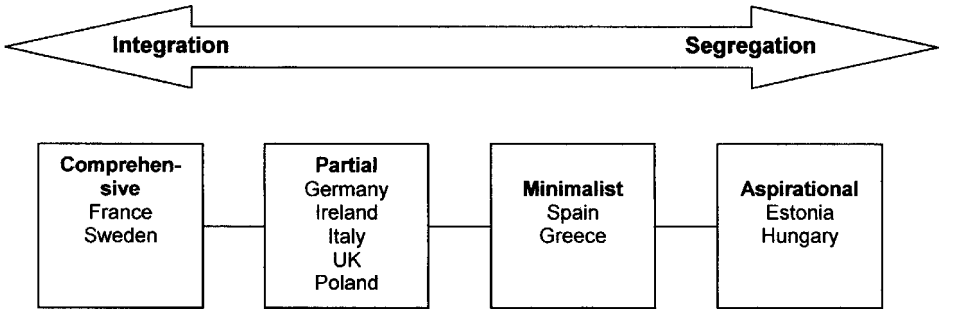


Figure 1. Family policy formulation network continuum.

to family policy. This memorandum of understanding, presented for discussion in the Estonian parliament in 2001, advocates cooperation between the two sectors, but not explicitly in policy formulation. As in the Compact agreement in the UK, the EKAK promotes contracting out of public services to NGOs, largely because their forms of intervention in family life are considered more acceptable than direct intervention by the state. As in Poland, limited funds have inhibited the development of the link. However, the relative strength of the state, the marginal place of family policy on the political agenda, the preoccupation with economic survival and the legacy of social dissatisfaction with state intervention in family life have, to a great extent, prevented any meaningful dialogue between sectors on family policy issues.

Integrated and segregated policy networks

This article has demonstrated that the role of the civil society sector in family policy formulation varies markedly between the 11 countries. They can be classified along a continuum between integrated and segregated family policy networks, as summarised in figure 1.

At the integrated end are France and Sweden, characterised by civil society sectors that consult with political actors as 'an important complement to the institutional process of policy-shaping' (Prodi and Kinnock, 2000: 7). Further along the spectrum, in the UK, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Poland, integration is less tightly structured and takes place between individual organisations rather than the sector as a whole. Elsewhere, in countries such as Spain and Greece, the relationship between the civil society sector and the political sector is less developed, which prevents feedback from grass-roots organisations into the (re)formulation of policies. In two of the candidate countries studied, Estonia and Hungary, while policy networks are currently considered as segregated, the relationship is shifting rapidly, alongside other social changes that have occurred since transition.

The problem with the Commission's ambitions for more NGO involvement is both the variety of networks revealed here and the deep-seated differences reported, some of which have partisan origins and may change in the relatively short term. Virtually all parties of the right advance the traditional family model as an exemplar, identifying it as essential for a stable society. They are willing to grant NGOs that share this view – primarily the Church – an important role in both policy formulation and implementation. Left-wing parties are more reluctant to present the traditional family model as an exemplar and are receptive to

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NGOs that advance alternative family forms and issues. Many of the differences, however, stem from political culture rather than specific partisan ideology. It can be seen from the evidence evoked that participation by NGOs in family policy formulation is dependent on exogenous forces deriving from national political cultures. Such forces vary widely across our study, whether it be the Church in societies like Italy and Poland advocating traditional family forms, or a long-standing ideological commitment to equality in a society that emphasises individual rights and gender equality, as in Sweden, or a more pragmatic concern over the state's ability to raise sufficient taxation to finance the welfare system, as in Germany and the UK. Overlaying these differences, in some cases, are fundamental changes in recent history. Approximately half the countries in the study have undergone major political transitions over the past 20 years, from authoritarian regimes of the left and right to liberal democracy. In these countries, the role of governments, the extent to which they should intervene and where remain contentious issues, as citizens resist what is seen as a return to an overly directive state.

The historical legacy of regimes, the development of the civil society sector and NGOs within the sector, the significance and structure of family policy on government agendas, and the importance of the Church in the social and political lives of nations have contributed to a situation where NGOs have very variable influences in family policy formulation across Europe. The Commission may entertain hopes of strengthening relationships between EU institutions and NGOs, but they often rest on shaky foundations at the national level. Many European governments appreciate that they face fundamental challenges in the area of family policy, but few are in a position to utilise the interest aggregation that could be provided by civil society participation in policy formulation.

Notes

1 The definition of an NGO used here is that adopted by the European Commission. It is an organisation that is not profit distributing; voluntary; independent of government, political parties or commercial organisations; and not self-serving in aims and related values or pursuing the commercial or professional interests of its members, but acting in the public arena at large, on concerns and issues related to the well-being of people, specific groups of people or society as a whole. NGOs collectively constitute the civil society sector (European Commission, 1997).

2 The elite interviews quoted in this article were conducted in 2000–01 by participants in a Framework Programme 5 project funded by the European Commission (ref HPSE-CT-1999-00031), entitled 'Improving Policy Responses and Outcomes to Socio-Economic Challenges: Changing Family Structures, Policy and Practice'. See http://www.iprosec.org.uk, 5/Feb/03 for details. The contents of this article do not necessarily reflect the opinion or position of the Commission or the other contributors.

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