

Assessing family policies in a comparative perspective¹

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1. Introduction

In recent years family policy is receiving increased attention by researchers and policy makers. In this paper we discuss approaches to assess family policies in a broad comparative perspective. The paper draws heavily on earlier work carried out by the project “Towards a Framework for Assessing Family Policies in the EU” (Lohmann et al. 2009) commissioned by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Hence, the focus of this paper is on the EU and OECD countries. The interest in family policy is related to a number of different developments which affect the lives of families. The growth in employment rates entails the question how to balance work and family life for men and women. Child development and child well-being are deemed as increasingly important for later life outcomes such as education. In addition, in many industrialised countries around the globe population ageing is a perceptible truth. In order to evaluate which role family policy can play against the background of these developments detailed information is needed to compare family policy programmes and societal outcomes.

The main aim of this paper is to give an overview on the differences between existing approaches for an assessment of family policy. We use four criteria to categorize such approaches: the focus on family or single members of families, the assumed scope of family policy (which programmes are considered), the empirical perspective on family policy (which type of measures is used), and the method of aggregation to enable cross-country comparisons. In this paper, we discuss different approaches for an assessment of family policy according to these four criteria (Section 2, 3 and 4). In Section 5 we provide an overview on indicators and available data sources. In Section 6 we present an assessment of family policy using graphical scorecards, an approach proposed in Lohmann et al. (2009). The final section offers a brief summary.

2. Focus and scope of family policy

We begin our overview with the question which groups are primarily focused when family policies are assessed. In general, family policies address families which we define as persons with children. Children may be distinguished from other groups of the population using an age criterion (e.g., younger than 18 years) or other criteria as being still in full-time education, not having left the parental household or not being married or in a relationship. A broader definition of families includes adult children and their parents. A number of family policy programmes are designed to cater the needs of these families, in particular in the area of elderly care. We will restrict our focus to families with young children and adolescents. In OECD and EU-countries these are mostly families with at least one parent while only a minority of children do not live with their parents but with grandparents, other relatives or non-kin. But although the focus on families is predefined assessments of family policy differ in their specific focus. One approach regards the whole family as main unit of analysis (see, e.g., OECD 2011). Child-centered approaches primarily assess the well-being of children (e.g., OECD 2006, UNICEF 2007). Studies which focus on the balance between family life and work often take a mother and/or father-centered perspective (e.g., Gornick/Meyers 2003, OECD 2007a). Each of these perspectives will stress specific aspects of family policy which might lead in different evaluations of family policies across countries.

Assessments of family policy differ also in the assumed scope of family policy. Researchers have to deal with the so-called “fragmentation problem” (Gauthier 1999). In contrast to other

policy fields such as unemployment insurance the scope of family policy is not well defined.¹ For instance, the border where family policy ends and education policy begins is difficult to draw. The tax-benefit system or the health insurance system contain family-related regulations also outside the field of family benefits. Maternity leave policies originate from work protection legislation and parental leave policies interfere with employment protection legislation. At the same time, working time regulations are usually not considered within the framework of family policy. For a core assessment of family policy we may distinguish four fields of policy measures: parental leave policies, early childhood education and care, family benefits, and policies on the employer/firm level. This includes interventions in-cash (e.g., benefits), in-kind (e.g., child care services) and in-time (e.g., parental leave).

3. Empirical perspectives on family policy

Assessments of family policy may differ not only according to focus and scope, but – even given the same focus and the same scope – by the way family policy is assessed empirically. We distinguish three empirical perspectives on family policy: the expenditure perspective, the social rights perspective and the outcome perspective.

Expenditure perspective

The expenditure perspective uses data on public social expenditure to assess a given country's welfare effort (see Obinger/Wagschal 2010). Many of the classic studies on the welfare state are based on this empirical perspective. It is also used in studies which deal with family policies, including family benefits (see, e.g., Pampel and Adams 1992, Guo and Gilbert 2007). The expenditure perspective has been criticised for various reasons (see Esping-Andersen 1990, Gauthier 1999). First, expenditure data do not reveal whether a given level of expenditure is due to the provision of low benefits to a large share of the population (broad coverage) or to the provision of high benefits to a small share of the population (narrow coverage). Qualitative differences in the family benefit system that yield differential outcomes in terms of family wellbeing are not captured adequately. Second, internationally comparable expenditure data contain information about expenditure on broad categories of programmes rather than on individual measures. Some studies look at social expenditure on family policies in general, which includes expenditure on family benefits, parental leave policies and family services (see, e.g., Siaroff 1994, Guo and Gilbert 2007). The differential outcomes of different provisions of leave policies, benefits, or services from one country to the next cannot be evaluated based on such broad expenditure categories. However, the available expenditure data have become richer in detail, with the consequence that expenditure on family benefits can be analysed separately from other types of family policy expenditure. A third objection, which is related to the second, is that—due to the complexity of expenditure data (which captures all types of social expenditure)—it is sometimes difficult to achieve full comparability between countries. Similar policies may fall into different fields of competence and be dealt with by different government agencies from one country to the next, and may thus be counted as different types of expenditure (e.g., care or education).

Despite these objections, which we will have to account for when we compare countries on the basis of such indicators, the expenditure perspective has some distinct advantages. First, expenditure data is available for a large number of countries in highly standardised databases, which are updated on a regular basis and allow for broad cross-country comparisons. Second, expenditure data allow for a comprehensive overview, as all types of expenditure on family policy are included. However, the inclusion of information on tax reductions as a third type of

¹ Gauthier (1999) points out a second dimension of fragmentation. Family policy is often not delivered by the state but also by non-governmental actors.

family expenditure has not yet been fully implemented. These data are not available for all countries.

Social rights perspective

While expenditure data are most useful to provide a broad overview of the family-related welfare effort of a given country, the social rights perspective aims at providing information about benefit entitlements or guaranteed access to services (for a general discussion of social rights see Stephens 2010). With regard to family policy this includes regulations for maternity and parental leave, formal entitlements to daycare or the coverage and level of family benefits. Assessments of family policies from a social rights perspective use indicators which capture in summarised form the content of legal regulations in a given country. The construction of these indicators requires intimate knowledge of a country's legislation and regulations. Such information is usually provided by country experts and assembled by a group of researchers (see, e.g., Bradshaw and Finch 2002). As a consequence, the degree of availability of these indicators and the level of standardisation, compared to expenditure data, used to be quite low. Longitudinal data or data for less-often studied countries was – and often still is – difficult to obtain. However, the situation has improved in recent years not only because organisations such as the OECD have started to collect social rights indicators in a more standardised framework.

Social rights indicators cover early-childhood education and care (ECEC), parental leave programmes and family cash benefits. Only few studies provide indicators on ECEC from a social rights perspective. A reason for this might be that formal entitlements for ECEC have been established in many welfare states quite recently only or not at all. Gornick and Meyers (2003: 202f) provide indicators on entitlements for children in two different age groups (up to 2 years, 3 years until school age). The simple distinction if any kind of ECEC is legally granted has some discretionary power already. Gornick and Meyers (ibid.) add some information on part-time or full-time entitlements but no detailed information on the number of hours or other characteristics. Similar, slightly more detailed information is provided by Bennett (2008). Still, for very young children in only few countries formal entitlements for ECEC exist. Standard indicators on maternity and parental leave regulations usually contain information on the coverage, the duration and the conditions of leave. As in most countries, the basic features of these programmes do not differ across family types and can be covered in a few indicators. However, replacement rates differ by the prior level of earnings or family income. Here, indicators have to take into account variation across families (Moss 2010).

Indicators which cover the availability of family benefits differ strongly across families. The basic idea is to calculate the size of the benefit package for a number of family types that differ, for instance, in the level of earnings and the number and age of the children. In addition, most studies differentiate between lone parents and couples. The approach allows for the inclusion of all aspects of the tax-benefit system, such as tax reductions, family-related components of the social insurance system, family allowances, housing benefits and social assistance payments (see, e.g., Bradshaw and Finch 2002). This approach is illustrative, as it provides information on the level of individual types of benefits at the family level and not at a highly aggregated level. However, the computation of the family benefit package on a wide range of model families is demanding, as it requires detailed knowledge of a country's tax-benefit system. This often works as a restriction on the number of countries included. But compared to earlier studies (see, e.g., Bradshaw and Piachaud 1980), more recent studies have gained in terms of the number of countries covered (Bradshaw and Finch 2002, Bradshaw 2006, OECD 2007c). Still, the information is available for individual years or a few years only, and is not—like expenditure data—updated on a regular basis, which means that the indicators may soon

be outdated. The OECD tax-benefit models could provide a basis for continuous reporting of such indicators.

A general criticism of the social rights perspective refers to the problem that the results – if programmes differ across family types or earnings levels – cannot be generalised at a population level. Every study can provide information on a selected range of model families only, which does not allow for generalisation to families of different sizes, structures and earnings. Since the share of these “other” family types differs between countries, the model families will represent a smaller or larger share of the population in each country. Hence, depending on the choice of model families, the approach may yield different results for the same country. An additional issue has been raised as a disadvantage, but it can be read as an advantage as well. The approach is based on a mere description of the legal regulations and does not reflect the services which are actually used or the level of benefits which families receive (Gauthier 1999: 45). In the case of non-take-up, the social rights approach will overestimate the impact of family policy on problems such as child poverty. However, this can also be regarded as a strong point of the approach, as it provides a full picture of the policy framework and allows for analyses that are able to differentiate between policy effects and family behaviour. In providing instructive results on how different policies (are intended to) affect the situation of a broad range of family types, the model family approach convincingly complements the representative but unspecific perspective of the expenditure approach.

Outcome perspective

Although the combination of the social expenditure and the social rights perspective already provides a detailed overview of country differences in the field of family benefits, information from a third source may be added. As described above, the social rights perspective provides information at the policy level, while it cannot take into account the actual take-up of transfers or services. The expenditure perspective reflects the payment of transfers at a highly aggregated level only. Comparative micro-data, such as the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) or the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), allow for the assessment of the impact of family policies at the household level. They provide evidence on the income package of households or on the use of services such as daycare.

So far, we have used the term “outcomes” to describe the observed receipt of transfers or the use of services. These are outcomes which are often regarded as measures of the policies themselves (implicitly assuming full take-up). But we might look at family policy outcomes also in a wider perspective. Family policies may affect the percentage of families in poverty, the well-being of children or the labour market position of parents. Such outcomes, for which we use the term “societal outcomes” are closely linked to the aims for which family policies are designed for and are therefore of high relevance in an assessment of family policies. However, if we take societal outcomes as a benchmark for the assessment of family policies we have to take into account that also the societal context for family policy differs. It is important to have information on the context in which family policy is assessed, as it is obvious that family policy depends on the overall socio-demographic and socio-economic context of a country. It is, however, worth keeping in mind that the distinction between societal context and outcome indicators may seem arbitrary or at times even irrelevant, for example, whether to treat labour force participation or fertility as an outcome or a context indicator.

4. Modes of aggregation: Existing frameworks for assessing family policies

Each empirical perspective – expenditure, social rights and outcomes – offers a large number of indicators covering a broad range of dimensions. Often the perspectives are combined

which even increases the richness of the indicator base. In order to provide a feasible level of complexity approaches for an assessment of cross-national differences of family policy need to aggregate information. Basically, we can distinguish three approaches towards aggregation: the construction of composite indices, the clustering of countries in different types and the representation of results in scorecards.

There is a widespread use of indices across different domains of research. The basic idea of index construction is to collapse a larger number of measures into one (or few). A number of indices have been constructed for the comparison of family policy across countries. A well-known measure is the Family Policy Index by Gornick and Meyers (2003, see also Gornick et al. 1997) which combines measures of ECEC, school scheduling, family leave and working time. In addition to an overall index for policies that affect families with children of all ages, the authors also provide sub-indices by age-group of the children. A second example is the OECD (2001) composite index which covers work/family reconciliation policies and relevant flexible work arrangements. Indices such as the Family Policy Index or the OECD composite index are handy tools but in order to collapse a multitude of measures across countries into one dimension some crucial assumptions are made (Booyesen 2002). First, which measures are included in the index? Second, what is the directionality of the measure? Third, how can measures be standardised if they are different in scale? Forth, how can we define the weight of each measure for an overall assessment? All these questions cannot be answered based on some statistical method but concern the question how the basic understanding of family policy in terms of aims, focus and scope can be translated into a usable measure. A country's position in an index ranking may strongly change if some dimension is not regarded as within the scope of family policy or is weighted strongly. I.e., each index reflects a general understanding of what is important and what is not.

The construction of typologies constitutes a second approach of aggregation. Theoretical and empirical analysis of family policy programs generally supports the common division of countries into different policy regimes as originally formulated and further developed by Esping-Andersen (1990). Accordingly, there is a rich literature on family policy regimes (see for an overview Meulders/D'Orchais 2007) which differ in focus and scope. For instance, Korpi (2000) uses data on child-benefits, day-care services, gender-relevant taxation and other aspects of the tax-benefits system to distinguish three different regimes: the dual-earner support regime, the general family support regime and the market-oriented regime. Thévenon (2011) uses data from the OECD Family Database to cluster countries according to two dimensions which he extracts from Principal Components Analysis. Using this two-dimensional perspective Thévenon shows how countries differ in their support provided to working parents with young children and their generosity of leave entitlements or cash transfers and distinguishes five distinct groups of countries along geographical or cultural boundaries (Nordic, Anglo-Saxon, Southern European and Asian, Eastern European, Continental European).

A third approach lies in presenting all relevant subdimensions in the form of scorecards which do not fully aggregate the underlying indicators into one composite measure. We find approaches which retain a larger number of subdimensions but collapse the information in qualitative categories such as a simple yes/no dichotomy (UNICEF 2007) or the threefold "traffic lights" which the OECD used to summarise the findings of its study "Babies and Bosses" (OECD 2007b). Others use merely graphical tools to represent the information captured in a multitude of indicators in a form which is comparable across countries and indicators. Examples are the recently introduced OECD country snapshots (see OECD Family Database website) or the scorecard approach proposed by Lohmann et al. (2009). The latter translates a large range of indicators into standard deviations. These values are plotted on a common scale

for all indicators and countries which allows for a graphical assessment of a given country's family policy profile. We will discuss this approach in Section 6 more in detail. In contrast to index and typological approaches this allows for an assessment of the underlying measures and does not require any form of weighting. However, this comes at the cost of a representation of family policy profiles in a large number of graphical displays instead of one figure.

5. Data sources for an assessment of family policies

In Section 3 we have distinguished three different empirical perspectives on family policy (expenditures, social rights, outcomes). In our discussion of data sources we begin with those which cover only one of the three perspectives before we present data sources which are wider in scope. Expenditure data is found in the highly standardised databases of the OECD (SOCX), EUROSTAT (ESSPROS) and ILO (Social Security Expenditure Database). There is a long-standing discussion on the usefulness of expenditure data, not only in the field of family policy but also in welfare state research in general (see, e.g., Clasen/Siegel 2007). Current expenditure databases offer a fine-grained perspective on social policy differentiating programmes in detail. In the field of family policy, it is not only possible to differentiate between in-cash and in-kind transfers but also to separate transfers by target group or specific programme. In addition, the databases offer yearly measures starting from the 1980s or 1990s and are therefore also used to evaluate policy changes over time (Guo and Gilbert 2007). However, breaks in the time-series are not always fully documented.

While expenditure data is collected and distributed by governments or inter-/supra-national entities, social rights data are usually gathered by the scientific community. One of the most prominent collections in this field is certainly the Social Citizenship Indicator Programme (SCIP) initiated by Walter Korpi and colleagues more than 30 years ago. It covers 18 industrialised countries over an immense period of time (1930-2000). Initially, family policy was not within scope of the SCIP but in recent years information on child-benefits, day-care services, gender-relevant taxation and other aspects of the tax-benefits system have been included (Korpi 2010). However, these indicators are not yet available in the public domain. Apart from SCIP there are no other initiatives with a broad scope which collect indicators on family policy from a social rights perspective. But there are a number of data sources which contain information on single aspects of family policy. One example is the work carried out by Bradshaw and colleagues (see, e.g., Bradshaw 2006) on family benefits packages. Bennett (2008) provides a rather detailed description of childcare entitlements across countries. Moss (2010) describes parental leave policies in detail.

We do not discuss data sources for outcome indicators in detail as these can be found in a broad selection of publications and databases. In general, there is an increase in the availability of data in the field of family policy.² This is partly due to the investments of the OECD within this area which resulted in the establishment of the OECD Family Database (Adema et al. 2009). The database covers a wide area of topics from different empirical perspectives. It combines information on family policy expenditure, with a few social rights indicators and a larger number of outcome indicators. Some of the indicators are available in longitudinal perspective. However, information on changes across time is not included in a systematic manner. Most of the indicators are taken from other databases or publications, only a few indicators are available in the OECD Family Database only. The aim is to provide data covering a broad range of topics categorised into four thematic fields, each of which is sub-divided into three or four topics. In total, the database contains 60 indicators on: 1. structure of families, 2. labour market position of families, 3. public policies for family and children, 4. child out-

² See the EDACwowe website for a broad and well-structured overview of available data sources.

comes. According to our earlier categorisation, only the third field contains information on family policy while the other fields cover societal outcomes related to family policy. Still, the OECD Family Database contains 16 family policy indicators which often consist of a number of sub-indicators. Given the large number of indicators which are combined in the database a detailed description of its contents is outside the scope of this paper. A more fruitful approach seems to ask which dimensions of family policy are not covered. The family database contains no information on ECEC entitlements. The data on family benefits from a social rights perspective are also rather restricted. Concerning the first, Bennett (2008) offers respective indicators for a large number of countries. More detailed information on the latter is provided in OECD (2007c) or Bradshaw (2006). Expenditure databases like the OECD SOCX or ESS-PROS are certainly of additional use for a more detailed assessment of family policy spending.

6. Assessing family policies in OECD countries

In this section we briefly describe the graphical scorecard approach proposed by Lohmann et al. (2009). Primarily using indicators from the OECD Family Database scorecards have been constructed in order to provide a comparable synthesis of the country context, policy measures and outcome indicators. All indicators have been transformed into z-scores (i.e., the deviation of a value from the mean divided by the standard deviation). The mean of a z-standardised variable is zero; one unit equals the standard variation of this variable. Hence, the scale is the same for all indicators and they can be compared directly. To provide a better orientation, all figures include separating lines at $+1/2$ and $-1/2$ standard deviations. Values falling between these two lines can be regarded as close to the mean of the variable. For each country we present two figures. The first provides an overview of outcome and context indicators that are directly related to the policy aims of child wellbeing, gender equality and balancing work and family life. The second contains information on indicators that describe the design of family policy measures. Both figures follow the same style in organising the data. The basic idea is to present a country's value for a given indicator in relation to the indicator's distribution across all countries. Therefore, for each indicator the figures contain the mean, minimum and maximum values. This allows for a quick and transparent assessment of a country's position in comparison to other countries.

As an example we provide the respective figures for one country (see Appendix). We briefly discuss the example of Denmark to illustrate the contents of the scorecards. The first graph is divided into three subsections that contain context and outcome indicators for three selected policy aims: child well-being, balancing work and family life and gender equality. Denmark scores low in most indicators of child wellbeing (values below the average over all countries for which an indicator is available). However, with the exception of the PISA scores, which are almost average, a low share can be interpreted in a positive way. The share of young men and women not in education and the child poverty rate there are the lowest among all countries. The share of children with low birth weight is also well below the average.

Regarding the indicators that describe the societal context and outcomes in the field of balancing work and family life, we also have to take into account the direction of the indicators. Denmark scores above-average with regard to maternal employment rates, the part-time employment rate of men, the fertility rate, and the share of households with no children, and the difference between the actual and ideal number of children also tends to be high. The average household size is below average. However, the share of people who state that they do not have children because of difficulties combining work and family life or due to financial prob-

lems is low. The share of childless women who do not desire to have children (childbearing preferences), the mean age of women at first birth, and the part-time employment rate of women are at a level at or near the average. It is not easy to summarise the results for Denmark under a common heading that reflects the complexity involved in assessing the outcomes and the contexts for the aim of balancing work and family life.

Looking at the aim of gender equality, we find three indicators that have already been used since they are also related to the aim of balancing work and family life (part-time employment rates of men and women, maternal employment rates). The other two indicators show that the gender wage gap as well as the gender employment gap is comparatively low in Denmark.

The second graph, which shows the family policy indicators, is divided into six subsections (benefits and taxes, expenditure, firm-level policies, working time, child care, parental leave). Denmark scores rather high (or at the top) with respect to compensation for parental leave, but lower with respect to the length of parental leave. Denmark also scores high in almost all indicators that describe the child-care system. In many areas—such as childcare—it is easy to assume that policy measures are related to all three policy aims. The enrolment rates in childcare are high. For zero to two-year-olds, they are the highest of all countries in our comparison. The share of children in full-time care (as a percentage of all children in care) is high. Childcare facilities in Denmark have, on average, long opening hours. On some of the indicators, Denmark scores low. First, the child:staff ratio in preschool programmes is low, which can be taken as an indicator of the quality of the programmes. The share of public funding is also low (while the overall public expenditure on ECEC is high). This example shows clearly that it takes a normative view to evaluate whether high or low indicators should be interpreted in a positive or negative manner.

Looking at working-time regulations, the scorecard shows a mixed picture for Denmark. The statutory maximum is the highest of all OECD and EU countries. However, the collectively agreed average working time is well below the average. There are, to varying degrees, possibilities to accumulate hours. A comparatively high share of firms offer the option to reverse part-time work. With respect to firm-level policies, the share of firms providing daycare is below average; the share of firms with males on parental leave is above average.

Overall, public expenditure indicators show that Denmark spends a high share of its GDP on family policies, in particular on in-kind measures. But expenditure on cash benefits is also above average (which includes expenditure on parental leave). Family support via tax breaks seems to play a minor role compared to other countries. The family benefit package for a family at the average wage level is slightly above average. Family benefits are targeted, however not strongly. Benefits for larger families or single parents are not particularly high compared to other families. Average tax rates are high, as are the differences between the tax rates for single and dual earners (i.e., the rate for dual earners is lower).

Although the scorecards are meant as a tool to summarise the detailed information collected in earlier chapters, they still provide information on the value of a given indicator, but in a more standardised manner, with direct reference to the overall distribution of an indicator (minimum, maximum, average). In our view, this allows for a quicker assessment of an overall country profile without assigning an overall grade to that country's family policy, since many of the indicators can be read in different ways (positive for one aim, negative for another).

7. Discussion

In this paper we used four criteria to categorize approaches for an assessment of family policy:

- focus on family: family, children, parents
- scope of family policy: encompassing, narrow / in-cash, in-kind, in-time
- empirical perspective: expenditure, social rights, outcomes
- method of aggregation: scorecards, index, typology

For OECD or EU-countries a wide variety of indicators is available which allow for family policy assessments which are broad in scope and focus and combine different empirical perspective. Most approaches look at family policy from different empirical perspectives and assume a wide scope of family policy, i.e. all types of policies are taken into account. As an example we have presented a graphical scorecard approach. The research discussed in this paper covers rich countries only. While the fundamental criteria may apply also for an assessment of family policy in other countries, the aims of family policy and the availability of data which may be used for an assessment differ strongly.

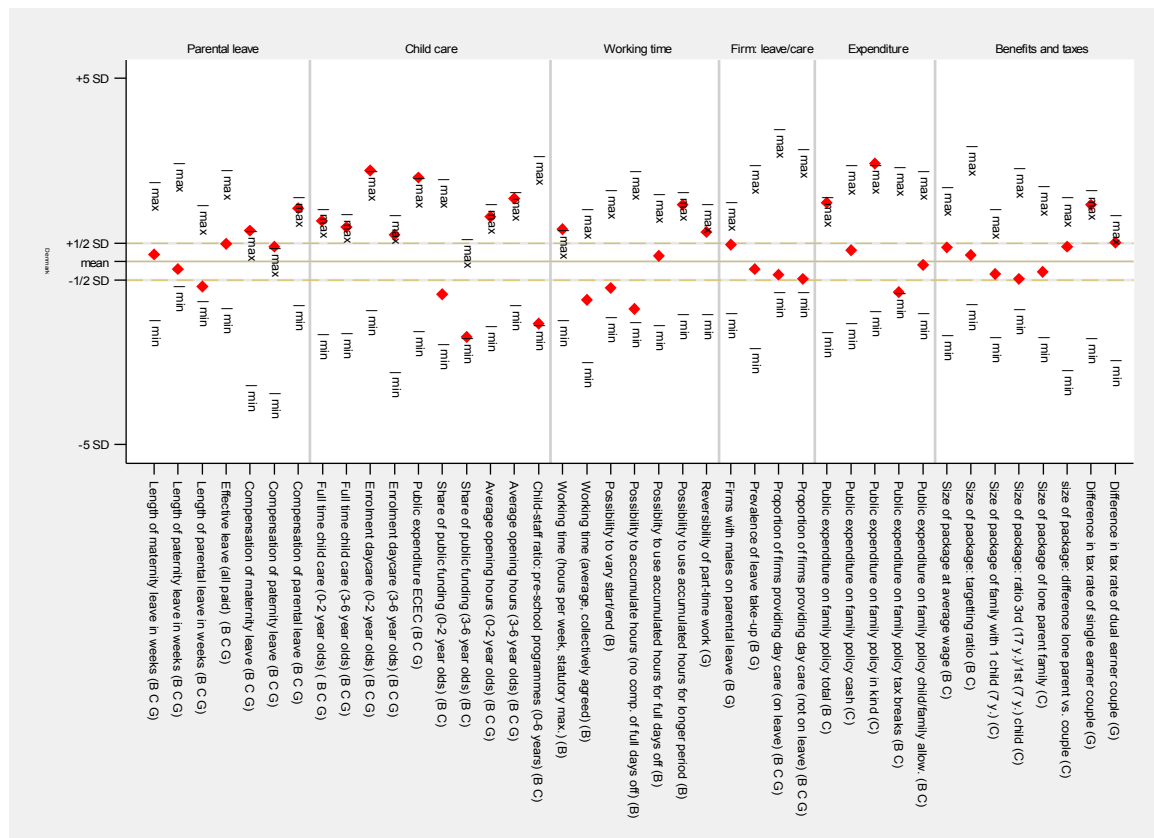
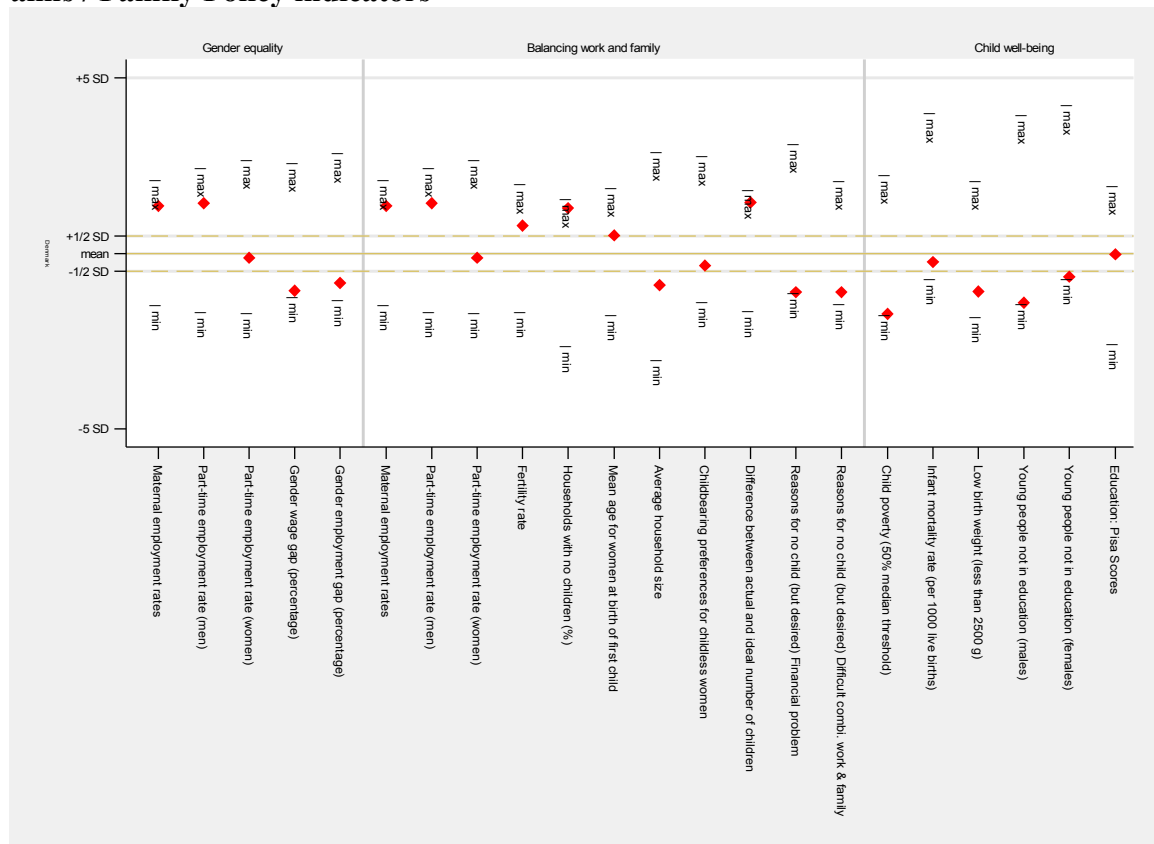
Concluding we may add:

- An assessment of family policy needs to start off from well-defined policy aims. If policy aims differ across countries this has to be taken into account in the assessment.
- An encompassing assessment of family policy includes a child- as well as parent-oriented perspective.
- Assessments may use different empirical perspectives. However, the advantages and disadvantages of each perspective need to be taken into account.
- The availability of indicators differs across countries. A framework for an assessment of family policy needs to be flexible to deal with the problem of missing information.
- Assessments as discussed in this paper may inform policy makers about the general features of national policy in a comparative perspective. However, such an approach is not suited for the evaluation of single programmes or the establishment of causal relationships between family policy and family outcomes.

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APPENDIX: Graphical scorecard (Denmark): Societal context and outcomes by policy aims / Family Policy indicators



Source: Lohmann et al. (2009). Notes: All values have been transformed into z-scores. The mean of a variable equals a z-score of 0 and a standard deviation (SD) a z-score of 1. Country specific value in relation to the distribution of an indicator over all countries.