

Cross-cutting introduction to Family Benefits (Table IX)

The idea of a family unit may be a common structure in all countries, but its empirical character is varied and contested. Over recent decades the form and composition of family units have evolved in response to the changing role of women, fluctuations in birth rate and extensions of life expectancy. Social security benefits to meet the needs of families (and individual family members in particular) have a long history and have often embodied policies and priorities that reflect national character and politics. In addition, families have witnessed how social policies have been developed and adapted to reflect changed perceptions of need, the requirement for redistribution of income within and between families taking account of changes in gender and childcare responsibility. Family policies or state support for families are therefore often an amalgamation of policies, regulations and laws rather than single initiatives targeted at families. The family support system is an important policy tool that may increase opportunities for families and children as well as improving their quality of life. A variety of goals motivate the provision of family support, and may include pro-natalism (ie incentives to have children) all the way through to policies and provision which enable both men and women to take up work or to enable and encourage parents to take time-off to care for their infant children. At a time of rising joblessness and inadequate unemployment benefits, a changing demographic landscape (with more cohabitation, including non married-couples and more single parents), family support policies can (at best) effectively alleviate the economic situation for those at greatest risk as well as providing people with better life opportunities.

It is possible to distinguish between four main categories or policy options in relation to state support for families with young children:

- direct and indirect subsidies for parents such as family allowances, childcare benefits, vouchers, tax benefits and deductions;
- provision of early childhood care and education services through public institutions (such as public nurseries, crèches, pre-schools and kindergartens);
- parental leave policies, such as maternity, paternity, parental and child-raising leave;
- direct and indirect subsidies for some special cases such as unemployed persons, pensioners, orphans.

Cross-cutting introductions to MISSOC Tables

Family support may be in the form of a direct cash payout, such as an allowance. This benefit is usually given to families with children up to a certain age and under some conditions of residence of the child and/or some additional conditions like the parental alliance, adoption or unofficial guardianship. The concept of this allowance is based on the rationale that raising children places an extra financial burden on the household and this allowance provides support for raising children and to meet family expenses. Some payments are lump sum and one-off in nature and others are payments made until the child becomes an adult.

Family allowances may be universal, meaning that they are awarded simply on a per-child basis regardless of family income or contribution record; or they may be selective, meaning that they are income-or means-tested and awarded only to families below a certain economic threshold. A selective system provides greater benefits to certain types of families, such as single-parent families (i.e. unmarried, divorced or separated parents left with the sole charge of their child) or families with disabled children. Benefits may also be based on a principle of social insurance and depend on parents' employment records and contribution rates. The amount may be the same for all families (a flat rate), or earnings- or age-related. The interaction between the benefits and tax system is increasingly significant and in some countries tax allowances and credits are applied to income in recognition of children or other family responsibilities.

Leave policies set out rules for the amount of time to be taken off work, compensation and other terms of employment. Maternity rights confirm that the mother can take time away from work with a leave benefit prior to confinement and that she can spend time with the newborn infant afterwards. Paternity rights award the father time and money to enable him to stay home with the newborn child. Maternity/paternity leave focus normally on the weeks following the birth, while parental rights award both parents the right to take time off from work and look after the child, normally after maternity leave expires.

Finally, some countries emphasise mechanisms to guarantee the non-fulfilment of parent's legal obligation to pay maintenance for their children.