

## Reproductive Decision-Making in a Micro-Macro Perspective:

### Policy Implications

#### Deliverable 7.21

This report is aimed at a non-academic audience concerned with birth rates in European countries. It was compiled by Dimiter Philipov as a compact display of policy implications presented in more details, along with supporting scientific research, in REPRO's deliverable DL 7.20 "*Synthesis and policy-relevant information*". It has been revised and printed in the European Demographic Research Papers (EDRP) 2011/1 issued by the Vienna Institute of Demography of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Readers interested in more details on issues discussed in this paper are therefore advised to consult the EDRP document, available at [http://www.oeaw.ac.at/vid/download/edrp\\_1\\_11.pdf](http://www.oeaw.ac.at/vid/download/edrp_1_11.pdf). Academic discussion on theories as well as models, data, references, and individual authorship can be found in the source deliverable DL 7.20 and in the EDRP paper.

REPRO web-site:

<http://www.repro-project.org>

<http://www.oeaw.ac.at/vid/repro>

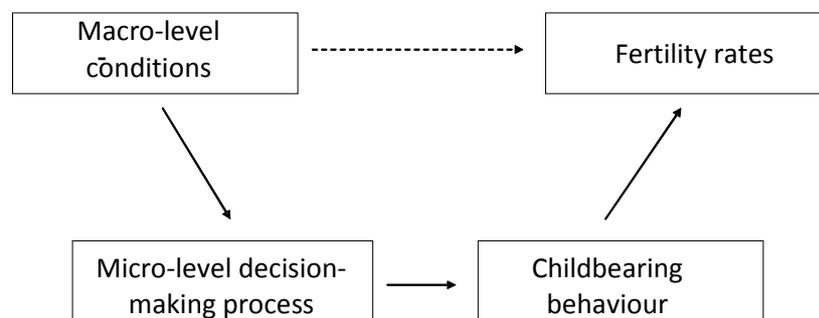
## 1. REPRO: main objective

“Europeans want more children than they actually have”: the meaning of this sentence persists in a series of documents issued by European institutions, for example in a 2008 Resolution of the European Parliament, and in the Green Paper of 2005 and the White paper of 2006 issued by the European Commission. The difference between actual and desired fertility, frequently referred to as “fertility gap”, indicates the existence of a window of opportunities for the elaboration of family and child-friendly policies by governments in the European Union. Moreover, unfulfilled desires for having a child indicate that for the realisation of their family plans people need adequate support which policy makers are expected to consider scrupulously. The REPRO project provides rigorous research on this line of reasoning. This paper summarises achievements that are of interest to policy makers and other stakeholders.

The main objective pursued by the REPRO project is *to fill gaps in the knowledge on the factors that drive changes in fertility rates and to generate new scientific and policy-oriented knowledge on the reproductive decision-making of contemporary Europeans.*

The main objective identifies reproductive decision-making as a focal point in REPRO. Reproductive decision-making of individuals includes the construction of intentions to have or not to have children and their subsequent realisation.

The main objective identifies also macro and micro levels of discourse (the figure below).



The micro level represents individuals’ construction of childbearing intentions and their subsequent realisation, or frustration. Fertility rates are an aggregate of individual births. Individuals formulate their decisions in a macro environment characterised by the influence of diverse institutions and particularly by the impact of relevant family and other social and economic policies.

Along this structure we draw policy implications as follows:

- At the macro level: here policy implications refer to links between the economic level and fertility as well as to the efficiency of policies related to family life.
- At the micro level: implications refer to factors that drive formation of fertility intentions and their realisation.
- Macro-micro level, where social norms impinge on fertility decisions.

## 2. The domain of REPRO's policy messages

### (i) Unintended pregnancies are out of the scope of REPRO

REPRO stresses the need of policy action to provide support to people for the realisation of their childbearing intentions. However, intentions might be to have a child, or not to have a child. These two types of intentions call for a differentiated policy approach and require very different sets of policies.

Some pregnancies were intended by the woman, others were unintended. Unintended pregnancies may be interrupted with an abortion, or may end with an undesired birth. The mitigation of similar undesirable outcomes lies within the scope of family planning and policies targeted at spreading knowledge and practices of contraception and provision of pertinent devices and services. The REPRO project does not discuss these issues although their utmost importance is recognised.

- Our policy messages relate to the construction of intentions to have a child and their subsequent realisation or frustration.

### (ii) Targeting a change in intentions not to have a child is a sensitive issue

As discussed above, intentions not to have a child and hence to avoid undesired pregnancies are respected and supported through family planning. However, should policies aim at a change in these intentions? This is a subtle issue. When people form intentions not to have a child under the pressure of obstacles which can be mitigated with policy action, the answer should be “yes”, provided these obstacles are well-identified and policy action is efficient. Yet there is a danger that aiming at a change in individuals' decision-making can harm the personal right of free choice (for example setting restrictions to the spread of contraceptives with the purpose of achieving a higher fertility). So instead of raising similar policy aims it is preferable to aim at identifying and alleviating obstacles that prevent the realisation of actual intentions to have a child. The efficiency of this policy approach will be noticed by persons who do not want to have a child and is likely to prompt a revision of this intention on their own preferred choice.

- A switch in intentions not to have a child towards intentions to have a child can be achieved as a policy side-effect in a way which guarantees personal freedom of choice.

### (iii) REPRO's policy messages do not claim an all-encompassing system

The REPRO team reached numerous policy implications. Still there is no claim that they are systematised in an organised policy package; our policy implications should just be considered as contributions towards an enriched background in the construction of policies and policy packages. We emphasise only those policy-related issues where REPRO has its contributions.

### 3. The macro-environment of reproductive decision-making

#### Fertility rates in Europe

It is common knowledge nowadays that fertility rates are low in all European countries. When measuring fertility levels demographers outline the so-called tempo effect, which is observed when fertility is postponed to later years in life. Because of postponement, births may decline during the current year but they will be realised during subsequent years. These postponed births constitute the timing effect. When postponement declines (i.e. the timing effect dwindles) an increasing number of postponed births will be realised and fertility will mark a slight increase, other things being equal. Actually this has been observed in a number of European countries during recent years.

- Some fertility indicators may show an increase in fertility that is a result of a tempo effect. However, it would be premature to conclude, without delineating the tempo effect, that institutional or structural factors (and policies in particular) have contributed to a relative increase in fertility.

#### Economic development and fertility

REPRO scientists reported an important relationship between fertility levels and the GDP per capita observed in the OECD countries during the period 1960-2006. With an increase of the GDP fertility declined; this well-known relationship was observed for levels of GDP per capita till around 32,600 US Dollars (2006 Purchasing Power Parity values). Higher values of the GDP per capita correlated with an increase in fertility levels.

This relationship shows that fertility is relatively higher in most advanced economies. The richest countries can maintain more expensive social policies which attract women to the labour market while at the same time giving their families better opportunities to rear their children.

- A high level of society's affluence opens opportunities for the enhancement of social and family welfare. Policy makers in countries with most advanced economies may differ on whether these opportunities are adequately utilised.

#### Relevant policies and policy packages

There is a bewildering diversity of potentially relevant policies in Europe that may have an influence on reproductive decisions. They can be divided into five categories:

- Policies that support mothers-to-be during pregnancy until delivery;
- Support for childbirth, e.g. a baby kit, vouchers, or a lump sum paid upon the birth of a child ('baby bonus');
- More regular, long-term financial assistance for families to cover the direct cost of children. This comes in various forms, such as family allowance, welfare benefits dependent on the number of children, tax breaks for families with children, or support to cover some education expenses;
- Support designed to help parents balance having a job and raising children. This category encompasses especially child care and education facilities, work arrangements such as

flexible working time and part-time work availability; as well as financial benefits and tax breaks linked to employment;

- Entitlements to paid or unpaid parental leaves for parents who are not in paid employment or who stop working to care for young children.

By type of transfer these policies can be divided into monetary transfers (e.g. ‘baby bonus’ or tax breaks for parents), leave provisions (especially maternity or parental leave, but also short-term leaves for parents with sick children) and infrastructure provisions (especially child care facilities). In addition, the provision of health and education facilities as well as their quality and costs may influence reproductive decisions.

The effect of policies on reproductive decision-making can be summarised along the following dimensions:

- Many different policies affect fertility decisions simultaneously;
- Most of these policies are not aimed at influencing fertility but motivated by different objectives;
- Policies may be analysed one by one, but it is the combination of policies and their coherence, or their conflicting influences, that matters for reproductive decisions;
- Stability is an important policy feature, improving the predictability of the consequences that individual reproductive decisions have;
- The fertility impact of policies may differ widely by social group, by age and by the number of children already born;
- Also the institutional context, including the prevailing norms and attitudes in a country, matters for the way how a particular policy may be accepted and how it will influence reproductive decisions;
- It is important to distinguish short-term and long-term policy effects as well as their influences on the timing and level of fertility;
- Well-designed policies signal that having and rearing children is important and valued, and that parents will be supported in their endeavour.

## **Policies have a limited influence on fertility levels**

Financial transfers such as family allowances have a positive but small and mostly temporary effect on period fertility rates. The relatively small effect of cash transfers to families found in a number of studies can be explained by a combination of the following factors:

- Financial transfers do little to reduce the opportunity costs of childrearing, which have increased with rising female labour market aspirations;
- Financial transfers only cover a small part of the direct cost of children;
- Financial transfers can be one-time contributions, such as ‘baby bonuses’ that do not substantially reduce the cost of children over the life course.

### *Duration and payment of parental leave*

The effect of paid and employment-protected leave on fertility is ambiguous. On the one hand, these entitlements support household income and labour market attachment around childbirth, which will have a positive effect on fertility. However, as entitlements are often conditional on employment, they encourage men and women to postpone childbirth until they have established themselves in the labour market, which has a negative effect on overall fertility. This ambiguity is likely to explain

the variable results reported for the effect of leave entitlements on fertility rates from cross-country comparisons.

- Thus it is not clear whether the duration of leave entitlements increases or decreases fertility, but in any case its effect is small. Moreover, there are indications that long durations might have a negative effect on fertility.

Payment conditions during the leave period can also affect fertility behaviour.

- Although one would expect a positive effect of payment rates on fertility, the evidence suggests that the effect is small and influences the timing of births rather than completed family size.

### *Availability of formal child care*

- Evidence from cross-country as well as national studies almost invariably points to a positive and significant effect of formal child care availability and enrolment on fertility rates

### *Part-time employment*

- Long working hours and working weeks make it harder to match paid work and family care commitments, thus negatively affecting fertility rates.
- Part-time employment opportunities have a positive effect on fertility rates in OECD countries, especially among women with a higher level of education. However, these results are not always replicated in other studies and are likely to be country-specific.
- Rather than the length of working time being important, the extent of individual control over one's working time strengthens the intentions to have children in European countries.

## **Summary**

- *Policies remain diverse across Europe despite the fact that most countries have increased their support to families. The main differences remain with respect to the support for working parents with children under age 3 and the extent to which parental leave entitlements and provision of child care services complement each other.*
- *The fertility impact of different policies is typically modest, and concerns mostly the timing of childbearing, as well-designed policies may allow couples to realise their childbearing plans earlier. This timing impact is not necessarily unimportant: it may help halting the ongoing processes of childbearing postponement, allow more couples to have children before the age when they may face infertility problems, and temporarily increase the number of births in a country, and thus also the cohort size of new generations.*

## 4. Childbearing intentions attract increasing policy attention

Policies targeting at an increase in birth rates rely on instruments which are expected to influence fertility and its determinants. Actually policies can have an influence on those births which are the outcome of a planned behaviour, i.e. successful policies influence individuals' decisions to have a child, and their subsequent realisation.

Since policies interfere with the childbearing decision-making process, their implementation should be based on more information with regard to:

- How people construct their intentions to have a child;
- Whether people realise their intentions to have a child, and if they don't, what impedes the realisation of these intentions.

REPRO research examined these questions in detail.

### How people construct their intentions to have a child

The REPRO project adopted the socio-psychological Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) as its unifying framework for studying the formation of childbearing intentions. According to this theory, intentions are formed along three main factors:

- *Attitudes* to childbearing: people's internal evaluations that having a child will lead to a positive or negative outcome for them. For example a positive outcome is that they will feel satisfaction and more security in life; a negative outcome is that the financial situation of the family will worsen, or that the individual will no longer have sufficient time for meeting friends;
- *Perceived norm*: perception of external social pressures for having a child, for example a person might be influenced by the opinion of close relatives, such as parents, and friends;
- *Perceived behavioural control*: people's perceptions that they are able to exercise their control over obstacles that might arise in connection with childbearing, such as inappropriate housing conditions, low income, unemployment, bad health, insufficient facilities for child care.

The team studied mainly short-term (and mid-term) intentions: to have a child during the subsequent 2 or 3 years. Long-term, or life time, intentions were analysed in a different theoretical framework. A focus on short-term intentions has the following advantages and disadvantages:

- Short-term intentions can be checked effectively for their realisation;
- Individuals and couples are supposedly well acquainted with their situation during the next 2-3 years and hence can construct effective short-term plans;
- However, short-term intentions are indicative about timing of a birth; they do not inform about intended family size.

The three factors specified above are a composition of a variety of antecedents whose impact on intentions was analysed in detail to give a multitude of (frequently country-specific) policy-relevant inferences. In this paper we consider only general inferences.

REPRO analysed the impact of policy context (defined as the percentage of GDP spent on family- and child-friendly policies) on the formation of childbearing intentions across European countries. Where family policy expenditure is higher (3% to 3.8% of GDP), intentions were affected only by positive attitudes and subjective norms, while with less generous family policy (around 1% of GDP) intentions were also affected by expected negative outcomes and perceived behavioural control (PBC). This difference is further underlined by the observation that PBC was high in countries where expenditure is higher and low in countries where it is lower.

Summarised policy implications include:

- Childbearing intentions are formed under the prevalence of various factors which include personal attitudes and the influence of prevalent norms, along with factors related to the ability of individuals to control their financial or employment situation, their health or their child care availability. Factors and their components may have an opposing effect on the resultant intention; the dominant direction of influence defines whether the intention will be for having or for not having a child.
- Policies which rely on traditional instruments such as child allowances, parental leaves, or facilitation of employment, exert their direct effect on the third factor: perceived behavioural control.
- The implementation of policies needs to account for the impact of all three factors. As REPRO analyses show, policies have an indirect impact on positive attitudes and perceived norms on childbearing. This effect is achieved when policies are stable in the long run, as individuals then have confidence in their implementation and develop positive attitudes to childbearing. Stable policy instruments will be evaluated positively by one's friends and relatives and hence incur a positive normative pressure for childbearing.
- Results indicate that different factors influence the intentions to have a first or a second child. Having a first child is influenced mainly by expectations for personal satisfaction and normative pressure to enter parenthood. Intentions to have a second child are influenced by a large variety of factors which indicates that constructing this decision is more sophisticated than the decision to enter into parenthood. Policies may have to be specified for the support of a first or of a second child.
- National context matters: the significance of factors differs across countries. Hence a successful implementation of policies in one country does not guarantee their success in other countries. Countries may learn from one another but need to run additional analyses before policy implementation. For example, strong preferences towards parental child care dominate in some countries while in other countries formal child care facilities are widely accepted.
- The REPRO results support the interpretation that policies play an important psychological role in signalling that having and rearing children is important and valued, and that parents will be supported in their endeavour. It might even further suggest that the precise details (within boundaries) of policies may be less important than the existence of policies and institutional support that can be regarded as having a beneficiary effect for the society as a whole. Such a conclusion would affirm the approach to policy taken by most countries with relatively high levels of expenditure on

family- and child-friendly policies, primarily aimed at permitting a balance between work and family, but with variations that reflect national contexts.

### Couples' intentions

Data for the analyses of couples' intentions were available only for two countries: Bulgaria and Italy. In both countries family norms have a considerably more pronounced effect on the formation of childbearing intentions than in northern or western European countries. The main inferences, although informative, should therefore be interpreted with care where other countries are considered.

- The psychological effect of a couple's mothers' support on positive intentions in Italy, where government family support is low, may be having a similar effect to policy in other countries, i.e. it contributes to the material and emotional environment in which couples can focus more on the benefits of having a child than on consequent difficulties. While policy measures are unlikely to replace the psychological effect of grandmothers' support on the expected outcomes of having a child, these observations support other research that underlines the importance of policies that enable access to child care. They do not, however, inform debates about the relative value of public child care and support for family-provided child care in different contexts.
- Couples without (grand)mothers would need particular attention if policies were to emphasise the support for grandparents' child care. This also underlines the psychological importance of (grand)mothers' approval, suggesting that institutional interventions should sustain, if not strengthen, conditions supporting three generations: child, parents and grandparents.
- In the attempt to improve the perceived behavioural control policies should not ignore men, or the couple as a decision-making unit, particularly where gender roles are closer to traditional division of labour.

### Realisation of intentions: a key outcome of effective policies

The realisation of fertility intentions is a long-standing topic of scientific research. Scientists have noted that intentions may not get realised for a diversity of reasons; actually individuals may revise their intentions so that some who intended to have a child will decide not to have a child under changing conditions of life, and vice versa for some of those who had initially intended not to have a child.

A review of past research on the relationship between fertility intentions and fertility highlights the salience of the following factors:

- The timeframe of intention (short-term intentions are often expressed with higher certainty);
- Certainty, i.e. how well-defined and certain intentions are (uncertainty and ambiguity are common and inherent features of the reproductive decision-making process);
- Biological and health factors, which directly intervene into individuals' plans, and their efforts to realise them;
- Intention of the partner: agreement or disagreement between partners strongly influences intention realisation;
- Demographic (especially age, sex and parity) and social group characteristics;
- Occurrence of unexpected life events;
- Time and context: Historical and institutional context, including culture, norms and policies.

## Realisation of short-term intentions

The REPRO team used panel survey data to examine specific short-term intentions. During the first wave respondents were asked about their intention to have a child within two years. Later respondents were asked whether they had a child during the three years after the first survey wave. On the basis of these observations respondents who declared that they intended to have a child during the next two years were divided in three groups:

- Intentional parents: those had a child during the next three years;
- Postponers: those who did not have a child but declared that they intend to have one during the subsequent two years;
- Abandoners: those who did not have a child and declared they do not intend to have one during the subsequent two years either.

Data for four countries were used to estimate the percentage distribution of respondents in the three groups. Figure 1 displays the findings.

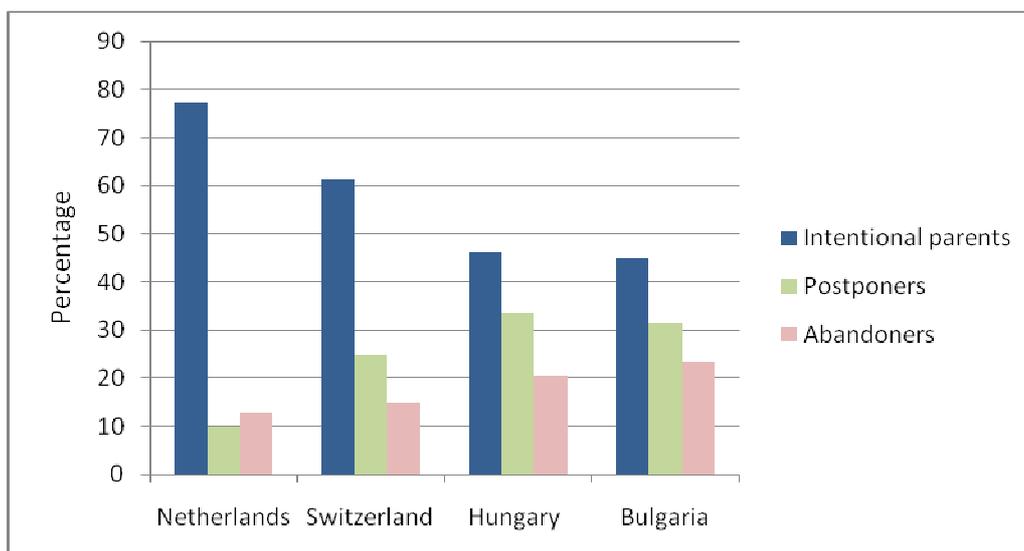


Figure 1: Intentional parents, postponers and abandoners of childbearing intentions in four European countries.

77% of the Dutch respondents realised their intention to have a child during the subsequent two years. This percentage is lower in Switzerland (62%) and below 50% both in Hungary and Bulgaria. The highest percentage of “abandoners” was observed in the latter two countries as well.

Among the reasons frustrating the realisation of intentions, researchers identified some that do not pertain to policies, for example worsening relations with the partner. Nonetheless, some important structural observations could be made.

The pace of social change in the former communist countries and the unparalleled change of the cultural system and institutional structures in these countries could be responsible for the observed weak relationship between intentions and behaviour. Two sets of explanations are proposed:

- First, the ideas about family formation and the social schemes about the timing of parenthood (which was “at a very young age” during the period of state socialism before 1990) change only gradually. The slowly-changing normative system of childbearing has coexisted with rapidly

changing societal conditions. This involved many uncertainties and resulted in high rates of postponement and abandonment of fertility intentions.

- A complementary interpretation can be based on the concept of ‘unrealistic optimism’. Individuals can be unrealistically optimistic in their intentions if they overestimate the degree of control they have over their own fertility behaviour. Further research is needed to identify what barriers people underestimate, and what conditions they judge too optimistically when formulating their fertility intentions.
- Unexpected and rapid social change could be an important reason for the high rate of failure in realising short-term fertility intentions in the formerly state-socialist countries. An effective family policy should be predictable and stable, which will decrease the structural uncertainty emerging from rapid changes in the society, including policy programs.
- The observed wide differences between countries in the share of women and men who do not realise their childbearing intentions suggest country-specific policy implications.
- Governments in countries with very high proportions of people who unintentionally postpone their family formation should pay attention to this issue and consider adjusting their family policies to better cater to these people.
- A stable co-residential union is a prerequisite for the realisation of fertility intentions. People who intended to have a child without living with partner (e.g. those living in a ‘living-apart-together’ relationship, or co-residing with their parents without a common dwelling with the partner) have a much lower chance to realise their intentions. Regulations of the housing market that support younger people in acquiring and keeping a stable dwelling are of key importance. For example, in Hungary many young couples who intend to have a child live in non-cohabiting partnerships out of necessity, as the share of housing in the affordable rental sector is very limited.
- Since younger respondents realise their intentions more successfully than the older ones, policies that support the realisation of earlier intended births (but not ‘too early’ births, particularly not teenage births) potentially have a broad relevance.

### **Stability of long-term intentions**

Changes in life circumstances may invoke changes in fertility intentions. The more stable intentions are, the less likely are such changes. British data were used to examine the stability of intentions during a 6-year period (Table 1). A change of an intention to have a child towards the intention not to have one is displayed as “revised down” while the inverse change is noted as “revised up”.

Table 1: Changes in fertility intentions over a 6-year period (in percentages)

		Revised down	Unchanged	Revised Up	Total
Men	18-24	33.0	54.5	12.5	100
	25-29	25.5	55.8	18.7	100
	30-34	19.9	70.3	9.9	100
	35-39	7.8	87.9	4.4	100
Women	18-24	27.5	50.5	22.0	100
	25-29	21.6	63.4	15.0	100
	30-34	14.6	76.5	8.9	100
	35-39	4.8	92.4	2.8	100

The following inferences can be made from Table 1:

- The higher the age, the less likely a change in intentions. Respondents aged 35-39 are very unlikely to change their intentions;
  - Revising down is more likely than revising up;
  - Women are more likely to revise up than men and less likely to revise down.
- The gap between intended and realised fertility is often conceptualised as representing an unmet need for children. It is clear that many individuals do fail to have some, or even all, of the children they would have liked to have, due to obstacles which may include social, economic or biological constraints. However, it would be wrong to represent the entire gap between expected and achieved fertility as arising from an unmet need for children. People do change their expectations, and constraints do matter; but other things matter, too. Some people decide to have fewer children than they originally wanted and some more; some find new partners and some negotiate with existing partners; some learn on the job about children and parenthood. In other words, while some people clearly experience constraints to achieving their planned fertility, Iacovou and Tavares (REPRO partner Essex University) have shown that many people simply change their minds *and the difference between expressed intentions at one stage in life, and their realisation, may not reflect a generalised unmet need for children.*

### More on Bulgaria and Hungary

- The dual-earner family model is inevitable for securing a reasonable living standard in both Hungary and Bulgaria today. Since the availability as well as the use of part-time work is minimal in these countries, this means full-time employment for both partners.
- Childrearing entails the suspension of gainful employment for one half of the couple, at least for a transitory period. Hungarian family policy encourages this withdrawal for a relatively long period of two years. The current set of policies and economic conditions does not support any other options though, especially an early return to work for the mothers. There is a lack of public crèches, and wages are too low to make a paid full-time babysitter an affordable option for most couples. Higher realisation rates of birth intentions may be encouraged by expanded options of labour market reintegration, improving crèche provision and expanding part-time employment. And if reconciling work and family becomes easier,

not only women's employment level, but probably also the chances of realising their and their partner's fertility intentions would increase.

#### **More on the effect of economic uncertainty on fertility intentions: France**

- Rather generous and extensive family and employment policies may reduce the negative impact of unemployment and other sources of economic uncertainty on fertility.
- Achieving a stable job situation is paramount for fertility decisions among men. Policies should aim to stimulate labour market functioning and job creation, especially for young adults who have excessively high unemployment rates in most parts of Europe.

## 5. Fertility cultures in Europe

REPRO analyses included a deeper understanding of reproductive decision-making across European countries, using qualitative data which were available for several countries. Five main topics emerged from this analysis:

### The emergence of a culture of childlessness

It can be argued that a culture of voluntary childlessness can emerge in countries that have adopted a post-modern vision of the benefits of childbearing. Such a vision brings forward childlessness as a voluntary lifestyle choice, motivated by the quest for personal fulfilment.

This 'culture of childlessness' is most advanced in Germany. Respondents do value children and think that children deserve the best. However, as one respondent put it: *"if somebody decides to have children, for me it's either children or a career. Both together, that doesn't fit."*

In Poland, by contrast, voluntary childlessness remains rare. All respondents think children are very important and they all want to have children some day. A high regard for having children in the value system of Polish men and women is sustained by social norms and a complex system of sanctions and rewards.

- Improving the work-life balance is of paramount importance in countries like Germany or Italy, where many women feel they have to choose between motherhood and career, or other interests. More women could opt for having children if they had a wider set of options available for combining childrearing with other interests.
- Attitudes to family life, child care arrangements or women's roles change more slowly than many other aspects related to childbearing. Policy-makers should not expect immediate results from new child care policies as measures targeted at changing childbearing and childrearing practices need to be durable for new practices will often be only gradually adopted.

### Changing gender roles and fertility decisions

In most contexts gender roles are still predominantly traditional, characterised by men's very low involvement with childrearing and most other regular household tasks. This may explain why in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, as well as Italy, men's involvement with family care does not appear to be important in couples' fertility decision-making. In contrast, men in France and Germany often contribute to family work, in line with the frequent early return of mothers to full-time work, and the impact of both partners' domestic involvement on fertility decisions appears clearly.

Labour market options for men and women, as well as child care options in different countries are of paramount importance for understanding the way respondents envision and practice gender roles. France is the only country in the frame of this REPRO analysis, along with eastern Germany, which provides affordable and abundant public or private child care options for children under the age of three.

In the case of western Germany and Italy, the lack of affordable child care options and negative attitudes towards child care means that most women have to stop working after childbirth until the time their child goes to kindergarten, and then work part-time when their children attend primary school. In the eastern European post-socialist countries studied in WP5 (Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland) women are also expected to stay at home when they have small children, and child care options below age 3 are both limited and negatively perceived by society.

Grandmothers are an important source of help. In Poland, grandparents are often expected to help with child care from the very early stage. In Bulgaria, grandparents' care is also facilitated by young couples frequently living in with the parents of one of the partners, which is in particular prevalent in small towns and villages.

- Schemes that support men's involvement in family work and child care—nested within more general family policies (such as the incentive to take part of the parental leave for fathers)—were successful in northern European countries. However, given that in many countries with low support to working mothers the prevailing norms about gender roles are rather traditional, policies targeted at promoting early child care and men's involvement in family work may initially have only limited impact. Therefore they need to be durable and will only be effective over a longer time.

## **When values do not fit practices: the uneven advance of social change**

Individuals' values and behaviours are usually in agreement, conforming to a psychological need to have a coherent approach to life. People's visions of women's paid work usually match what they or their partners do for a living, their visions of male participation in family work often match what they or their partners do in the household, and the same can be said of institutional child care. However, a mismatch between stated ideals and actual practices may arise. In the REPRO studies, this was especially the case with regard to men: theoretically they defend a more egalitarian distribution of roles between man and women though in practice they advocate a fairly traditional division of roles.

Another discrepancy repeatedly identified by REPRO researchers is the contrast between prevailing social norms and structural conditions in times of social change. When structural conditions change, individuals could be expected to adjust their behaviours rapidly. However, individuals do not adapt fast, because they follow social logic: norms often change more slowly than structural conditions. Given the large inertia in child care-related attitudes, new policies may be slow in affecting fertility behaviour.

- Policies promoting the work-family balance should be designed to encourage the involvement of fathers in domestic work and gender equality within dual-earner families.
- Analyses show frequent 'delays' between structural changes in the society and the adoption of the corresponding new norms in the realm of childbearing. Policy makers should expect a time lag between the introduction of new policies and their initial impact due to normative resistance.
- In the long run, policies often have larger effects than expected when they induce normative changes. Eventually, the desired practices may also be adopted by individuals who do not directly benefit from policies.

## A typology of declared fertility intentions

Based on the qualitative interviews REPRO researchers developed six categories of fertility intentions, which cover all the cases encountered in the interviews. These six categories are distinguished according to the presence of a clearly expressed desire to have a child and a clear time frame for it.

—*Surely yes*. The respondents in this category want a child mainly because of its emotional advantage (joy and happiness). Respondents in this category are inclined towards rather young parenthood as it makes childrearing burdens lighter and communication with a child easier.

—*Surely Not*. These respondents represent the opposite end of the fertility intentions continuum. They are firmly decided not to have a(nother) child.

—*As soon as (contingent intentions)*. These individuals mention a variety of reasons which interfere with their intention to have an otherwise desired child. These reasons are mostly perceived as external factors, often outside of the control of the respondent.

—*Surely one day*. This category is mostly made up by the childless respondents. What links these men and women is their feeling that they have not yet reached the stage in their lives when they can even consider childbearing.

—*Maybe (uncertain intention)*. These respondents do not express a strong desire for a(nother) child. Their intentions are uncertain and ambiguous.

—*At times (ambivalent intentions)*. This category comprises only women. They have a strong perceived incompatibility of a possible desired parenthood with other life course spheres. For these respondents living a childless life is not an easy alternative.

## Changing intentions and behavioural outcome over time

- *In many cases, fertility intentions—especially when they are contingent, uncertain, or ambivalent—are unstable and evolve over time. Policy interventions, particularly when their effects are stable and durable, are likely to affect this evolution.*

## 6. The macro-micro link: fertility decision-making in context

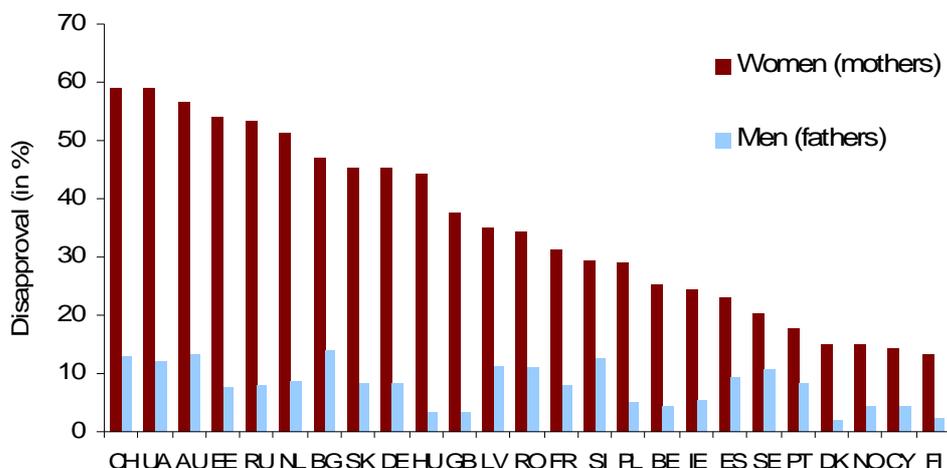
Multi-level models were used to study the influence of economic, cultural and institutional macro-level factors on individual-level fertility attitudes and behaviour. Attention was focused on three sets of factors outlined in the subsequent three sub-sections.

### Perceived norms concerning fertility-related behaviour: cross-national differences

Norms belong to the three cornerstones of the theory of planned behaviour. They fulfil an important psychological function in regulating the life course and are important for demographic decision-making. Differences in fertility patterns across countries may partly stem from the differences in prevailing norms. Other explanations suggest, however, that the importance of norms has waned during the last decades owing to increased individual autonomy and a rising tolerance to non-traditional behaviour.

- Relatively little variation exists across Europe in the mean lower (age 19 years for women and 20-21 for men) and upper age thresholds to childbearing (in most countries 40-42 for woman, 44-46 for men). The social reproductive life span is therefore shorter than the biological reproductive life span.
- A large variation exists between countries in disapproval rates with respect to voluntary childlessness. Disapproval rates of female voluntary childlessness vary from 4 % in Sweden to 86 % in Ukraine. In ten European countries a majority of the population disapproves of voluntary childlessness; almost all these countries are formerly state-socialist countries in central and eastern Europe.
- There is a considerable variation with regard to combining motherhood and full-time employment. Figure 2 below highlights this observation.

**Figure 2** Disapproval of having a full-time job for fathers and mothers with children below age 3



The figure shows that disapproval of a woman having a full-time job when the child is under three years old varies enormously around Europe: from nearly 60% in Switzerland and Ukraine to less than 20% in southern and northern European countries such as Portugal, Denmark, Norway, Cyprus and Finland.

- *Where norms on childbearing-related behaviour that exist within a country have an impact on actual childbearing among the population, policy makers should be aware of the strength of these norms. For instance, in countries where combining motherhood and full-time employment is strongly disapproved of, policies that try to increase female labour force participation may not be as effective as in countries where society generally approves of this combination.*
- *Where norms influence actual behaviour it might be useful to try to change norms that conflict with existing policy aims. Again, the combination of motherhood and full-time employment provides a compelling example. This double standard with regard to combining parenthood and labour force participation strongly discourages either female labour force participation or motherhood, and also the combination of both in many countries. Such a prospect should be particularly alarming to many European governments that try to increase either female labour force participation, or fertility, or both. How to overcome it? Given the high level of disapproval of this behaviour, policies that would allow this disapproval to diminish may be highly effective in changing the behaviour itself. Ways of doing so could be to show that it is actually quite feasible to combine both roles, or to show that the quality of existing child care is high and that children are not in any way harmed if they spend a considerable amount of time in such child care.*
- *Another potential avenue is to take the opposite road. Rather than trying to loosen norms on motherhood and full-time employment, one could try to strengthen the negative norms on fatherhood and full-time employment. If successful, this could lead to fathers taking more responsibility for the actual parenting of their children, and this in turn could allow mothers to increase their labour force participation.*
- *The finding that disapproval of voluntary childlessness is weaker in countries where gender equality is high than in countries where gender equality is low, may have important implications. If the same relationship between gender equality and norms might also hold for other norms, this could imply that a general policy to increase the position of females in society might indirectly translate into increased autonomy for women to make their own decisions. This increased autonomy could make it easier for women to ignore norms that conflict with their own interests, and it might—in the long run—even lead to a weakening of norms that restrict women’s decision-making autonomy in fertility-related issues.*

## Child-number and child-timing intentions across Europe

One REPRO study attempted to shed light on the causal process underlying fertility behaviour of individuals in a social context as well as on selected aggregate-level factors influencing fertility decision-making of Europeans. Intentions were specified with respect to the number of children that the respondent wishes to have, and the timing of births in terms of an intention to have a child during the next 3 years.

- According to the estimates of the multilevel models, short-term fertility intentions are more closely related to situational factors, such as living in a cohabiting partnership or being

enrolled in education. In contrast, the total intended family size is closely linked to more enduring individual characteristics, such as religiousness.

- There are, however, some common predictors of both child-number and child-timing intentions. In particular, the ability to foresee what one's household situation will be like in the next one or two years increases the number of intended children as well as the certainty of planning a child in the next three years.
  - The mean actual number of children of the 'parental generation' was positively and significantly correlated with the intended number of children among the 'children generation' at the regional level.
  - The country's GDP per capita was negatively associated with first-child intentions and positively associated with second-child intentions, when these intentions were framed in the period of three years.
- 
- *Family-friendly policies may become more challenging in the future if preferences for smaller families spread in Europe as a result of the persistence of low actual fertility.*
  - *Creating a climate of economic security may be a precondition for policies aimed at sustaining fertility levels.*

## Synopsis of REPRO policy implications

- Policies aimed at an increase in births exercise their effect either on the formation or on the realization of childbearing intentions. Their outcomes are births or their absence. Realization or frustration of fertility intentions is an important domain for policy attention.
- Policies which aim to support the realisation of childbearing intentions need not be pro-natalistic.
- Policies should be planned, introduced and performed without sudden changes in time. They should remain stable in the long run. Thus policies contribute to the creation of a positive environment for childbearing.
- Stable policies have a positive effect on people's attitudes towards having a child, as well as on the social norms towards having children. Attitudes and perceived social norms contribute to the construction of positive intentions for childbearing.
- Traditional policy instruments such as baby bonuses or maternal and parental leaves have a limited effect on the level of fertility. Yet they might contribute to the creation of positive attitudes and social norms.
- Instability in policies may cause downward changes in intentions to have a child or construction of intentions not to have a child. The same holds for societies with high dynamics of social change.
- European societies differ significantly in welfare arrangements as well as social norms related to childbearing. Policies that have been found successful in one society will not be necessarily effective in another one. Any application of new policies or their components therefore requires a rigorous preliminary analysis.
- Monitoring fertility intentions and their realisation provides valuable information for the efficiency of policies.