New research project examines changes in family formation and social policies across Europe

What will families look like in the future? Are existing social- and family policies compatible with changes in family patterns? A major European research project investigating the diversity of family forms, relationships and life courses in Europe in relation to policies, will be launched in February 2013. The project has secured a grant of €6.5m from the EU’s Seventh Framework Programme for a four-year period.

Coordinated by Livia Oláh, Associate Professor at the Stockholm University Demography Unit (SUDA), Dept. of Sociology, researchers from 25 leading universities and research institutes in 15 European countries and three transnational civil society organizations will work together within the project entitled ‘FamiliesAndSocieties - Changing families and sustainable societies: Policy contexts and diversity over the life course and across generations’.

In the past decades family structures in Europe have become increasingly complex linked to decreasing marriage rates, high and/or rapidly increasing age of first birth and increasing rates of divorce and separation. These trends have resulted in an increasing diversity of living arrangements alongside the nuclear family of married couple with children. Hence, the points of departure for the project are that family life courses are becoming more complex and diverse, that individuals’ lives are interdependent – linked within and across generations – and that individual life courses are shaped by social contexts and policies.

“Our approach is multidisciplinary combining a wide range of expertise in social sciences, law and the humanities. We will conduct comparative analyses applying advanced quantitative methods to high quality register and survey data, and also conduct qualitative studies,” says project coordinator Livia Oláh.

The project will explore the growing complexity of family configurations and life course transitions across and within European societies and examine their implications for the well-being of children, women and men, inequalities in life chances, intergenerational relations and care arrangements. The research groups at Stockholm University will especially focus on issues related to inequalities and child well-being, family patterns of immigrants, and how women and men combine employment and family responsibilities.

The project will also investigate how policies address family diversity and its consequences, and identify likely paths of future changes in family compositions and related policy needs. The aim is to assess the compatibility of existing policies with the increasingly diverse and complex family life courses in Europe, and to contribute to evidence-based policy-making.

Two new databases will be developed within the project. One will gather legal content of family forms available in European countries, and another, developed at Stockholm University, will contain data on EC/EU initiatives in core family-policy areas covering the period from 1957 to the present.

All major European regions are represented in the project governance. Together with various stakeholders, government agencies, national and local policy-makers, non-governmental organizations and additional members of the scientific community across Europe, the project will identify and disseminate innovative and best policy practices.

For further information
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SUDA website: http://www.suda.su.se. The project website will be launched in July 2013.