FAMILY SUPPORT STRUCTURES

Objectives - Access – Offers

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

OF EXCHANGE AND DIALOGUE

Background

We live in challenging times. The effects of crises and accelerated social developments are putting families to the test. For structural reasons, some families are hit harder than others are. At the same time, it is the family relationships that give a base to society's resilience and to stability of the individual family member's stability. Thus, families themselves do a lot of support work. However, they are increasingly reaching their limits, especially in crises. The support structures for families are intended to help strengthen families and give them a boost.

The National Family Forum is a network of 120 organisations that are committed to continuous cooperation and a comprehensive dialogue supporting family concerns. Their common objective is to actively assume responsibility for a family-friendly society. It is organized by the Association of German Family Organisations (AGF). In a two-year process, the members of the National Family Forum discussed how family support structures are designed, organized and implemented in Germany. It was examined how family support structures on the local level can help families, how they can be organized and what help the organization need themselves to be able to support families best.

The focus was on the goal of ensuring non-discriminatory access to effective services across the board for all families and especially families with increased burdens. As family support work is always relationship work, which requires commitment and cooperation on an equal footing, a self-critical perspective on both the institutional and personal level was chosen. It was as important to reflect on both personal attitudes to different life realities and family forms as well as one's own "house culture". The published report summarises the process and results of this two year period.

Introduction

"There is no glory in prevention"

"There is no glory in prevention" - this was widely discussed in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with regard to health. However, this seems no less appropriate for the political debate on supporting parents in raising their children. The German Ninth Family Report comprehensively addressed the growing need for family support. According to the core diagnosis of the report, "intensified parenthood", which is perceived as increasingly challenging, puts parents under pressure and at the same time increases inequalities in education. The report therefore recommends responding to the situation with an investment driven preventative and infrastructure based social policy instead of compensatory aftercare. The focus should increasingly be put on preventative measures in the early stages of life. It was needed to have a well-defined and accurate distribution policy, because, as the "stress test" of the COVID-19 pandemic made clear, family support services are ultimately a question of distribution.

The following questions were identified and discussed: How are parents enabled to know about and make use of family support service? How can stakeholders in educational and care institutions be enabled to organize sustainable, empowering and suitable services for families? How can a social infrastructure be established that is not based on pillarized structures, but on families and their very different starting points?

Conclusion

"There is reason in prevention"

How can family support services be organized in a needs-oriented, participatory, sustainable and comprehensive manner? Dealing with this topic in Germany is enormously complex: Different legislations in the federal states, heterogeneous municipal frameworks and a diverse service provider landscape pose a big challenge. Thus, there is no ultimate "one size fits all" solution. Like working with the families themselves, the work for the support services must be tailor-made. Still, it is possible to formulate conditions for success and to transfer approaches that have turned out to work well. It is precisely this exchange about successful programs, successful collaborations and

instructive experiences that is needed. Thus, it is important to understand heterogeneity not (only) as a disadvantage, but also as a strength. This applies not only when working with families, but also when working with support structures. However, coordinating heterogeneity requires a great deal of attention and dedication. Unfortunately this is what is presently lacking. There is a lack of attention and often also a lack of political will to deal with those measures. This is even more the case as it is difficult to evaluate their (financial) effects, because they not only "pay off" years later and in other budget departments. In this respect, it is central to foster discussions on family support structures to provide an important counterpoint in the family policy debate landscape, which too often is primarily characterized by the discussion of monetary support benefits.

Monetary and infrastructural support must not be played off against each other

It is a problem when socio-economic sustainability - e.g. in the form of a liable family supply structure - and financial security for families compete each other. This should neither be the case in budget terms nor terms of attention. It is important to raise awareness among all stakeholders that these are no conflicting approaches. Only a combination of financial and structural measures - supplemented by investments in infrastructure - will make it possible to improve the situation for families in the long term.

An adaptive overall strategy is needed

The often organically grown diversity in family support systems is in principle a strength. In order to make even better use of this strength, this diversity should be coordinated and embedded in a strategic framework. This would avoid competition between service providers and arbitrary patchworks in the service landscape. Such an overall strategy requires not only the provision of sufficient financial resources, but above all the creation of a content-related framework that is both reliable and flexible. The development of touchstones would help to recognize the effect of measures. The building blocks of the overall strategy should therefore be "adaptive" in the sense that they respond to social changes and changing needs. It will need to be discussed how this overall strategy can be developed in the context of the existing system and who should be responsible. Inspiration for this could come from the area of childcare: Similarly, there is a great heterogeneity of both needs and services. However, at the same time there is a common understanding of what is needed from the perspective of families and children in terms of education and care and there is a joint awareness of the importance of childcare for the reconciliation of professional work and family life. This shared self-image provides the basis for the objectives, discussions and activities to develop tailor-made services across the board. To develop a tailor fit service offer means, among others, to take into account socio-economic framework conditions into account, as inequalities in the local service structure and the use of them reflect the unfair distributed of access to resources. For example, it is much more difficult for financially disadvantaged families to access education, housing and health services. Therefore, for vulnerable families it is particularly important to create low-threshold access to family support services in parenting and educational work - such as family centers, parenting counseling and parent-child groups.

Change begins with self-reflection

All actors in family support are part of a well-established structure. They represent interests, formulate positions and make demands. In organizational everyday life, the focus is therefore primarily on the confident representation or even the unassailability of one's own position. However, it can be easily overlooked that habits and social roles as well as (presumed) standings can have corrupting effects. Thus, it is essential to question own values and to reflect own actions is therefore for keeping the entire family support system capable of learning. How do I speak, how do we speak with and about families? How do I, how does my organization react to social change? By questioning what is usually taken for granted actors in the field can discover approaches that they can implement directly themselves, for instance the use of language in publications or internal concepts.

Controversies are markers of change

Many discussions often revolve around controversial terms. What does "eye level" mean? What does "socially weak" imply? Who should speak of "empowerment", who of "power sharing"? Might the term "prevention" be an expression of a deficient view of humanity? These questions on terms shouldn't be misunderstood as mere "quibbling over words" or used as a cause for "trench warfare". They are a starting point for content related problems and are valuable as such. The terms are markers that show where increased attention could be worthwhile and where there are opportunities for learning and development. However, paying increased attention also means focusing on the subject matter instead of the term, being open to the arguments of different perspectives and being able to distinguish where friction is productive and where it is detached from the original intention.

The central element is political will

The legal framework for family support service in Germany is principally regulated in one specific civil law, although not to the complete satisfaction of all stakeholders (section 16 SGB VIII). One aim is to strategically tackle the pillarization of structures. Thus, the law foresees regulations like a requirement for cooperation. However, less is happening than is possible and prescribed within the legal framework. This is mainly due to implementation problems, which are mainly caused by the dependence on municipal budgets and political priorities. Despite the family being repeatedly emphasized as being important for the future of democracy, education and health, the fundamental value of low-threshold, preventative and individualized family support service that is available on a permanent and reliable basis is underestimated. All stakeholders - including those from the media, academia and business - have a responsibility to help ensure that strengthening families under stress is placed higher on the political agenda. Political representatives and social planners are expected to make families aware of their own responsibility and participation in the social fabric from the outset, while at the same time creating framework conditions that have a supportive effect on everyday family life. This presupposes that the family is perceived as a system in which balance and development are constantly being created anew by all members instead of looking on families as a combination of adults and children, each of whom being done good.