

EUROFOUND PROJECT

**Families in the economic crisis: mapping policy  
responses in 5 European Member States**

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**Changes in Family Policies since 2010:  
Country Overview Portugal**

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Tasks 6a & 6b

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## 1) Introduction

Historically, and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Portugal’s pathway is linked to the male breadwinner model and to a rudimentary and familialistic welfare state underlining women’s role as primary caregivers and low state support for families. Family policies after the transition to democracy (1974) rejected unsupported familialism and introduced an explicit focus on state responsibilities to support a gender-equality oriented dual-earner model, leading to a gradual but steady increase in entitlements to family benefits and paid leave schemes, in public and publicly-subsidized services for young children and in gender equality incentives (Wall, 2011). Family policies shifted toward a “mixed” welfare state model focusing on family care supported by services and benefits and underlining a specific “solidarity” welfare mix in which different actors - families, public, private profit and non-profit institutions - take on responsibility jointly (Wall, Samitca and Correia, 2013).

Since 2010 there have been major changes in family policies in Portugal. The economic crisis led to a retrenchment in benefits for families and policy objectives moved away from an explicit pro-family and pro-egalitarian perspective during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century towards a more implicit and residual policy perspective. The new focus of family policies has underlined support for very poor families, the strengthening of selectivity mechanisms and a move away from state responsibility for families in general, by encouraging the non-governmental sector and families themselves to act as the “front-line” of support for persons “in need”. At the level of the governmental framework, family policy during the last three years has therefore been in the shadow of social policy. There has also been strong delegation of state responsibility for disadvantaged families to third sector institutions (mostly private publicly-subsidized NGOs) and to regional and municipal authorities. At present there is no specific governmental body with responsibility for overseeing family policies and their impact.

These developments in family policies over the last few decades have had an impact on public spending on cash benefits and services for families. As shown in Figure I, expenditure on economic support and services for families as a percentage of GDP remained at a low level until the early 90s and then increased sharply during the first decade of the 21st century, before the onset of the economic crisis. Recent data shows that this trend was reversed in 2010, with expenditure on cash benefits and services dropping from 1.5% of GDP in 2009 to 1.2% in 2011. Public spending decreased both at the level of cash benefits (from 1% to 0.8%) and services (from 0.5 to 0.4%) (OECD, 2014<sup>1</sup>). As a consequence, public spending on families in Portugal is again shifting further away from EU and OECD average values. Moreover, this negative trend is likely to have been even stronger over the last two years, as 2012 and 2013 were the years in which the economic crisis and the austerity measures imposed by the Troika affected the lives of families and children more severely. Unemployment rose to 16.2%

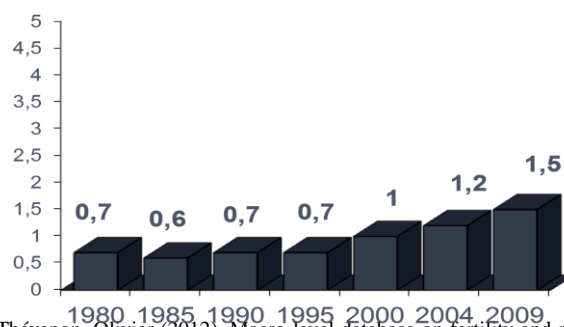
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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF1\\_1\\_Public\\_spending\\_on\\_family\\_benefits\\_Oct2013.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF1_1_Public_spending_on_family_benefits_Oct2013.pdf) (updated in September 2014).

in 2013 and the risk of poverty for the total population rose from 17.9% in 2010 to 18.7% in 2012. Other indicators related to family life and child well-being reveal the same trend: in 2013, the fertility rate dropped to 1.21, the lowest level ever in Portugal, and the risk of poverty for children below age 18 rose to 24.4% in 2012 (up from 21.8% in 2011).

These trends have recently sparked a governmental concern with low fertility. In 2014, the PSD (party in government) appointed a working group to draw up a report proposing new measures to increase fertility. And in October 2014, Parliament approved a resolution underscoring the need to reflect on and build up measures to “promote fertility, to strengthen the protection of children and to support families” (Resolution 87/2014).

**Figure I**  
Public Spending on Family Benefits (economic support and services) as % of GDP  
(1980 – 2009)  
Portugal



Source: OCDE, Thévenon, Olivier (2012), Macro-level database on fertility and policies supporting families with children in European and OECD countries

## 2) Changes in Family Policies since 2010

Since 2010, cash benefits for families have been changed along two main lines: increased selectivity, with eligibility criteria focusing on support for families with very low income, and cut-backs in the amounts of benefit. Tax reliefs for families were also reduced. In contrast, policies concerning leave entitlements and services have undergone little change, even if the programmes to invest in new publicly-funded care services for children below age 3 were suspended.

To support needy persons in times of crisis, the government introduced one main policy instrument, the “Social Emergency Programme”, in 2011. The main objective of the programme was to reach out to individuals and families in extreme poverty by providing support in kind. Measures include the setting up of a network of third sector canteens, the introduction of free breakfast at school for children from disadvantaged families, and an uprating of unemployment benefits for low-income couples with children where both are unemployed and unemployed lone parents who are not

receiving alimony. From the point of view of work-family balance, the programme recognized the need to continue to invest in childcare; however, in the absence of programmes to expand the number of creches, the main measure adopted was a change in the legal framework of childcare institutions allowing for more children per classroom.

Local authorities, third sector institutions, charitable church organizations and schools have often introduced other forms of support (e.g. helping families to pay rent, paying for schoolbooks), thereby seeking to reach out to needy children and families and to compensate for a decline in State responsibilities for families.

## 2.1 Economic support for families: family benefits and tax relief

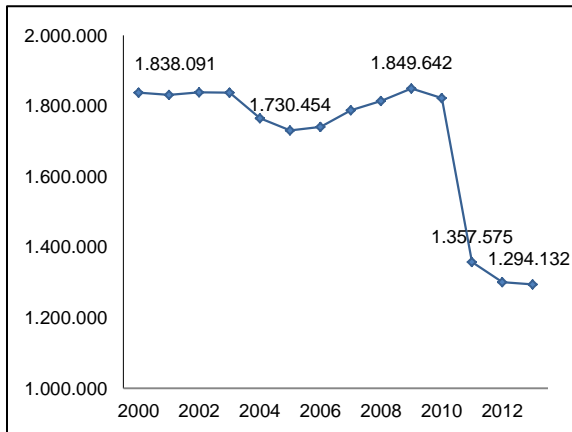
Regarding the main **cash benefit for families** with children (**Abono de Família**), there has been a decrease in the number of beneficiaries, in the amounts of benefit received by families, and in public expenditure (Figures II and III).

Due to changes in eligibility criteria, since 2010 nearly half a million families with children have lost access to the main family benefit. The drop in the number of beneficiaries was very sharp between 2010 and 2011, when the main changes were introduced (2 out of the 5 income levels were abolished, thereby increasing selectivity; changes in eligibility criteria), but there has been a continuing decrease between 2011 and 2013.

The decrease in the amount of benefit was also considerable. The uprating of 25% for the two lower income levels was abolished in 2010 (while the uprating for children below age one, for lone parent families and for families with more than one child below age 3 were kept). As a result, in 2010 there was a substantial decrease in the monthly amounts received by families: for example, the monthly amount received in the first and lowest income level for a child over age 1 decreased from 43 to 35 euros and the amount received for a child below age one from 174 to 140 euros. The amounts of benefit by families in the three income levels remained exactly the same between 2011 and 2013.

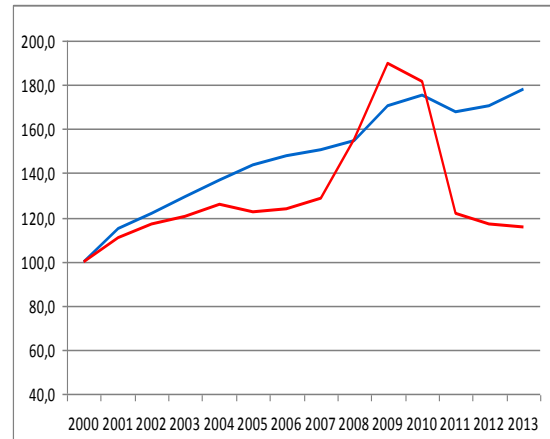
Figure III shows that public expenditure on the main family benefit, at constant prices, declined sharply after 2010, revealing a strong retrenchment in economic support for families. In contrast with the continued increase of public expenditure on all cash benefits paid by social security (blue line), public spending related to the main family benefit was rolled back to the level of spending in 2002 (red line).

**Figure II**  
 Number of Beneficiaries of main Family Benefit,  
 Portugal 2000-2013



Source: PORDATA (last update on 10/04/2014)

**Figure III**  
 Social Security Expenditure on all Cash Benefits  
 and on main Family Benefit, at constant prices  
 (reference year 2000) (2000-2013)



Total Expenditure Family Benefit  
 Total Expenditure Cash Benefits

Source: Pordata. Figures for 2013: Social Security Report  
 (December 2013, published in January 2014), available at:  
<http://www4.seg-social.pt/execucao-orkamental-mensal>.

Between 2011 and 2013, taxation was increased and tax reliefs for individuals and families were cut back. In 2011 an additional tax of 3.5% was introduced on all levels of income above the national minimum wage (485 euros). An additional solidarity tax of 2.5% was also introduced: in 2013, it affected annual incomes above 80 000 euros, also increasing from 2.5 to 5% in the case of higher incomes. Tax reliefs were changed and reduced. With the new tax table (5 levels, instead of 8), taxpayers with an annual income above 80 000 euros are no longer entitled to tax deductions, those in the middle levels have ceilings ranging between 250 and 500 euros and only taxpayers below an annual income of 7 000 euros are entitled to tax reliefs with no limitations. Tax deductions per taxpayer and for dependent children were also changed: the tax deduction per taxpayer was decreased (from 55 to 45% of the reference value); it was also reduced for those living in lone parent families (from 80 to 70%); while the tax deduction per dependent child was increased (from 40 to 45 %; and from 80 to 90% if the dependent child is below age 3).

Interviews with policy experts and with representatives of local NGOs and local authorities highlight some of the consequences of these developments. Policy experts reflect mainly on the implications of policy changes which have reduced economic support for all families but especially for very low income families, those which, they say, should receive more support in times of crisis. Representatives at a local level and those working in non-governmental institutions underline two main aspects. On the one hand, they also draw attention to the fact that retrenchment in economic support has

weakened support for families living in “permanent (endemic) poverty”. On the other hand, they highlight the emergence of “new contexts of poverty”, such as average-income families hit by unemployment and salary cuts. A social worker from the Community Centre in Ramada (NGO; Odivelas-Lisbon) talked at length about these families and the need to support them since the onset of the economic crisis:

*“We realize that, with the crisis, many middle class families need support but are ashamed to come here... they are cases of families where there is unemployment, of one or both members of the couple, and if they no longer had access to family benefits since the cut-backs, now with unemployment their sources of income have decreased even more... so one of the measures which we adopted, to make it easier for them to come and not feel ashamed, was to introduce symbolic prices,(2 cents, 1 euro, 2 euros, 5 euros) in the things we sell (clothes, shoes, baby chairs, beds etc). These families have not yet applied for the minimum social income (RSI), sometimes they rely on help from other family members, but very often this is only for a short time and the children are always growing and needing new stuff...buying things here is less constraining for these families” Vera Fernandes, Social worker, Ramada Community and Parish Centre*

## **2.2 Leave entitlements**

Leave entitlements have become longer and more generous over the last few decades, moving gradually from a short well-paid maternity leave (1976) to a more generous leave system combining 6 months of well-paid initial parental leave, one month of fully-compensated paternity leave and 6 months of additional parental leave (3 per parent) at 25% of previous earnings. The leave system also represents a significant element of state expenditure but there have only been minor cut-backs and no changes to leave entitlements since 2010. However, in 2013 the Minister of Solidarity and Social Security announced the government’s intention to use European funds to promote female part-time work (paid as full time work) in order to allow parents to have more time to raise their children.. The intention was presented as a measure to promote fertility since births continue to decrease. No specific measures had been proposed and approved by the end of 2014.

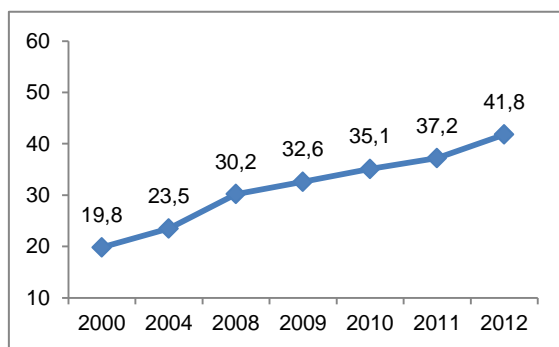
## **2.3 Service provision for children and student welfare**

Investments over the last few decades to expand daycare services and pre-schools for children below age six may be seen to have increased coverage rates substantially, above average EU levels (Figures IV and V). Recent data show that these coverage rates have continued to increase between 2011 and 2013: up to 46.2% in 2013 for care services for children below age 3; up to 90.6% in 2013 for children between 3 and 5 years. Several factors may explain this trend. On the one hand, due to changes in legislation the number of children allowed per classroom is now higher and some

investments (especially in pre-schools) that were already planned were not interrupted; on the other hand, due to low fertility and high rates of emigration over the last three years, the total population of children has decreased.

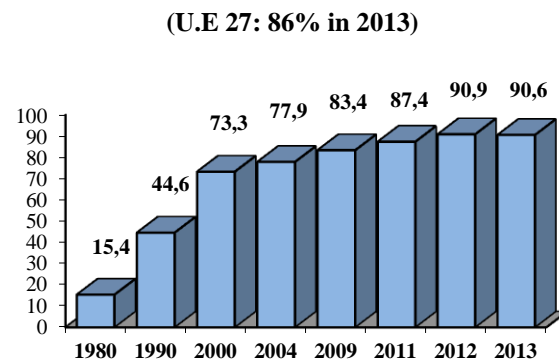
Since 2006 primary school children have a full-time 8-hour day school with 2 hours of obligatory “extra curricular activities” (English, music, art etc.) as well as before and after school care services. However, there have been some changes since 2011: although the 8-hour school day was maintained, schools now have to provide 5 and not 10 hours of extra-curricular activities; extra-curricular activities have received less funding, also shifting more responsibility for these activities on to schools and parents’ organisations.

**Figure IV**  
Coverage Rate: Daycare services for children below age 3, Portugal (2000-2013) (%)



Source: National Council of Education (2010 e 2012) and *Carta Social*, Informative Sheet n° 8, de Maio 2012, e n° 11, de Junho de 2013.

**Figure V**  
Coverage Rate: Pre-school (3-5) Portugal (1980-2013) (%)



Source: PORDATA (reviewed in 08-08-2014): European Commission (2013) Barcelona Objectives, the development of childcare facilities for young children in Europe with a view to sustainable and inclusive growth, Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, pp.8; Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/documents/130531\\_barcelona\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/documents/130531_barcelona_en.pdf)

Student welfare has also undergone several changes. In 2011, school scholarships for children belonging to the first and second levels of family benefit, to help prevent school drop-out, were cut back to half of their previous value. Subsidies for school transport passes were also cut back. Instead of a 50% discount for all children between age 4 and 18, only children in the first two levels of student welfare (corresponding to the first and second levels of family benefit) are entitled: the discount increased from 50 to 60% for the 1<sup>st</sup> level but decreased from 50 to 25% for the second level. Universal subsidizing (50%) of transport passes for university students up to age 23 was also abolished in 2011: entitlement was restricted to those on welfare (60% discount) or belonging to very low income families (25% discount). However, restrictions were not



introduced for meals and books. Children in the first and second levels of family benefit continue to receive a subsidy for books (approximately 30 euros and 15 euros) as well as free meals (1st level of family benefit) or meals at 50% (2<sup>nd</sup> level); other children pay 1,46€ (a cost which is subsidized by the State and the Local Authorities).

## **2.4 Support for families with care responsibilities**

In the field of long-term care, cash benefits both for parents caring for sick children or adult relatives and for elderly persons with medium and high levels of dependency were introduced in the 1980s. Benefits for parents caring for sick children have been made more generous over the last 20 years (e.g. parents are now entitled to 30 days with earnings compensation to care for a sick child below age 12 instead of age 10) whereas entitlements to take leave to care for a spouse or another close relative have not changed and are comparatively less generous (15 days, unpaid).

Since 2010 selectivity has been introduced in the benefits for the care of highly dependent elderly persons (means-tested instead of universal) and there has been a reduction in the levels of compensation for individuals on sick leave or caring for a sick child: compensation for those on sick leave up to 30 days dropped from 65% of previous earnings to 55%, and compensation for those on sick leave for 30 to 90 days dropped from 65% to 60%; however, beneficiaries on sick leave up to 90 days who have a monthly income below 500 euros receive an uprating of 5%; the same applies to families with three or more children or with handicapped children if they are entitled to family benefits.

## **3) Other family-relevant social policies**

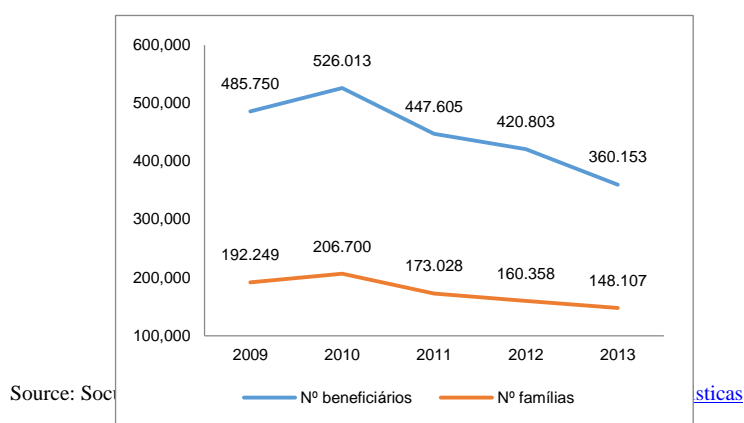
Other benefits, measures and programmes which provide support for vulnerable families include minimum income benefits, unemployment benefits, the social emergency programme introduced in 2011, and the advanced alimony payment.

The **Minimum Income benefit (Rendimento Social de Inserção - RSI)** is the cash benefit which has the strongest impact on the reduction of extreme poverty in Portugal. Public spending on this benefit expanded until 2010. Between 2010 and 2013 there was a sharp drop (-40%) in state expenditure on minimum income benefits due to changes in eligibility criteria, reduction in the amounts of benefit and the abolishing of certain upratings for families. For example, the extra support in case of pregnancy and the uprating for every third and subsequent child were abolished and the amounts of benefit per child in the household dropped from 93.59 euros to 53.44 euros.

Table VI shows that between 2010 and 2012 there was a decrease of 46.342 families on minimum income benefits (representing a drop of 22.4%) (Figure VI). In 2012, the total number of beneficiaries represented approximately 4% of the Portuguese

population, less 1% than in 2010. The negative trend has continued in 2013 due to new and stricter eligibility criteria introduced in 2012: e.g. the value of real estate holdings of the beneficiary and his/her household has to be below 25 153,20 € instead of the 100 612,80 € established as a maximum in 2010.

**Figure VI**  
Number of Beneficiaries on Minimum Income (RSI): number of individuals and number of families, 2009-2013



Policy experts and social workers underline the impact of these developments on the increased risk of poverty and on the growing number of children suffering material deprivation. They also highlight the efforts of non-governmental and local institutions to compensate for this decline in the economic support of highly vulnerable families. Commenting on the decrease in the number of beneficiaries, Cátia Rodrigues, a social worker from the Ramada Community Centre (publicly-subsidized NGO), describes the following:

*“There have been cuts in minimum income benefits and here we have had to try to support these persons and their families. These are people who are extremely vulnerable... We have to encourage them to seek employment and we have to work out ways to support them. Now at the end of the year the situation gets even worse because many of them have to renew their papers to be entitled to the minimum income benefits and this often takes a long time... and in the meantime their benefits are suspended and they are deprived of support. Social security sends them to us, they all come here... and there are situations of extreme vulnerability, I can tell you”*

**Unemployment benefits** underwent three major changes after the signing of the memorandum with the Troika (17 May 2011). First, there were changes in eligibility criteria and in the duration and the amounts of benefit. Second, social protection in case of unemployment was extended to independent workers. Third, a temporary uprating of 10% was introduced for couples with children in which both are unemployed and for lone parents who are unemployed (in both cases entitlement is dependent on level of income and lone parents cannot be receiving alimony

payments). In 2012 entitlement to unemployment benefits became easier (12 months of contributions instead of 15 months). At the same time, however, the cash benefit was cut back (the maximum amount of benefit dropped from 1 258,00€ per month to 1 048,05 €) and after 6 months the benefit is reduced by 10%; on the other hand, the minimum duration of benefit dropped from 9 to 5 months and the maximum duration dropped from 38 to 26 months. In 2013, the government also introduced a compulsory social security contribution of 6%, to be deducted from all unemployment benefits. Only couples and lone parents entitled to the uprating of 10% are exempted from this contribution.

It is important to add that in 2013 over half of all unemployed persons were not entitled to any kind of employment benefit. Of the 808.000 unemployed individuals in the last trimester of 2013 (INE, Inquérito ao Emprego, 4º trimestre de 2013) only 376.922 (46,6%) were entitled to social protection (II, IP/MSSS, Desemprego Dados Mensais, Dezembro 2013). Of these, the majority (38,3%) received unemployment benefit and 8,3% the social (non-contributory) unemployment benefit. Lastly, data for December 2013 showed that among the 25.426 persons living in couples where both were unemployed, only 23% (5739) were entitled to the uprating of 10% on unemployment benefits.

Members of Local Authorities and non-governmental institutions often mention the current high levels of unemployment as a major problem for families and also mention those who are no longer entitled to unemployment benefit. Tita, a former primary school teacher, now a member of the local council of the Caneças and Ramada Municipality, says:

*“The unemployed persons who come to the municipality regularly to prove that they are looking for a job are a small sample of all the unemployed persons out there.... Many of them are no longer entitled to any support. Then there are those that they send off to do training courses, they are paid very little and they no longer count as unemployed persons for the statistics. Well, it’s a way of showing that unemployment is decreasing but it isn’t, we know that here...”*

As mentioned above, the main aim of the **Social Emergency Programme (PES)** introduced in 2011 was to reach out to disadvantaged individuals and families by providing and strengthening support in kind throughout the country. The state delegated the coordination and organization of canteens to third sector institutions. At the end of 2013 there were 811 canteens at national level, with approximately 49.150 meals per day which were being subsidized by the state. The budget for the PES (2011-2014) was 400 million euros.

Local authorities and members of parents’ association in schools who were interviewed considered that the publicly-subsidized canteens are an important measure in times of crisis, even if they do not solve overall material deprivation. Quoting a member of the local council: *“The social canteens have helped a lot of people. It’s an important measure. Here at the local council we cannot help people directly, we cannot provide*

*benefits in kind, we do what you call the politics of proximity. We try to solve daily problems of families by sending the cases to the institutions that are part of our Social Commission or to others that can help solve specific problems. We send a lot of people to the Community Centre that has the Social Canteen, but we also send some people to the food bank”.* Elsa Mora, a member of the parents’ association at the Odivelas secondary school also considered the social canteen as an important measure. She emphasized that it works well, even giving families double the amount of food on Fridays in order to cover meals over the week-end. However, she also added that this is not always enough because children from very poor families sometimes arrive at school hungry on Mondays. The social canteen from the Community Centre has an agreement with Social Security and provides 106 meals on a daily basis as well as distributing other food.

Since 2010 eligibility criteria for entitlement to **Advanced alimony payments** (Fundo de Garantia de Alimentos) for children and young people living in lone parent families has been made more restrictive: monthly income has to be below 419,22 € (previously 485 €) . The number of beneficiaries receiving advanced alimony payments increased from 13 294 in 2010 to 17 915 in 2012.

#### **4) Concluding reflections**

In the context of high unemployment rates, sharp cut-backs in salaries, pensions and cash benefits (e.g. family benefits, the minimum income guarantee, transport passes for children and young people) and heavier taxation for all families, developments in family policies since 2010 have created a weaker safety net and less state support for families in general. The main aim of policies in times of crisis was to target very low income families by keeping up previous cash benefits for only these families (increased selectivity) and by introducing some new measures such as providing support in kind through third sector social canteens and uprating benefits for low income families with children in which both members of the couple are unemployed . However, the economic support for very low income families has also been cut back: eligibility criteria have become more restrictive and the amounts of benefit have been reduced, even for children in families entitled to minimum income benefits. On the other hand, the new measures of economic support (uprating for unemployed couples) only reach a low number of disadvantaged families. There has been a sharp drop both in the number of beneficiaries entitled to family and minimum income benefits and in the amounts of benefit received.

These developments have had an overall negative impact on disadvantaged families and children (Annual Reports OFAP, 2011, 2012, 2013; Wall et al. 2014, “Children and the crisis in Portugal”). Major indicators of family and child well-being, such as poverty, material deprivation, work intensity, fertility, school drop-out and expenditure, reveal that the difficult life and work conditions of families, especially of disadvantaged families, have increased over the last few years. Some of the measures introduced, such as the distribution of food, have provided an important source of support in times of crisis. But they do not always compensate for the overall retrenchment in support for vulnerable families. As interviewees from local NGOs and municipal councils underline, the high rates of unemployment and the difficult access to economic support

has put increased pressure on local and non-governmental institutions to provide support for these families.

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