

Integrated Family Support Models: 10 years of Houses of the Child: Lessons from Flanders' Integrated approach

Tine Rommens (Governemental agency Growing up – ‘Agentschap Opgroeien’)

Ivan Pauwels (Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities – ‘VVSG’)



Kristien Nys en Kathleen Emmery (ODISEE Centre for Family Studies)

European Observatory on Family Policy: Conference Breaking Silos, Building Futures:
Policy Innovations for Integrated Family and Child Support

Brussels, 25 September 2025

Stream 2

Topics

Welcome & Introduction

Kristien Nys (ODISEE Centre for Family Studies)

Integrated Family Policy through Houses of the Child

Tine Rommens, policy adviser Gouvernemental agency Growing up (Opgroeien)

Houses of the Child from the perspective of local governments

Ivan Pauwels, Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG)

Questions and Discussion

Welcome & Introduction

Expectations?

Undoubtedly: relevant input from all of you

What do you take with you to your practice, your research, your policy work?

Welcome & Introduction

Who's in the room?

- **Politician?**
- **Policy Advisor?**
- **Researcher?**
- **Practitioner?**
 - House of the Child / Family Centre ...
 - Childcare (0-3 years – 0-6 years - ...)
 - Healthcare
 - Education
 - ...

1. Integrated Family Policy through Houses of the Child

Tine Rommens

**Policy adviser Governemental agency
Growing up (Opgroeien)**

1. Flanders and the agency Growing Up

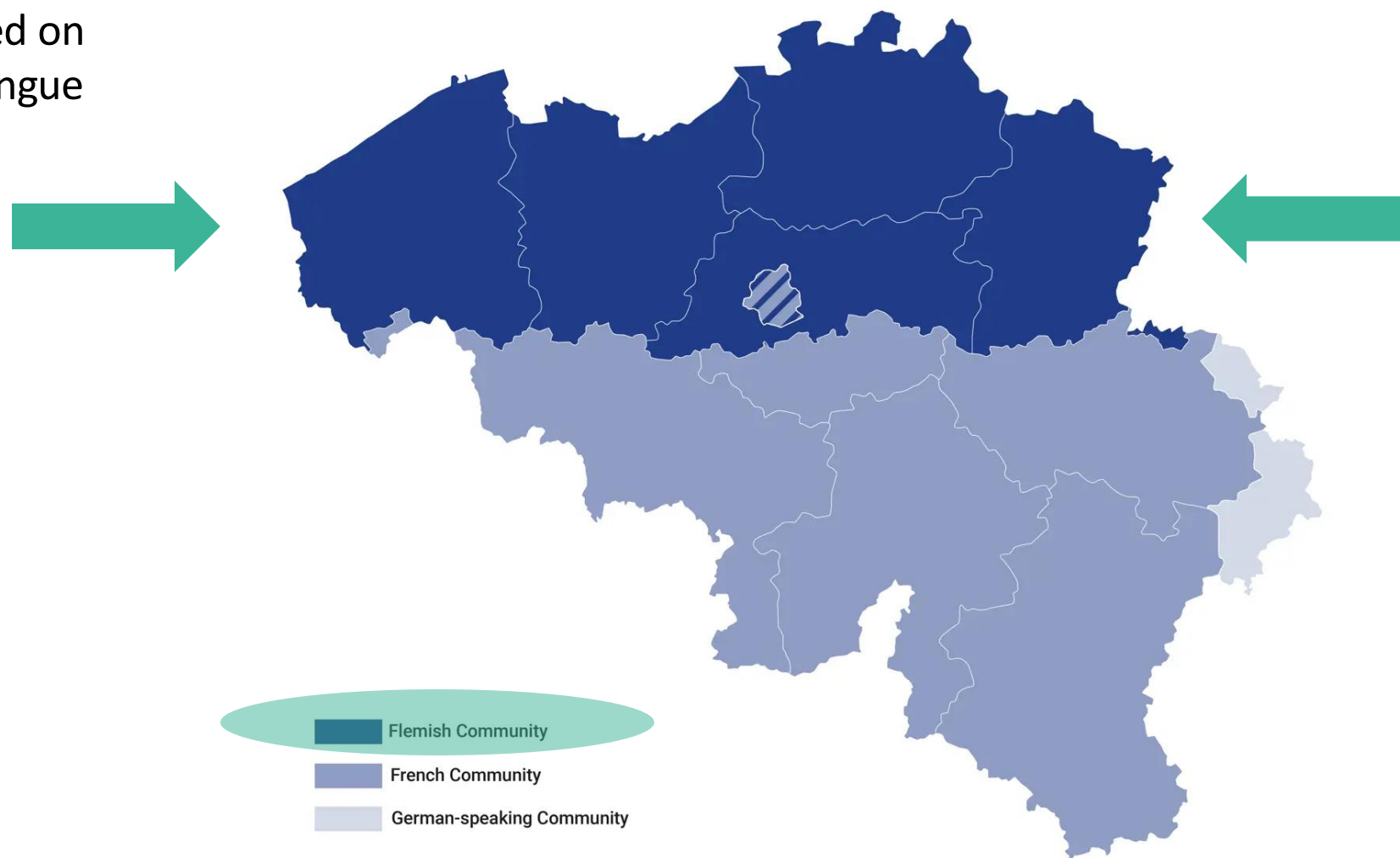


The Flemish community

The communities are based on their residents' mother tongue

Profile

- Area: 13 522 km²
- Inhabitants: 6,7 million
- Language: Dutch



Growing up - Opgroeien

The governmental agency **Opgroeien** joins forces to create as many opportunities as possible for all children and young people, including their families, who grow up in Flanders and Brussels-Capital Region.

The agency's service provision ranges from preventive family support, childcare, the child benefits ('Groeipakket'), foster care, adoption, youth support and the approach to juvenile delinquents.

Opgroeien explicitly opts for an integrated, multidisciplinary approach in cooperation with a large number of partners. In this way, families are given maximum support.

Kind & Gezin

Jeugdhulp

GROEIPAKKET

VLAAMS
CENTRUM
VOOR adoptie

2. The Flemish Houses of the Child: an introduction

The Flemish 'Houses of the child': what?

- Established in **2013**: Decree 'The organization of preventive family support': A House of the Child in every municipality
- House of the Child ('Huis van het Kind') = Flanders' adaptation of the Family Centre model.
- They provide multidisciplinary, integrated services - particularly during the **perinatal** phase and **early childhood** - bridging **health, social care and education** to promote family well-being through coordinated support.
- Serving **expectant parents** and **families with children up to age 25**



The Flemish 'Houses of the child': what?

They bring together healthcare providers, social services, educators, and community organizations to achieve **six primary objectives** outlined by the 2013 Decree:

1. Holistic family support
2. Enhancing community-based support
3. Early risk detection
4. Disease prevention (vaccination programs,...)
5. Targeted poverty reduction
6. Contributing to creation of family-friendly environments



The Flemish 'Houses of the child': what?

- Guided by a principle of **proportional universalism**: universal access while prioritizing tailored support for at-risk families
- The Houses of the Child function as **local collaborative networks delivering integrated preventive family support** tailored to **local needs** and aligned with municipal social policy frameworks.
- **Open participation model**: any local authority or relevant actor in preventive family support may take the initiative to establish a House of the Child, with local government required to take the lead where no other stakeholder does.

The Flemish 'Houses of the child': what?

- In addition to the **preventive medical consultation offices**, at least two of the 4 next activities:
 - ✓ Organizing meeting places
 - ✓ Offering group work
 - ✓ Providing low-threshold individual support
 - ✓ Organizing a reception and information point
- **Referral** of parents and children to adequate services

Near-universal utilization
of Kind & Gezin consultation services



Access to families during early childhood =
opportunities for comprehensive support



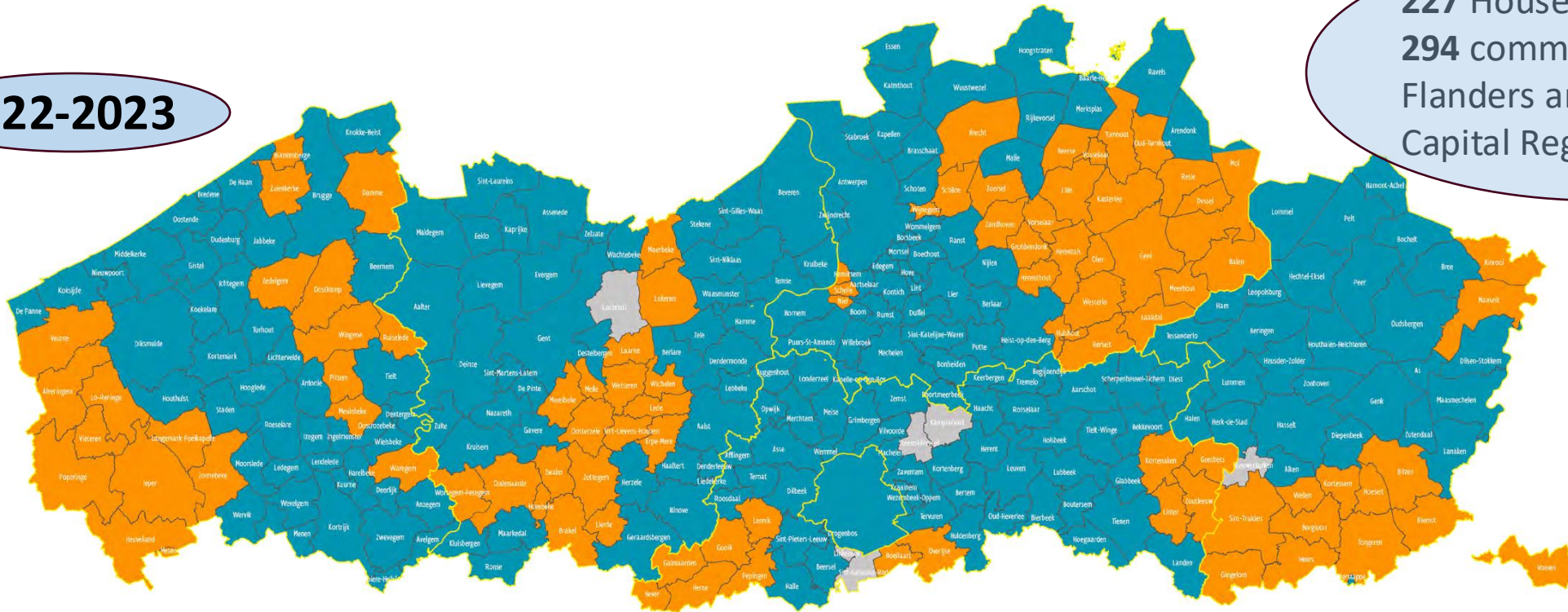
HUIS VAN HET **KIND**

Opgroeien

The Flemish 'Houses of the child': where?

2022-2023

227 Houses of the Child in
294 communities in
Flanders and Brussels
Capital Region



- 29 inter-municipal Houses of the Child
- Municipal House of the Child

In 2024: final expansion: 284/285
municipalities in Flanders + 19/19
Brussels Capital Region

The Flemish 'Houses of the child': funding mechanism?

January 2025

Basic services – Core funds

- The amount of Flemish funding varies between +/- € 1.200 en € 98.000 (median amount +/- € 8000) per House of the Child
- Based on the number of minors and vulnerable families in each area

Total amount for all Houses of the Child = **€ 2.793.973**



The Flemish 'Houses of the child': funding mechanism?

Supplementary services – on call funding

- Extra **family support initiatives** including:
 - ✓ targeted assistance for families in vulnerable situations
 - ✓ support programs for expectant and young parents
 - ✓ home-based volunteer support
 - ✓ Language and developmental aid for disadvantaged parents
 - ✓ group-based parenting support and parent-child activities
- Total amount for all supplementary services = **€7.129.831**

Total amount (basic + supplementary) = €9.923.803

The Flemish 'Houses of the child': funding mechanism?

Preventive medical consultation offices

- Separate legislation, but part of the Houses of the Child
- 289 offices with **doctors, staff of Kind en Gezin** (Child and Family), part of Opgroeien, and **volunteers**
- Funding
 - ✓ Infrastructure and the support of volunteers: € 5.197.992
 - ✓ Doctors' fees: € 11.877.496
- Total amount of funding = **€ 17.075.488**



Houses of the child: Survey 2022-2023

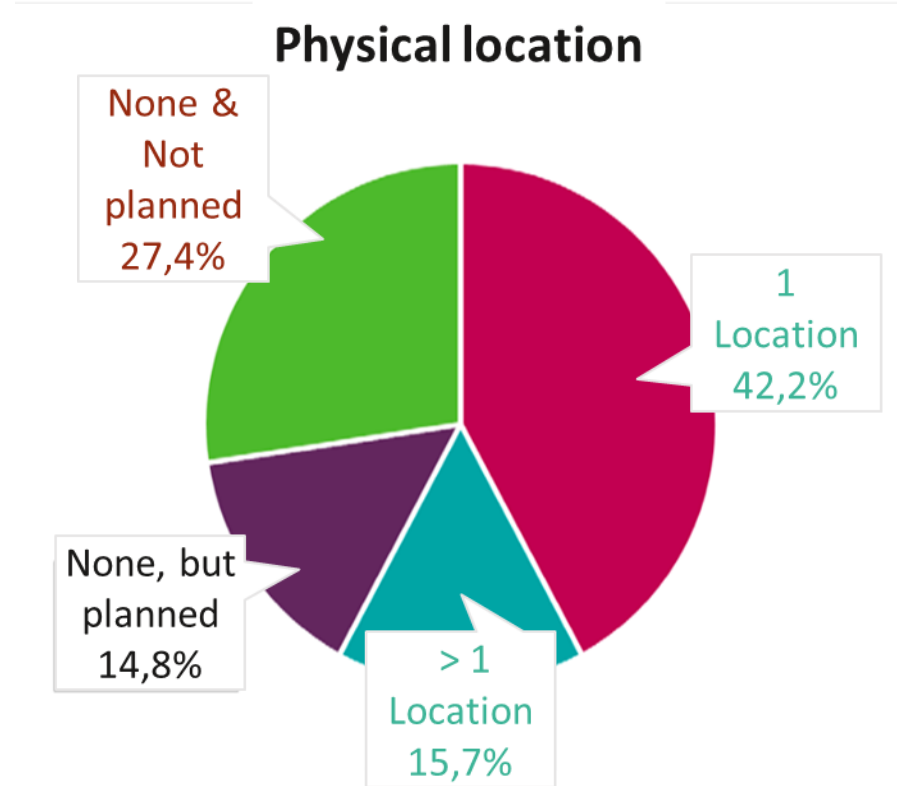
Opgroeien

Survey – Developments over the past decade and major trends

- **Purpose:** 10 years after the decree, gaining a comprehensive picture of local practices, delivering insights for future policy
- Extensive survey in **spring 2022**
- Examined **multiple operational dimensions** including target demographics, service provisions, partnership networks, and organizational structures
- **Methodology:**
 - ✓ Oral interview based on standard questionnaire (open + closed questions)
 - ✓ Interviews by local staff of Opgroeien with the coordinator of the House of the Child
- Extended report in 2023

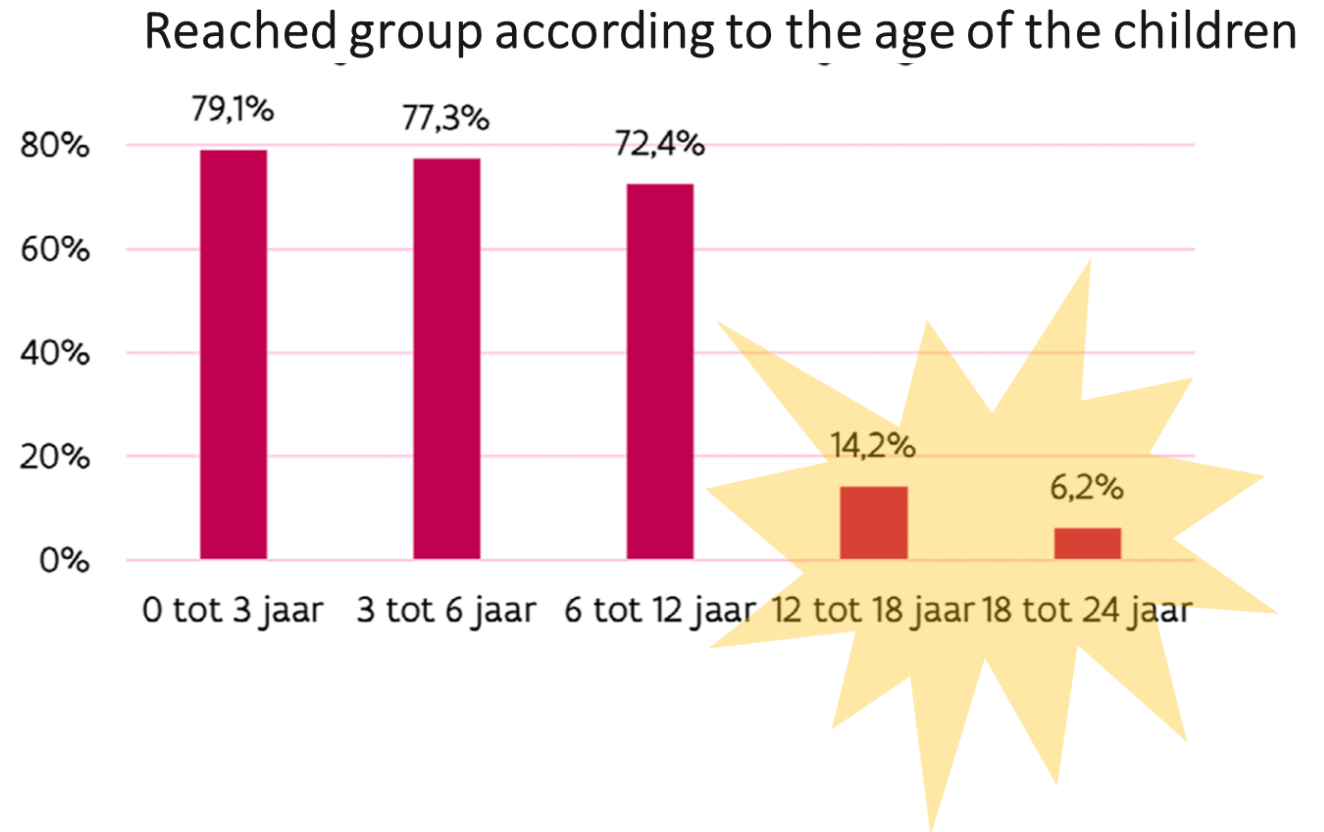
Survey – Developments over the past decade and major trends

- No obligation by legislation
- But: **crucial role** of physical location (**accessibility!**) and **co-location** in the development of Houses
- **Sharing facilities** with complementary services such as public libraries, Kind & Gezin offices, community meeting spaces, or childcare centers creates **integrated service hubs** where families can naturally seek guidance on various parenting and child development matters



Survey – Developments over the past decade and major trends

- Focus on families with children between **0 – 12 years old**
- Challenges in effectively reaching all family demographics:
- Realising a **social mix = significant challenge**
- Families with **children requiring specialized support**: only **13%** of the Houses reports a good reach of this group



Survey – Developments over the past decade and major trends

- **Great diversity** in partnerships and life domains
- Connecting different life domains is a major challenge: truly integrated work across life domains is still not a reality.
- Few connections between Houses and **more specialized support services** (f.e. youth care)

Top 3 life domains ➤ active engagement	n	%
Parenting support	150	67
Childcare	129	57
Education (cf. school)	88	39
Social cohesion (e.g. play day, picnic, birth tree event)	84	37
Culture/Sports/Youth	57	25
Mental Health	54	24
Practical support	37	16
Healthcare	35	16
Socio-economic determinants	36	16
Youth assistance/help	4	2
Play(groups) & informal exchanges/support	5	2
Other	6	3

Survey – Developments over the past decade and major trends

MAJOR TRENDS

- Remarkable **diversity among Houses: strong Houses of the Child** models with broader cross-sectoral integration with areas such as education or leisure services versus Houses remaining at **earlier developmental stages**, still primarily situated within welfare services
- Strong commitment of **local governmental authorities**: financial investments (Flemish funding is insufficient!)

Ongoing challenges and future policy directions





Challenges and future directions

1. NEED FOR MORE FUNDING + MORE EQUALLY SPREAD

- Decree (May 9, 2024) 'Towards a strong and integrated youth care and family policy': Houses of the Child as crucial access points for family services
- But: substantial **budget increases** from the Flemish government remain **necessary** to fully realize this expansive mission
- Current **funding disparities between regions** needs to be rethought, guided by the principle of proportional universalism

Challenges and future directions

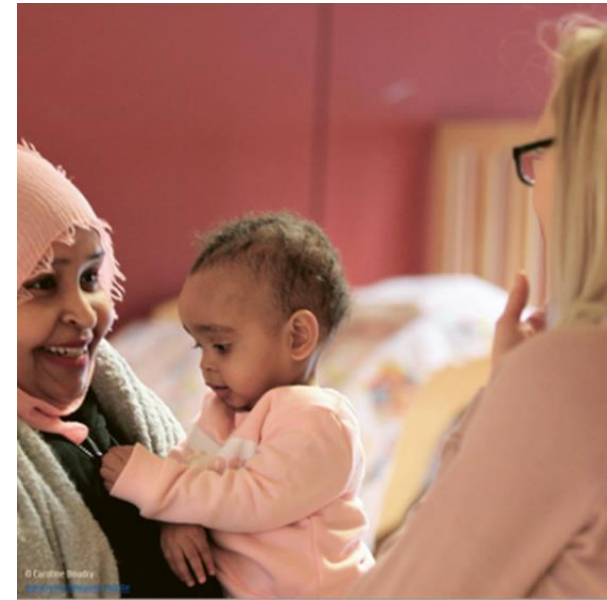
2. NEED TO ESTABLISH FRAMEWORKS FOR SERVICE QUALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

- **Wide variety** in services, vision, partnerships,...make it difficult to establish consistent expectations regarding the services families can anticipate from any given House.
- In principle, all families in Flanders and Brussels should have access to **consistent basic services**: welcoming, accessible neighbourhood hubs offering child-friendly spaces for interaction and information exchange,...
- **Define clear expectations** in new legislation and support of the Houses of the Child, allowing for **local adaptation**

Challenges and future directions

3. PROMOTE INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

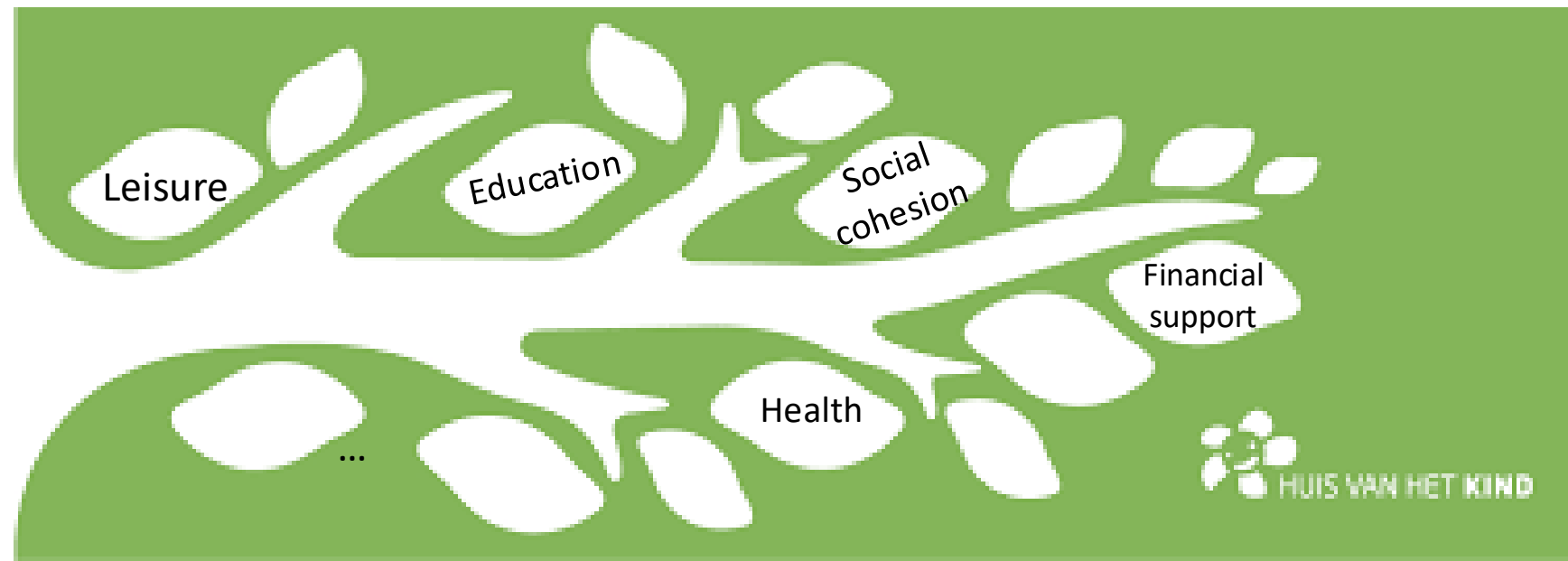
- Strategies to improve **access for all families**: socially disadvantaged families, families with children with specific needs, families with migrant background,...
- F.e. working with innovative outreach methods
- Realising more connections between preventive family support and **more specialized services** (f.e. youth care) will increase **accessibility and continuity** for families requiring specialized support services
- Supporting Houses of the Child in realising social inclusion and accessibility (vision, methodologies, tools,...)



Challenges and future directions

4. FACILITATE CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION AND INTEGRATION

- Incentivized **partnerships** across health, education, youth work, leisure, youth care, social services,... could create more integrated support ecosystems.
- Contributes to realize **holistic family support systems**
- Increases **accessibility**, especially for socially disadvantaged families

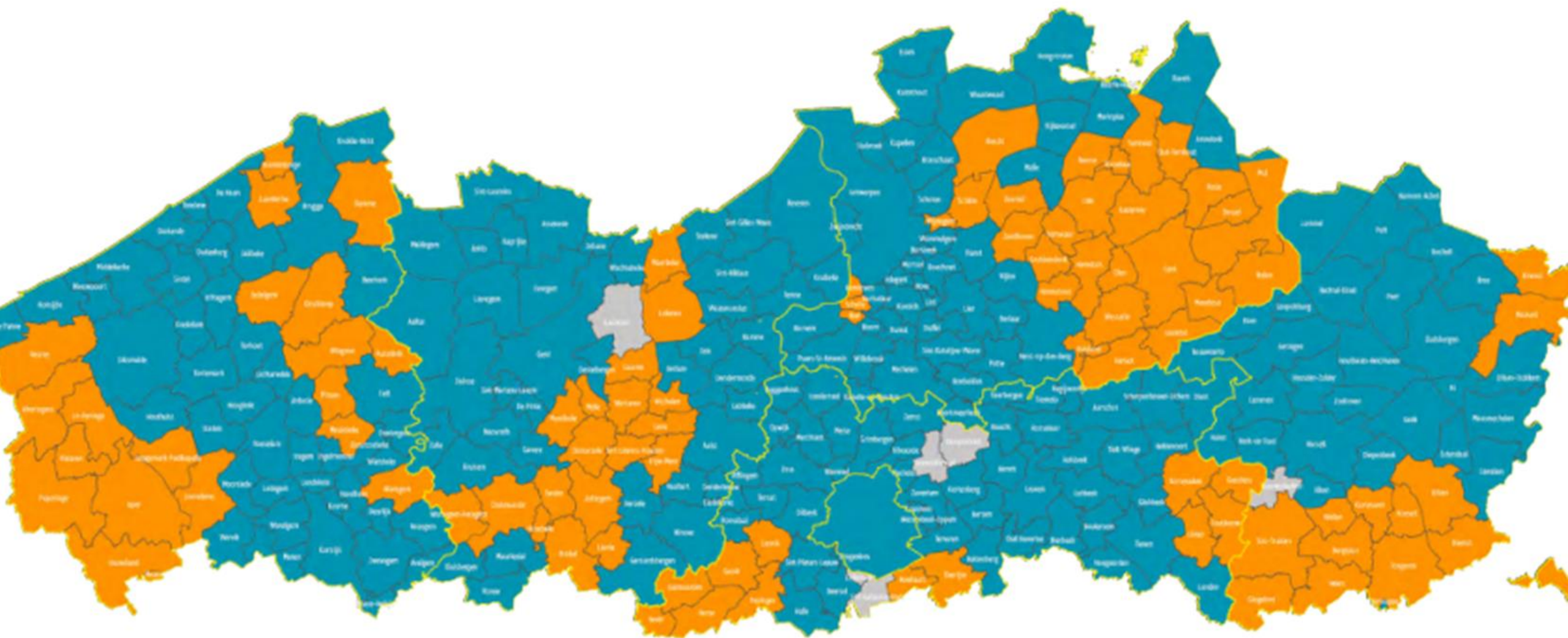


2. Houses of the Child from the perspective of local governments: a long and winding road (but we're getting there)

Ivan Pauwels

**Association of Flemish Cities and
Municipalities (VVSG)**

vvsg







Importance of a vision on local family policy

Local family policy

... is more than facilitating actions

... is more than providing budgets



What do we, as a local council, want to achieve for children, young people and families in our municipality ?

- What is important for us ?
- How do we get there ?
- How realistic are these goals ? How do we prioritize them ?

Why is this so difficult ?

- No tradition of ownership
- Limited budgets (make limited interest)
- Complex landscape

Problems arising from this in clarity

- On a governance level
- On the level of local employees
- Towards local families



What is local family policy ?

COFACE

Supporting families is about more than just parenting advice





...



Child care



Spatial
planning



Leisure



Mobility



...

Family policy

So it's about ... everything for everybody ?



Survey data on characteristics of good support:

- Reliable
- Usable



Let's create a local network:

- That is nearby
- That feels safe and familiar for parents (and their children)
- That provides shared, custom made support for every individual

For families

The House of the Child = this
network



For city councils

The House of the Child = a policy
instrument



Challenges:



...



Child care



Spatial
planning



Leisure



Mobility



...

Family policy

Surpassing actions towards a proper vision on family policy



**Surpassing actions towards a
proper vision on family policy**

... also on a Flemish level







3. Questions and Discussion

... the floor is yours ...

Houses of the Child – Integrated Family Support Hubs (Service Hubs)

= Basic support for (all) families?

- Basic support?
- What support (activities) must be provided to be recognized as a basic service?

Houses of the Child – Integrated Family Support Hubs (Service Hubs)

= Basic support for (all) families?

- All families?
- Proportional universalism?
- The (local) government should primarily/only finance support for families in vulnerable situations?

Houses of the Child – Integrated Family Support Hubs (Service Hubs)

= Integrated support for (all) families?

- What is integrated support and how can you achieve that kind of support?

Houses of the Child – Integrated Family Support Hubs (Service Hubs)

= Collaborative network

- **Public and private (local) actors?**
- **How to involve / engage local actors?**
- **How to persuade local actors to engage?**
- **How to persuade local practitioners and policymakers to make a sustainable and active contribution to integrated support?**
- **Encouraging factors? Preconditions?**

Houses of the Child – Integrated Family Support Hubs (Service Hubs)

= providing basic quality

- Quality assurance (e.g. monitoring, impact measurement) of integrated support?
- To be established by each network itself?
- Supra-local development (e.g. instruments) and management (e.g. datacollection)?

Information?

Contact?

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<https://coface-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Insights-Flanders-Website.pdf>

INSIGHTS ON FAMILY POLICIES

DOSSIER 2

**THE
FLEMISH
HOUSES OF
THE CHILD:**
TEN YEARS
OF FAMILY
SERVICES
COORDINATION
AT THE LOCAL
LEVEL

KATHLEEN EMMERY
TINE ROMMENS
IVAN PAUWELS
KRISTIEN NYS

EUROPEAN
OBSERVATORY ON
FAMILY POLICY



THANK YOU

Holistic Approach. The integration of models requires a holistic approach where all system components are interconnected.

Putting the People at the Center. To attract and keep people—the world's scarcest resource—a system must place **individuals and families** at the core of its strategies.

BREAKING SILOS, BUILDING FUTURES.
Policy innovations for integrated family and child support
PARALLEL SESSION STREAM N. 2- INTEGRATED FAMILY SUPPORT MODELS
Brussels, Belgium, 25-26 settembre 2025
Luciano Malfer

Research and Family Development Manager, Fondazione Bruno Kessler (Trento, Italy)

1

ATTRACTIVE PEOPLE STRATEGY



The model is based on 15 years of experience as Head of Agency and on actions that have already been implemented and are still ongoing.

An attractive People Strategy: A Call for Change

A good People Strategy requires a shift in perspective, focusing on empowering people and adopting a holistic approach.

It must give individuals the opportunity to realize their own life projects.

It sees all parts as interconnected, working together as a whole. At the center there are Agencies or Family Centers. I propose the following 6 key

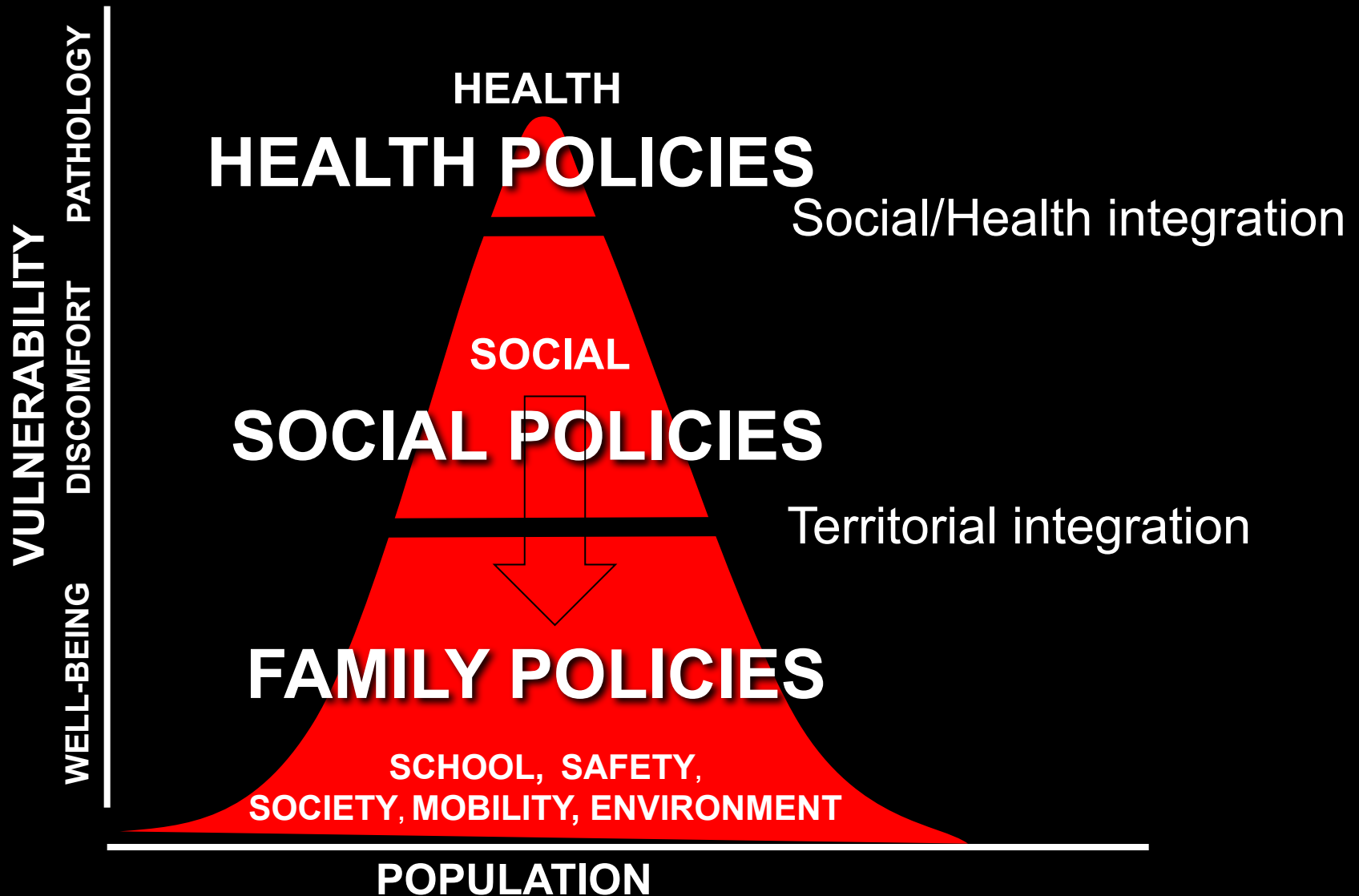
POLICY DESIGN

1

Policies for family and personal well-being are distinct from social policies

PEOPLE IS NOT A PROBLEM

POLICY DESIGN

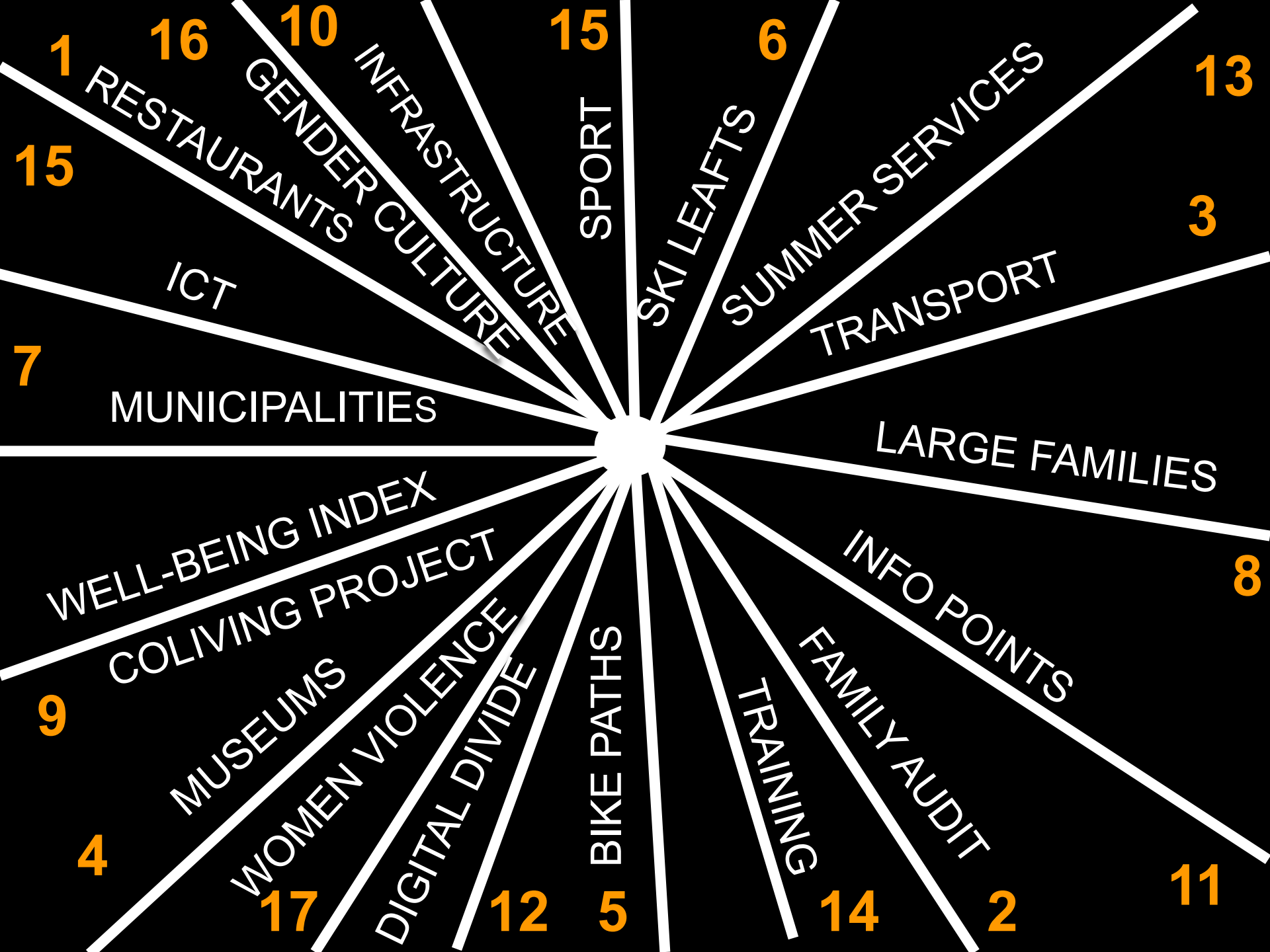


POLICY DESIGN

PEOPLE AT THE CENTER

2

All policies of a regional or municipal council can be designed as policies for the well-being of individuals and families.





At the center of the web, we have the well-being of the families/individual, and all policies can be oriented or reoriented toward this goal.

POLICY DESIGN

3

Developing a voluntary alliance with all sectors of activity in the region to put the person and family at the center of their policies.

COMMUNITY FOR PEOPLE

From this model of Welfare...

**WELFARE
STATE**

**WELFARE
PROVIDED FAMILY**

...to Welfare "Factor 8":

(

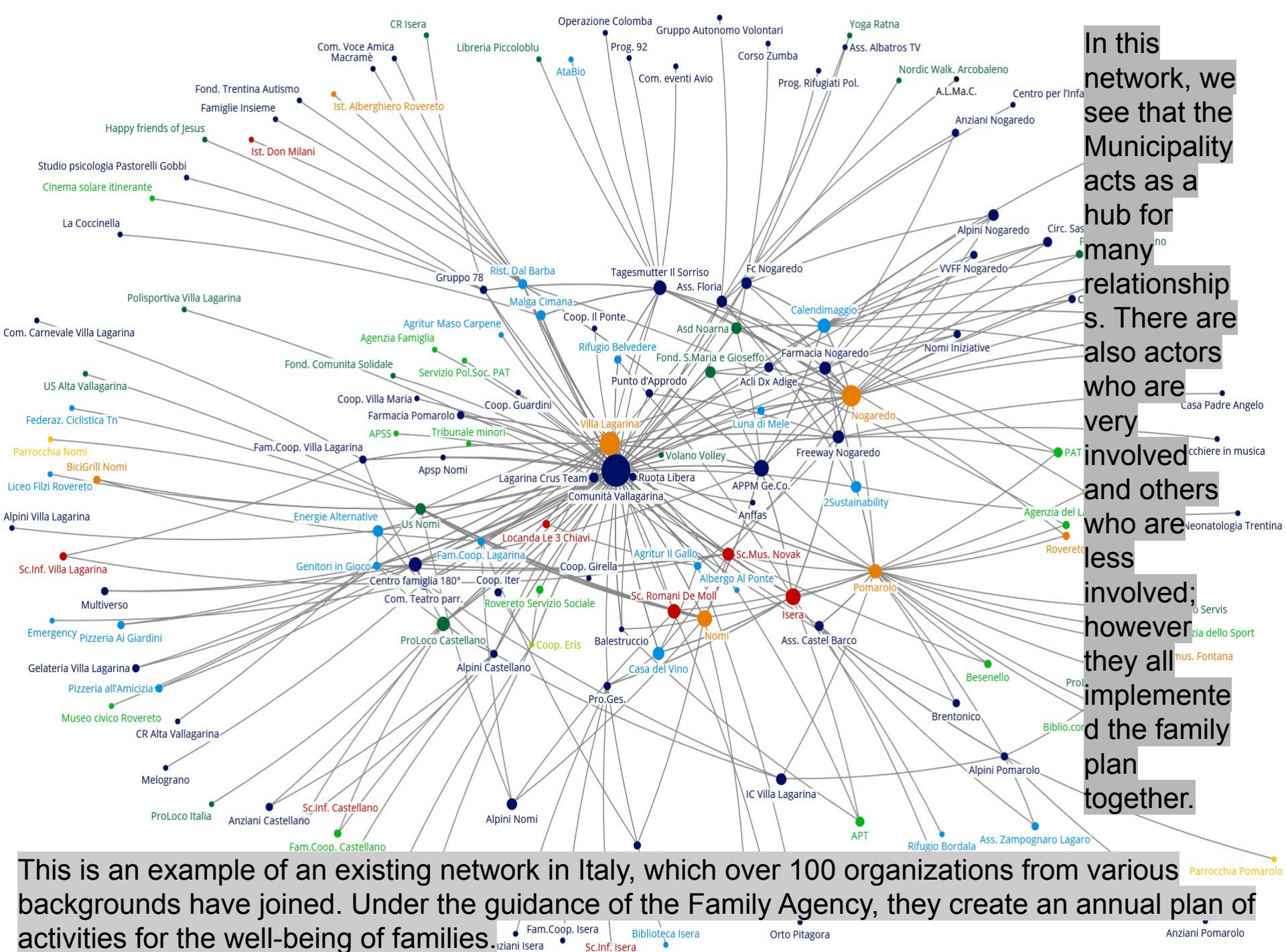
WELFARE STATE	WELFARE PROVIDED FAMILY	GRANDPARENTAL WELFARE	WELFARE ...
CORPORATE WELFARE	COMMUNITY WELFARE	CULTURAL WELFARE	SPORT WELFARE

POLICY DESIGN

4

Developing
voluntary **territorial
networks** with
individual **profit and
non-profit
organizations** in the
area to put the
person and the
family at the center
of their **programs of
activity**.

PEOPLE CENTERED SERVICES



TIMELINE "WELFARE TERRITORIALE"

Fasi del Processo

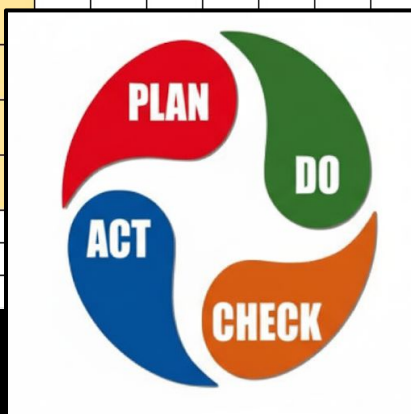


2025

2026

REPORT

	gennaio	febbraio	marzo	aprile	maggio	giugno	luglio	agosto	settembre	ottobre	novembre	dicembre	gennaio	febbraio	marzo	aprile	
1 Documento di progetto FBK	👍																13/1/25 (Documento di progetto FBK)
2 Approvazione piano strategico (Giunta comunale)			👍														21/3/25 (Piano strategico - 6 punti)
3 Presentazione del progetto scientifico alla Giunta comunale					👍												13/05/25 (ppt)
4 Cabina di regia. Approvazione del Piano operativo					👍												13/05/25 (Piano operativo -13 azioni)
5 Accordo scientifico di collaborazione (FBK-Comune Cesena)						👍											13/06/25 (Accordo)
6 Convegno cittadino "Verso un Piano Strategico per il benessere delle famiglie, l'attrattività"							👍										30/06/25 (Locandina) 30/06/25 (ppt)
7 Cabina di regia							👍										01/07/25 (Report)
8 Comitato scientifico									👍								9/9/25 (Composizione) 10/9/25 (Timone) 10/9/25 (ppt) 10/9/25 (verbale)
9 Costituzione gruppo pilota e comitato scientifico									⚙️	⚙️							
10 Accordo volontario di area											X	X	X				
11 Workshop con altre reti territoriali													X	X	X		
12 Programma di lavoro															X	X	X



The plan is based on the **PDCA method**, a continuous improvement cycle designed to ensure progressive growth.

POLICY DESIGN

PEOPLE METHODOLOGY

5

To start these paths, it is essential to **develop new paradigms and change management processes.**

Otherwise, we will keep doing the same things, expecting different results that will never come.



The development of these policies requires change management based on people-oriented methodologies (Family Standard, Family Plans, networking, co-design...) with people and communities at the center of change.

POLICY DESIGN

6

The change agent activates processes through evidence-based methodologies, developing voluntary networks among profit and non-profit organizations and placing people and families at the center of activity programs.

CHANGE AGENT

2

THE NATIONAL FAMILY PLAN



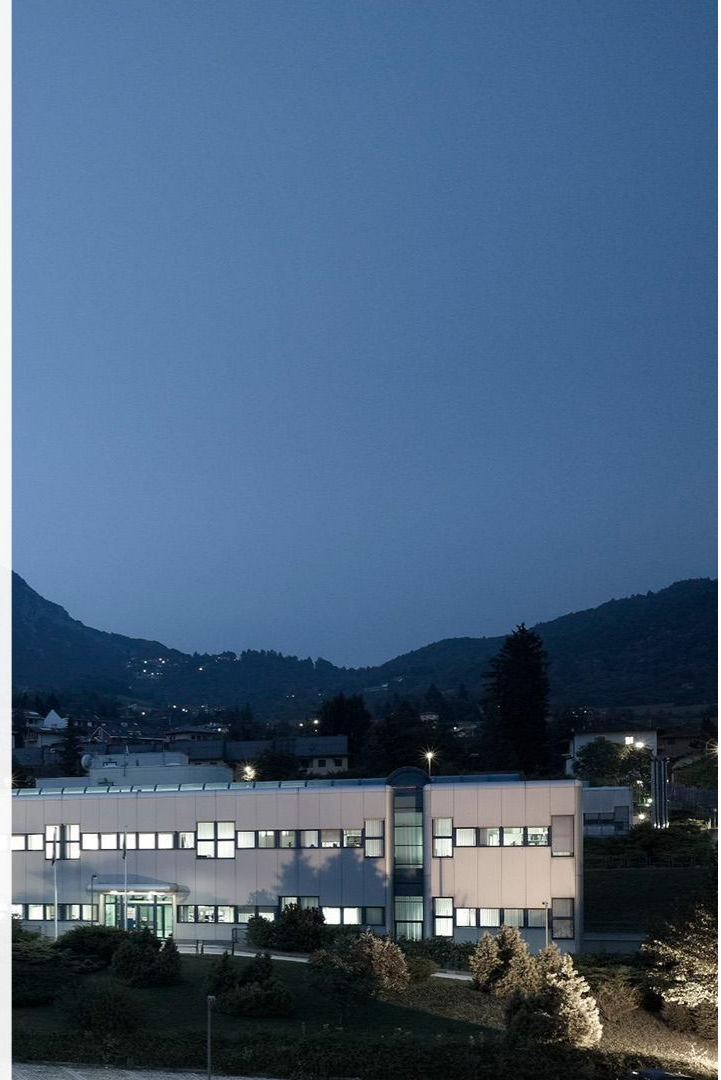
On May 30, 2025, the Italian government approved the **third National Family Plan** for the 2025-2027 period.

The plan is structured into 14 actions and is inspired by a practical approach.

The Action No. 6, is titled "**The Family Center as a hub of new local governance.**"

Family Centers, originating in some Italian regions in the 1990s, have been recognized as central hubs.

The new plan turns **Family Centers into community hubs**. By engaging all local actors, they build a new kind of generative welfare that helps families become active partners in their own well-being.



THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION

Luciano Malfer

Research and Family Development Manager, Fondazione Bruno Kessler

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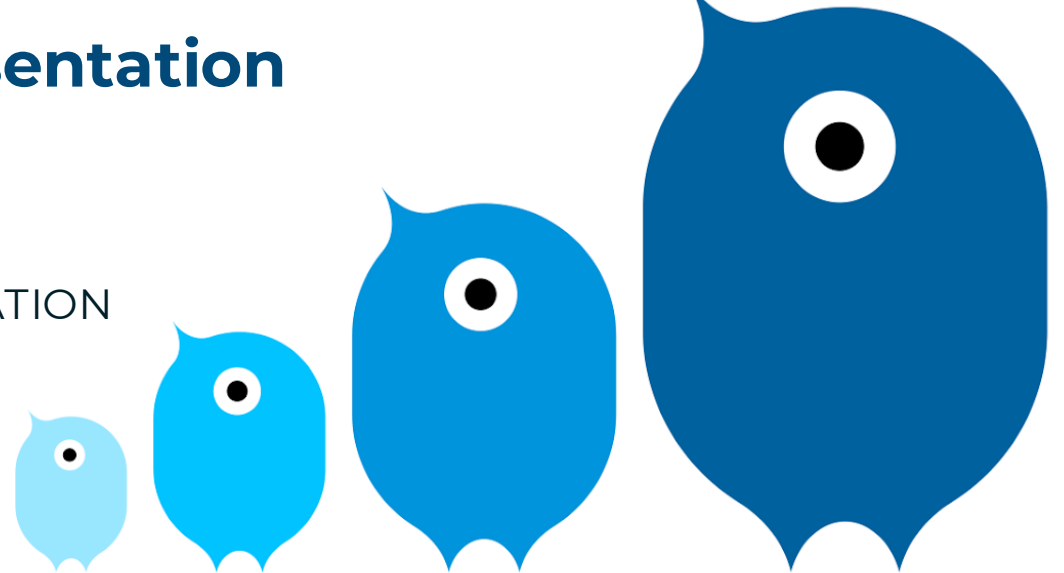


PEREPESA: Community-Based Prevention and Family Support Center

COFACE meeting in Brussels – Presentation

25 September 2025

CHILD WELL-BEING DEVELOPMENT CENTER FOUNDATION
Maarja Oviir-Neivelt
Founder and Chairman of the Management Board





MAARJA



KIIRA



LY



HELIKA



TEELE



ANETTE



RIIN



BRIGITTA

WHO WE ARE

Child Well-being Development Centre Foundation

(LaHe) is a privately initiated competence center that develops the **Perepesa** prevention and early intervention model and supports local governments in implementing the model in their municipalities.

OUR TEAM

MAARJA OVIIR NEIVELT- Founder and Chairman of the Management Board

KIIRA GORNICHEFF – CEO, member of Management Board

LY KASVANDIK – Development Manager

HELIKA SAAR – Implementation Manager

TEELE KRAVTŠENKO – Expansion Manager

ANETTE TALVIK – Quality and Data Manager

BRIGITTA ARUTJUNJAN – Communications Manager

RIIN PÄRNAMETS – Community Development Manager

The Problem We Are Addressing

- There was **no nationwide systemic prevention system at the local level**. Instead, the focus is primarily on addressing the consequences.
- The **accessibility and quality of services was inconsistent** with limited use of evidence-based interventions and no impact assessments for existing ones. Service provision was **fragmented** across various specialists and sectors.
- **Children's developmental issues were noticed too late.** [Local governments](#) are legally obligated to prevent risks that threaten a child's well-being and development⁽¹⁾ but [often lack the resources](#) to develop a systemic solution on their own.
- **Prevention is cheaper** than dealing with consequences:
€ 1 vs € 14 ⁽²⁾
€ 3.5 billion ⁽³⁾
1 % ➤ € 29 million ⁽⁴⁾

The scope of the problem: How big is the challenge in Estonia *

- Approximately **half of households need more help with child care and upbringing** but either don't know where to turn for assistance or are hesitant to ask for help. ⁽¹⁾ ⁽²⁾
- **One in five mothers experiences postnatal depression** ⁽³⁾. Long-term and severe depression can affect not only the mother but also the newborn and father. ^(ibid)
- **15% of children and adolescents experience mental health disorders**, with family problems being one of the contributing factors. ⁽⁴⁾
- In 2024, the **number of calls to the Children's Helpline** reached 18,690, which is about **10% more** than the previous year. Many inquiries were related to child upbringing, family relationships, and parent-child relationships. ⁽⁵⁾
- 42% of adult Estonian residents accept physical punishment of children in certain situations. ⁽⁵⁾
- In the first eight months of 2024, **10% fewer children** were born compared to the same period last year. This trend has been observed for the third consecutive year. ⁽⁶⁾ ⁽⁷⁾

Scientific Literature and Research

- The greatest influences on a child's well-being are:
 - ✓ the child's developmental needs
 - ✓ parenting
 - ✓ family and environment.
- The foundations for a child's success and resilience are laid during the **prenatal stage and the first three years of life.** ⁽¹⁾
- By supporting parental skills and well-being and identifying problems at an early stage, we can reduce the need for costly interventions later and prevent issues from emerging.

Solution: Perepesa model

- **A tool for local governments** on how to carry out **systematic prevention work** with families of young children at the local level.
- In **collaboration** with government institutions and NGOs .
- Informed by **global best practices**.



2014

2018

Recruitment of the **core team** and development of the Perepesa model and evaluation plan

2019

First Perepesas established in **Viljandi**, **Põltsamaa**, and **Türi**

2022

Perepesas opened in **Tartu** and **Elva**

2024

Tallinn joins the Perepesa network

2025

New Perepesas to open in **Pärnu**, **Haabersti**, and **Pirita**

2025-2027

A total of **25 Perepesas** will be established across Estonia by 2027



2016

Establishment of the **Child Wellbeing Development Centre** and development of the model framework

2022

The Child Wellbeing Development Centre becomes a **strategic partner** of the state

2023

National Welfare Development Plan (2023–2030) includes the creation of **community-based prevention and family work centers** as a priority

2024

The Intersectoral Parenting Action Plan (2024–2030) highlights the **expansion of the Perepesa network** as a priority

2025-2027

The Ministry of Social Affairs supports the creation of **13 new Perepesas** using ESF funds, allocating **€106,735 per Perepesa**. Tallinn City commits to establishing Perepesas in **all 8 districts**

A total of **20 services** offered across the Perepesa network:
■ **9** core services and
■ **11** additional services

2019–2024

■ **35000** visits —
■ The number increases every year

Pilot project:

■ Local governments (LAs) and cooperation partners rated Perepesa activities **8.3 / 10**.
■ "Such a systematic provision of services had never before been available in any Perepesa region."

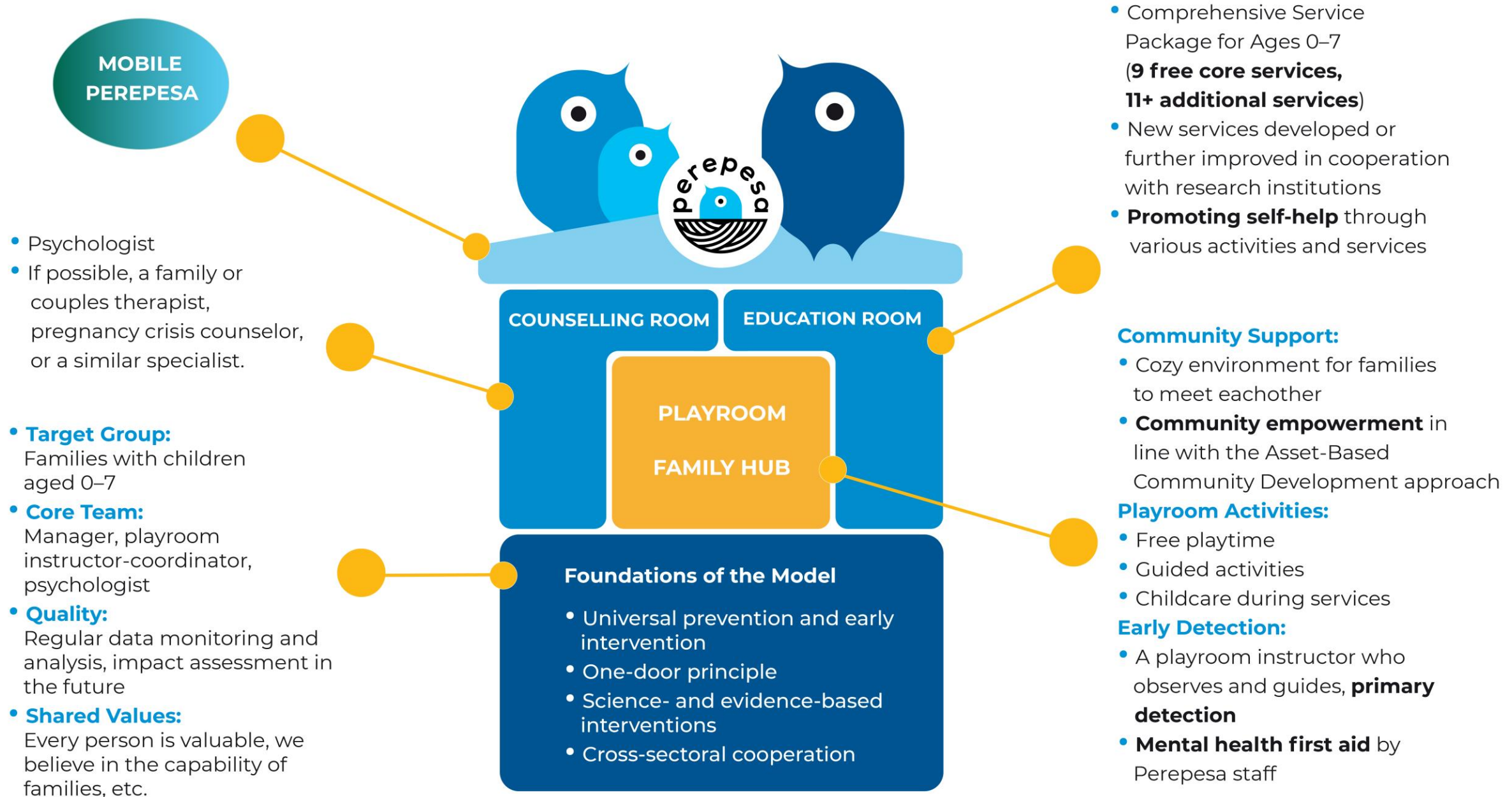
Parents:

■ Service feedback score **9 / 10**.
■ Perepesa is a warm and welcoming place to come — to participate in services, meet other parents, and receive evidence-based support.

Perepesa serves as a community anchor for families with young children:
■ Community members initiate and organize approximately **30 events** annually.



PEREPESA MODEL







Perepesa services

- The focus of Perepesa services:
 - Parenting education
 - Child and parental mental health support
 - Family and relationship support
- **Comprehensive service package** from pregnancy to the child's school entry
- **9 core services** provided in every Perepesa:
 - Playroom, guided activities, and childcare in the playroom
 - Psychological counseling
 - Parenting school for expectant families
 - Parenting discussion groups for new parents
 - Support for the speech and development of 2-year-old children
 - Parenting program "Incredible Years" for parents of children aged 2-8
 - Training and discussion groups, including **Dads' Club**
- * Core services are **free of charge**
- 11 + additional services, based on community needs

Quality assurance and impact research



Comprehensive training, implementation support and mentoring



Quarterly overviews of achievement of the performance indicators

Internal assessment once a year (assessment model based on Perepesa's model)



Planning to **evaluate the impact** of the Perepesa model on families in the coming years

LaHe ' s key functions:

- **Develops the model**, incl the services
- Supports the local governments in launching the Perepesas
- Provides **comprehensive training**, implementation support and **mentoring** to Perepesa teams
- **Coordinates cooperation among Perepesa centers** to share best practices
- **Monitors quality** through data collection and analysis and gives feedback to teams and local governments
- Conducts **advocacy** at both local and state levels

What is Perepesa? (the “Family Nest”)

- **Platform for early support for families with children** that plays a key role in national prevention efforts ⁽¹⁾
- **Part of the municipal social, education, and healthcare system** ⁽²⁾
- **A community-based prevention and family support center** that:
 - ✓ encourages and supports parents with understanding and competent information;
 - ✓ offers impactful services; and
 - ✓ provides a community environment where families can support each other

Funding of Perepesa

The **funding structure of Perepesa**:

- The Perepesa annual budget is € 80 000 – 100,000.
- Local government covers on-site costs of Perepesa: 1) salaries of the core team, 2) cost of services, 3) administrative expenses.
- LaHe provides **free advisory support** to local governments until 2027.

* LaHe's funding structure 2018 - 2025: **40%** state, inc ESF funding, **60% private funding**.

ESF + Support

ESF support measure amounting to

€ 1.3 million euros:

- for launching 13 new Perepesas in 2024 to 2027 (€ 107,000 per local government)
- supporting mobile Perepesa services to improve accessibility in rural areas
- supporting LaHe to provide free advisory support to local governments/Perepesa teams to open and operate new Perepesas (€ 300,000 for 2023-2027.)



THANK YOU !



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**Sure Start programme
in Bulgaria - practical model
for integrated child and family support
in the early years**

Maria Petkova
Tulip Foundation

„The participation of parents is what critically contributes to the development of children. We are not talking about their education or income. We speak of interaction.“

James Heckman
Economist and Nobel laureate

The beginning

- A concept that addresses a need
- A model that has been applied in different places for some time
- Evaluated and demonstrates social impact
- Financial and resource effectiveness

The need

- The first 1000 days are the most important for the development of a child!
- The first 1001 nights are exiting and highly emotional for the parents
But also quite stressful - everything is new...
- Sure start family centres offer different services under one roof - available, accessible, multidisciplinary essential services

Why this approach?

- Children could be reached via kindergarten, school or parents
- Early childhood development starts in the family
- Holistic approach – information, health, education, social & administrative services, sports, local initiatives...
- Empowers children and families – they participate & decide & initiate & organise
- Provides practical ground for preventative work
- Functions as an early warning / early identification system
- Research shows that ECEC services are most effective if/when these are connected to an integrated local service system

The family centres are run by local organisations in various places - city, towns, villages, neighbourhoods.

Variety of activities aimed at:

- physical, social, emotional, cognitive development of children according to their age
- building the capacities and skills of children and parents
- support for the family as a system

Children's house / House of the family & the community
is open for all

- Pregnant women and their partners
- Parents / families with children 0-6 years old
- Parents / families with children can visit at any day or time they want and join an activity of their choice

The activities

Various joint activities for children and mothers / fathers / family members

- Information, presentations and advice on various topics - importance of play, breastfeeding, health, education, family planning, violence, administrative documents & procedures...
- Visits and lectures from specialists – doctor, midwife, speech therapist, psychologist, representatives of local services...
- Groups for pregnant women (and their partners)
- Individual / group meetings with a specialists on request
- Individual / small groups work, consultations on various issues, contacts with institutions, help in filling in documents, accompany visits to agencies
- Exchange visits with local kindergartens & schools
- Joint activities for children and families – playing, reading, cooking...
- Birthdays, cultural and sport events, puppet theatre...

The impact

External evaluation September 2025

Know How Centre at the New Bulgarian University

- Effective model for integrated support for children and their families
- Serves as a bridge between families/communities and services / institutions by providing flexible access to needed support and specialists (even if these are not present in the community)
- It is highly appreciated by parents and children
- Safe friendly environment helps children to integrate and adults to strengthen the links and create supportive community
- Especially effective in vulnerable communities
- Contributes to the goals of the European Child Guarantee – reduction of child poverty and social exclusion by providing equal access to health, education, ECEC

Impact for children

- Gain knowledge and skills in various fields
- Develop cognitive, group communication and social skills
- Enjoy easy integration in the education system - kindergarten & school
- Have quality care at home
- Early identification - specialised intervention in cases of developmental delay / disability

Impact for parents

- Learn/develop understanding about the full spectrum of needs of their children – beyond food and sleep; improve parental skills and practices and provide better quality care
- Enhanced intensity & quality of relationships and communication between children and parents / members of the family
- Improved parental skills for supporting the complex development of their children and understanding of the importance of the early years
- Parents seek full social integration of their children

Impact for the community

- Available flexible integrated access to services and specialists
- Contact point for addressing needs that other services do not offer – information, exchange with other parents, emotional support, self-help groups, contacts with specialists, material support...
- Positive attitude of children and especially of parents towards the importance of education and health
- Decreased mistrust towards institutions
- Overcoming negative effects of poverty and social isolation by creating space for social interaction
- Smooth transition from home to kindergarten / school for children and parents

Services

- The programme is highly efficient in terms of finances and human resources
- Changes the traditional approach in services by replacing the formal sanctions with a more human and engaging manner
- Entry point – families are supported at a very early stage and connected with the respective health, social, educational or specialise service

Key factors

- Physical presence in the community
- Flexible complex support addressing complex needs
- Friendly non-judgmental approach builds durable trust
- Practical daily activities stimulate the development of children
- Prevention instead of sanctions
- Respect from the staff to families
- Strong partnerships with other stakeholders – maternity clinics, health services and GPs, kindergartens, schools, community clubs, social services, agencies, other NGOs, municipalities ...

Main characteristics

- Two generations - children & parents (grandparents)
- No stigma - for all families in the community
- Integrated approach – health, education, social, administrative services & community initiatives
- The activities continue long enough time so that practical change can be measured and evaluated
- Based on local needs, implemented in consultation and participation of parents and the local community
- Culturally appropriate and sensitive for the needs of children and parents

Principles

- Focus on the family as a system, not only the child/children
- Cross-sector collaboration - involvement of all local stakeholders - health, education, social, cultural and other institutions and organisations
- Special attention to vulnerable groups
- Takes into account specific local needs
- Focus on missing services in the local community
- Participation of families with children is not compulsory

Thank you for your attention!