Increased longevity and social security reform: questioning the optimality of individual accounts when education matters

par Gilles Le Garrec

In 1950, life expectancy at birth in Western Europe was 68 years. It is now 80 years and should reach 85 by 2050. The downside of this trend is the serious threat that is hanging over the financing of our public retirement systems. Financed on a pay-as-you-go (PAYG) basis, *i.e.* pension benefits are paid through contributions of contemporary workers, the systems must cope with an increasingly large number of pensioners compared to the number of contributors. For example, leaving the average age of retirement unchanged in France would lead to a ratio of pensioners to workers (the dependency ratio) of 70.1% in 2040, whereas this ratio was 35.8% in 1990. Changes are unavoidable. Maintaining the current level of benefits within the same system in the near future requires to increase either the contribution rate or the length of contribution (by delaying the age of retirement).

This financing problem calls into question the role of PAYG retirement systems in our societies. For instance, by evaluating the real pre-tax return on non-financial corporate capital at 9.3% and the growth rate over the same period (1960 to 1995) at 2.6%, Feldstein[1] unequivocally advocates the privatization of retirement systems and a switch to fully funded systems. He assesses the potential present-value gain at nearly $20 trillion for the United States. However, beside the change in the nature of the risk,[2] replacing conventional PAYG systems by financial – or funded – defined contribution (FDC) systems would certainly involve prohibitive social and political costs because one generation will have to pay twice. Implementing such a reform in Western democracies thus appears difficult. For that reason, in recent years a large focus has been put on non-financial – or notional – defined contribution (NDC) systems as legislated in Sweden in 1994. NDC systems are PAYG systems that mimic FDC systems. Individual contributions are noted on individual accounts. Accounts are credited with a rate of return that reflects demographic and productivity changes. Obviously, replacing conventional PAYG systems by NDC systems does not address the main concern of Feldstein, that is, the low return associated with the PAYG financing method. However, supporters of NDC systems claim that conventional systems, by linking pension benefits only partially to contributions, distort individual behaviours, inducing reduced work efforts or earlier retirements. In addition, they claim that only an explicit defined contribution system will be able to stabilize contributions in spite of aging populations.

Looking at the empirical facts, the supposed inefficiency of conventional retirement systems must be reconsidered. Firstly, even if their pension benefits are linked to partial earnings history, most conventional systems are close to actuarial fairness[3] as NDC systems because high-income earners live longer and have steeper age-earnings profiles. Secondly, stabilizing contributions can be achieved similarly within the scope of more conventional defined benefit systems, as seen in the "point system" in France or in Germany. In that case, the unit of pension rights is earnings points (not euros) and can be adjusted according to demographic and productivity changes, as in an NDC system. Cleverly designed conventional retirement systems can often do the same job as NDC systems. Finally, empirical findings from Sala-i-Martin[4] and Zhang and Zhang[5] tend to support a positive impact of retirement systems on economic growth through the human capital channel.

To explain the positive link between PAYG retirement systems and economic growth that is suggested by the empirical findings, previous authors have then focused on the human capital channel, and more particularly on parental altruism. In this strand of the literature, PAYG retirement systems result in higher economic growth because they provide an incentive for altruistic parents to invest more in their children's education, even if investment per child remains insufficient to be socially optimal. In addition, they also provide an incentive for parents to have fewer children. In that context, when private behaviour is not observable, Cigno, Luporini and Pettini[6] show that a second-best policy would be to provide parents with subsidies linked to the number of children they have and their future capacity to pay taxes. To that end, Cigno[7] suggests that unconventional children-related pension systems be added to conventional retirement systems so as to allow individuals to earn a pension by raising children and by investing in their human capital. Introducing such an unconventional system could stimulate both fertility and economic growth. In France, the 10% bonus on pension benefits for parents of three children or more is such a pension-based fertility subsidy. However, for both reasons of economy and equity[8], these subsidies are taxed since the reform of 2013, with the risk of lowering the fertility incentives. This latter reform will imply more profound changes as from 2020 proportional subsidies will be replaced with payments only given to women on a per-child basis (the first child inclusive).

Beyond the impact of PAYG systems on parents' behavior, results have first appeared mixed when considering people investment in their own education. On the one hand, Kemnitz and Wigger[9] and Le Garrec[10] have shown that conventional retirement systems provide an incentive for people to be trained longer because training results in steeper age-earnings profiles. On the other hand, Docquier and Paddison[11] have shown that in reducing the actualized return to education conventional retirement systems dissuade less able people from investing in their education. By embedding both channels, Le Garrec[12] shows that the positive impact dominates the negative one so that the average length of training and then economic growth was increased with conventional retirement systems, at least for low contribution rates. In the spirit of Cigno, this result suggests that a desirable feature of any retirement system would be to subsidize people who invest in their own education by linking pension benefits to the best – or last – years' average annual earnings, not to full lifetime average earnings as in NDC systems. From that perspective, the Balladur reform of 1993 inFrance went in the wrong direction. Indeed, in the private sector earnings-related benefits were linked to the ten best years before the reform, then gradually to the 25 best years after.

Starting from the empirically supported assumption that conventional retirement systems are close to actuarial fairness and yield more economic growth, it is then not straightforward to determine whether the introduction of individual accounts and the stabilization of contributions are desirable objectives. To analyze this issue and the relevancy of the switch from conventional unfunded public pension systems to notional systems we have extended in a recent article[13] the social security-growth literature in two directions. First, following Le Garrec (2012), we consider investment in human capital through both the proportion of individuals who decide to invest and the time they invest. With more general specifications, we can provide explicit and general conditions so that the positive effect associated with the lengthening of training may be dominated by the negative effect, *i.e.* the decrease in the proportion of educated individuals. We then show that economic growth may exhibit an inverse U-shaped pattern with respect to the size of an actuarially fair retirement system in which pensions are linked to the best – or last – years' average annual earnings, while an NDC system has no impact on economic growth. Second, we consider the aging process, not by assuming decreased fertility as it is usually done in the literature, but through increased longevity. This has important consequences. Indeed, as increased longevity raises the value of investments that pay over time, it generates stronger incentives for people to invest in their education[14]. Therefore, social security interacts with longevity in determining the individual level of investment in education. We then show that increased longevity may raise the size of the conventional retirement system rate that maximizes economic growth.

For policy-making, the message in Le Garrec (2014) is clear: increased longevity should be associated with an increase in the size of the existing conventional retirement systems, not with a switch towards NDC systems. However, there is no guarantee that the political process leads to the optimal size. According to Browning[15], there even are good reasons to think that the political process leads to a PAYG size exceeding the growth-maximizing level. Indeed, he showed that workers tend to increase their support for the PAYG retirement system as they approach retirement. Consequently, considering that the pivotal voter is middle-aged worker, by definition closer to retirement than a young worker, this could strengthen support for a PAYG size that exceeds the growth-maximizing (or the welfare-maximizing) level. Does this mean that in practice an NDC system is preferable to a conventional system? Not necessarily. Indeed, an assessment that the conventional PAYG size exceeds the growth-maximizing level does not necessarily mean that an NDC system would allow greater economic growth. Quite the opposite, if we give credence to the empirical results reported by Sala-i-Martin (1996) and Zhang and Zhang (2004), economic growth would be slowed down when switching to an NDC system.

Starting then from a situation where conventional PAYG systems yield more economic growth, what may happen with increased longevity. Firstly, as the pivotal voter approaches retirement, it is likely that the PAYG size supported by a majority will increase. Two configurations may then occur. If the effective PAYG size increases less or only slightly more than the growth-maximizing level, the superiority of a conventional system over an NDC system may be preserved. In that case, a switch towards NDC systems will not be optimal. By contrast, if the effective PAYG size increases significantly more than the growth-maximizing level, conventional retirement systems may become harmful for economic growth. In that case, as suggested by Belan, Michel and Pestieau[16], a Pareto-improving transition towards a fully funded system may exist if it results in a significant increase in economic growth. More likely, if such a transition does not exist, a switch to NDC systems can then be considered as a desirable policy for increasing economic growth and social welfare.

In Le Garrec (2014), all the solutions coping with increased longevity have been considered while keeping the calculation of pension benefits actuarially fair. If the main problem of existing retirement systems is that they are too large, another solution would be to make the system more progressive. Indeed, as highlighted by Koethenbuerger, Poutvaara and Profeta[17], the size of the retirement system chosen by the median voter tends to decrease as the link between contributions and benefits is loosened. It is a fact that progressive systems appear smaller than actuarially fair systems. However, as argued by Le Garrec[18], more progressivity also leads to fewer incentives for people to invest in their education. At this stage, the impact of introducing more progressivity on economic growth appears uncertain, unless it also strengthens majority support for public education funding, as argued by Kaganovich and Meier[19]. From that perspective, incorporating public education in the analysis appears to be a promising avenue for further research.

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[1] "The missing piece in policy analysis: Social security reform", *American Economic Review*, 1996 (86-2), pp. 1-14.

[2] The risk is linked to the instability of financial markets in FDC systems while it is linked to the forecast of the correct evolution of the dependency ratio in PAYG systems. In the latter, there is also a kind of political risk as transfers go from a majority, the workers, towards a minority, the pensioners.

[3] Except in Anglo-Saxon countries where pensions are weakly related to earnings. Strictly speaking, a retirement system is said actuarially fair if its return is equal to the interest rate. Considering that the economic growth rate, which is the retirement system return, is lower than the interest rate, retirement systems could be described more properly as quasi-actuarially fair.

[4] "A Positive Theory of Social Security", *Journal of Economic Growth*, 1996 (1-2), pp 277-304.

[5] "How does social security affect economic growth? Evidence from cross-country data", *Journal of Population Economics*, 2004 (17), pp. 473-500.

[6] "Transfers to families with children as a principal-agent problem", *Journal of Public Economics*, 2003 (87), pp.

1165-1172.

[7] “How to avoid a pension crisis: a question of intelligent system design”, *CESifo Economic Studies*, 2010 (56), pp. 21-37.

[8] The measure costs 5.7 billions Euros according to the Moreau report in 2013. In addition, as subsidies are proportional, they benefit more high-income earners and consequently also men.

[9] “Growth and social security: the role of human capital”, *European Journal of Political Economy*, 2000 (16), pp. 673-683.

[10] “Systèmes de retraite par répartition, mode de calcul des droits à pension et croissance”, *Louvain Economic Review*, 2001 (67-4), pp. 357-380.

[11] “Social security benefit rules, growth and inequality”, *Journal of Macroeconomics*, 2003 (25), pp. 47-71.

[12] “Social security, income inequality and growth”, *Journal of Pension Economics and Finance*, 2012 (11-1), pp. 53-70.

[13] Le Garrec G. (2014), “Increased longevity and social security reform: questioning the optimality of individual accounts when education matters”, *Journal of Population Economics*, DOI:10.1007/s00148-014-0522-z.

[14] This issue is well documented in the literature. See for example Cervellati M. and Sunde U. (2005), “Human capital, life expectancy, and the process of development”, *American Economic Review*, 95(5), pp. 1653-1672.

[15] “Why the social insurance budget is too large in a democracy”, *Economic Inquiry*, 1975 (13), pp. 373-388.

[16] “Pareto-improving social security reform”, *Geneva Risk and Insurance Review*, 1998 (23-2), pp. 119-125.

[17] “Why are more redistributive social security systems

smaller? A median voter approach", *Oxford Economic Papers*, 2007 (60), pp. 275-292.

[18] "Social security, inequality and growth", WP n°2005-22, OFCE/Sciences Po, December.

[19] "Social security systems, human capital, and growth in a small open economy", *Journal of Public Economic Theory*, 2012 (14-4), pp. 573-600.

Reforming the conjugal quotient

By Guillaume Allègre and Hélène Périvier

As part of a review of family benefit programmes (the motivations for which are in any case debatable), the government has announced plans to reduce the cap on the family quotient benefit in the calculation of income tax (IR) from 2014. The tax benefit associated with the presence of dependent children in the household will be reduced from 2000 to 1500 euros per half share. Opening discussion on the family quotient should provide an opportunity for a more general review of how the family is taken into account in the calculation of income tax, and in particular the taxation of couples.

How are couples taxed today?

In France, joint taxation is mandatory for married couples and civil partners (and their children), who thus form part of one and the same household. It is assumed that members of a household pool their resources fully, regardless of who actually contributes them. By assigning two tax shares to these couples, the progressive tax scale is applied to the couple's average revenue [(R1 + R2) / 2]. When the two spouses earn similar incomes, the marital quotient does not provide any particular advantage. In contrast, when the two incomes are very unequal, joint taxation provides a tax advantage over separate taxation.

In some configurations, separate taxation is more advantageous than joint taxation; this is due partly to the particular way that the employment bonus and tax reduction [1] operates, and to the fact that separate taxation can be used to optimize the allocation of the children between the two tax households, which by construction does not permit joint taxation. Tax optimization is complex, because it is relatively opaque to the average taxpayer. Nevertheless, in most cases, marriage (or a "PACS" civil partnership) provides a tax benefit: 60% of married couples and civil partners pay less tax than if they were taxed separately, with an average annual gain of 1840 euros, while 21% would benefit from separate taxation, which would save them an average of 370 euros (Eidelman, 2013).

Why grant this benefit just to married couples and civil partners?

The marital quotient is based on the principle that resources are fully pooled by the couple. The private contract agreed between two people through marriage or a PACS constitutes a "guarantee" of this sharing. In addition, the marriage contract is subject to a maintenance obligation between spouses, which binds them beyond the wedding to share part of their resources. However, the Civil Code does not link "marriage" to the "full pooling" of resources between spouses. Article 214 of the Civil Code provides that spouses shall contribute towards the expenses of the marriage "in proportion to their respective abilities", which amounts to recognizing that the spouses' abilities to contribute may be unequal. Since 1985, Article 223 has established the principle of the free enjoyment of earned income, which reinforces the idea that marriage does not mean that the spouses share the same standard of living: "each spouse is free to practice a profession, to collect earnings and wages and to spend them after paying the costs of the marriage". The professional autonomy of the spouses and the right to dispose of their wages and salaries are fully recognized in the Civil Code, whereas the Tax Code is limited to an overview of the couple's income and expenditures.

In addition, there is some dissonance between the social and the tax treatment of couples. The amount of the RSA benefit [income support] paid to a couple is the same whether they are married or common-law partners. As for the increased RSA paid to single mothers with children, being single means living without a spouse, including a common law partner. Cohabitation is a situation recognized by the social system as involving the pooling of resources, but not by the tax system.

Do couples actually pool their resources?

Empirical studies show that while married couples tend to actually pool all their income more than do common-law partners, this is not the case of everyone: in 2010, 74% of married couples reported that they pooled all their resources, but only 30% of PACS partners and 37% of common-law couples. Actual practice depends greatly on what there is to share: while 72% of couples in the lowest income quartile report pooling their resources fully, this is the case for only 58% of couples in the highest quartile (Ponthieux, 2012). The higher the level of resources, the less the couple pools them. Complete pooling is thus not as widespread as assumed: spouses do not necessarily share exactly the same standard of living.

Capacity to contribute and number of tax shares allocated

The tax system recognizes that resources are pooled among married couples and civil partners, and assigns them two tax shares. The allocation of these tax shares is based on the principle of ability to pay, which must be taken into account to be consistent with the principle of equality before taxation: in other words, the objective is to tax the standard of living rather than income *per se*. For a single person and a couple with the same incomes, the singleton has a higher standard of living than the couple, but due to the benefits of married life it is not twice as high. To compare the living standards of households of different sizes, equivalence scales have been estimated (Hourriez and Olier, 1997). The INSEE allocates a 1.5 share (or consumption unit) to couples and a 1 share to single people: so according to this scale, a couple with a disposable income of 3000 euros has the same standard of living as a single person with an income of 2000 euros. However, the marital quotient assigns two shares to married couples but one to the single person. It underestimates by 33% the standard of living of couples relative to single people, and therefore they are not taxed on their actual ability to contribute.

Moreover, once again there is an inconsistency between the treatment of couples by social policy and by fiscal policy: social security minima take into account the economies of scale associated with married life in accordance with the equivalence scales. The base RSA (*RSA socle*) received by a couple (725 euros) is 1.5 times greater than that received by a single person (483 euros). There is an asymmetry in the treatment of spouses depending on whether they belong to the top of the income scale and are subject to income tax, or to the bottom of the income scale and receive means-tested social benefits.

What family norms are encapsulated in the marital quotient?

The marital quotient was designed in 1945 in accordance with a certain family norm, that of Monsieur Gagnepain and Madame Aufoyer [“Mr Breadwinner and Ms Housewife”]. It contributed together with other family programmes to encouraging this type of family organization, *i.e.* the one deemed desirable. Until 1982, tax was based solely on the head of the family, namely the man, with the woman viewed as the man's responsibility. But far from being a burden on her husband, the wife produced a free service through the domestic work she performed. This home production (the care and education of children, cleaning, cooking, etc.) has an economic value that is not taxed. Single earner couples are thus the big winners in this system, which gives them an advantage over dual earner couples, who must pay for outsourcing part of the household and family work.

In summary, the current joint taxation system leads to penalizing single persons and common-law couples compared to married couples and civil partners, and to penalizing dual-earner couples compared to single-earner couples. The very foundations of the system are unfavourable to the economic liberation of women.

What is to be done?

The real situation of families today is multiple (marriage, cohabitation, etc.) and in motion (divorce, remarriage or new partnerships, blended families); women's activity has profoundly changed the situation in the field. While all couples do not pool their resources, some do, totally or partially, whether married or in common law unions. Should we take this into account? If yes, how should this be done in light of the multiplicity of forms of union and the way they constantly change? This is the challenge we face in reforming the family norms and principles that underpin the welfare state. Meanwhile, some changes and rebalancing could be achieved.

Currently, the benefit from joint taxation is not capped by law. It can go up to 19,000 euros per year (for incomes above 300,000 euros, an income level subject to the highest tax bracket) and even to almost 32,000 euros (for incomes above

1,000,000 euros) if you include the benefit of joint taxation for the exceptional contribution on very high incomes. For comparison, we note that the maximum amount of the increase in the RSA for a couple compared to a person living alone is 2900 euros per year. The ceiling on the family quotient (QF), which is clear, is 1500 euros per half share. A cap on the marital quotient of 3000 euros (twice the cap on the QF) would affect only the wealthiest 20% of households (income of over 55,000 euros per year for a single-earner couple with two children). At this income level, it is likely that the benefit from joint taxation is related to an inequality in income that is the result of specialization (full or not) between the spouses in market and non-market production or that resources are not fully shared between the partners.

Another complementary solution would be to leave it up to every couple to choose between a joint declaration and separate declarations, and in accordance with the consumption scales commonly used to accord the joint declaration only 1.5 shares instead of 2 as today. The tax authorities could calculate the most advantageous solution, as households do not always choose the right option for them.

A genuine reform requires starting a broader debate about taking family solidarity into account in the tax-benefit system. In the meantime, these solutions would rebalance the system and turn away from a norm that is contrary to gender equality. At a time when the government is looking for room for fiscal maneuvering, why prohibit changing the taxation of couples?

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[1] A tax reduction [*décote*]is applied to the tax on households with a low gross tax (less than 960 euros). As the reduction is calculated per household and does not depend on the number of persons included in the household, it is relatively more favourable for singles than for couples. It

helps ensure that single people working full time for the minimum wage are not taxable. For low-income earners, the reduction thus compensâtes the fact that single persons are penalized by the marital quotient. No similar mechanism is provided for high-income earners.

Family benefits: family business?

By Hélène Périvier

Bertrand Fragonard has submitted his report to the Prime Minister; it aims, first, to enhance the redistributive nature of family policy and, second, to rebalance the accounts of the family branch, which have recently been running a deficit, by 2016. A realignment of family benefits towards low-income families is proposed as the first objective. As for the second, the two options proposed are adjusting benefits based on means, or taxing them. How can 2 billion euros be found in today's lean times?

With the cow already thin, is it really the time to put it on a diet?

The cutbacks in spending on family policy are part of a broader economic austerity policy aimed at rebalancing the public accounts. The government deficit is of course a serious issue, which cannot simply be swept under the rug. It is bound up with the durability and sustainability of our welfare state, and as concerns the topic being discussed here more specifically, with the future of family policy. But the magnitude and timing of the fight against deficits are central to its effectiveness. The OFCE's forecasting work shows that the massive reductions in public spending being made by France will undercut growth. The lack of growth will in turn slow deficit reduction, which will thus not live up to expectations. Ultimately, you can’t have your cake and eat it too, in particular if the economy isn’t producing the ingredients.

If we continue down this path of trimming family policy, then how should we proceed? Who should bear the cost? Should we cut spending or increase revenues?

Staying the course?

A number of principles guide public action. They constitute a compass that helps to stay the course that we have set and to develop the tools needed to do this. With regard to family policy, the first principle concerns horizontal equity: this requires that a household should not see its standard of living fall with the arrival of a child. In other words, based on this principle, all households finance support that benefits only households with dependent children. This constitutes redistribution from households without children to those with children, whether the household is rich or poor. This sharing of the cost of children is justified by the idea that a healthy birth rate benefits everyone. Family allowances are emblematic of this principle.

The second principle concerns vertical equity: every household should participate in the financing of family policy in a progressive manner based on its income, and low-income households with dependent children should receive special assistance, such as the family income supplement [*le complément familial*], a means-tested assistance for families with three or more children.

Nothing of course prevents us from changing tack by changing the relationship between these two principles. Indeed, family policy does need to be reformed: it should take into account the changes undergone by French society in recent decades (which policy now does only partially): increased numbers of women in the workforce, the rise in divorce and unmarried partnerships (today most children are born to couples who are neither married nor civil partners), new family configurations, concern for the equality of children with respect to collective care and socialization, territorial inequalities, etc. (Périvier and de Singly, 2013). These considerations on family policy need to be integrated into an overall vision of the tax-benefit system for families —otherwise public policy risks becoming incoherent. The mission statement behind the Fragonard report highlights above all rebalancing the family branch accounts by 2016, "with a significant shift from 2014".

Don't lose your bearings!

While staying the course on family policy, some leeway is possible. To draw on the contributions of all households, the taxation of the couple could be reviewed. Under the current system, married couples or civil partners have two tax shares; this leads to tax reductions that increase in line with the difference in the income of the two partners (the extreme case being that of Mr. Breadwinner and Mrs. Housewife, the arrangement that this type of taxation was designed to encourage). This is what is called the conjugal quotient [1]. This "benefit" is not capped [2], unlike the benefit related to the presence of a child (the famous family quotient, whose ceiling was recently reduced to 2000 euros). Capping the conjugal quotient would not call into question the principle of horizontal equity, as many childless couples benefit from it, couples who, for the most part, had dependent children in the past and have benefited from a generous family policy. Doing this would spread the effort to rebalance the family branch accounts over a wide range of households, including those who do not have or no longer have dependent children [3]. The complete elimination of the conjugal quotient (*i.e.*

the individualisation of taxes) would provide additional tax revenue of 5.5 billion euros (HCF, 2011). This tax "benefit" could initially simply be capped: the yield would be greater or smaller, depending on the ceiling adopted [4]. The distribution of the gain for couples related to the marital quotient is concentrated among the highest income deciles (Architecture des aides aux familles, HCF, 2011). Another possible tax revenue concerns the extra half-share granted for having raised a child alone for at least 5 years. Now capped at 897 euros, this benefit could be eliminated, as it does not meet any of the principles set out above and it is doomed to disappear.

These steps would increase tax revenue and help fund family policy. These options would unquestionably increase the tax burden on households. If we add to the effort requested the constraint to not increase taxation, then the 2 billion euros would have to be found through cuts in spending on family benefits. The room for manoeuvring becomes almost razor thin. Out of concern for vertical fairness, these cuts must be borne by the best-off families with children. But this vertical redistribution is conceived within the limited framework of families with children. Yet vertical equity generally consists of a redistribution from better-off households to poorer households. What is therefore being applied here would be a principle of vertical equity that could be described as "restricted vertical equity".

There is no free lunch…

The family allowance is clearly in the firing line in this narrow framework for family policy that excludes from its scope the taxation of couples in particular. It represents 15% of the family benefits paid, or 12 billion euros. There are two main options: the amount could be adjusted in line with the level of household resources, or the benefits could be taxed. But which? Both options have advantages and disadvantages.

Subjecting the family allowance to conditions would help to target wealthy families while not affecting the others. This targeting would enhance the redistributive character of the system, which would definitely be an advantage. But this requires setting income thresholds above which the amount of benefits received decreases. So families in similar situations would receive different levels of benefits depending on whether their incomes were just below or just above the threshold. This would undermine the universal commitment to the welfare state. Furthermore, the thresholds could lead to a contraction in the labour supply of women in couples: the "classic" trade-off would be, "if I work more, we will lose benefits" – it is still the activity of women, and always the activity of women, that suffers. To limit these negative effects, the thresholds could be smoothed and variable income ceilings introduced based on the activity of the two partners by raising those applying to couples where both work. What would gradually emerge is a huge white elephant, a Rube Goldberg machine that generates higher management costs with extra work for the CAF service. In addition, the system would be less transparent, because it is more complex, leading to overpayments, fraud, and even more annoying, a lack of take-up (those eligible for a benefit don't apply). Finally, selective benefits are the breeding ground for debate around a culture of dependency, with the suspicion that "the reason these people don't work is in order to get benefits". Note that this risk disappears if the thresholds are set at a high level.

Taxing the family allowance would get around these problems: it is simple, with no extra management costs, as the amount of benefits received would just be added to taxable income. So the progressiveness of the income tax system would apply. More affluent families with children would pay more than those on lower incomes. But targeting would be less accurate than before: many families with children would be affected, and households that were previously not taxable may become so (even if this involved small amounts). Finally, the tax burden would increase, which is politically costly.

By construction, in both cases families that have only one child would not be affected because, under a family policy designed to promote high birth-rates, they do not receive family benefits. And in both cases families without dependent children are not required to contribute.

Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water ….

Adjusting the family allowance for income is the track that seems to be preferred by the Fragonard report. The opinion of the High Council for the family (HCF) indicates that this approach has been rejected by the majority of that body’s members. Overall, the measures proposed in the report are to reduce the spending on families with dependent children within the limited scope of family policy, namely benefits. The danger looming is that the guidelines proposed lead to paralysis by freezing the different oppositions and exacerbating the conservative visions for family policy. Some will justly view this as a systematic attack on family policy, since the overall budget is cut. Nevertheless, an overhaul of family assistance is needed, but it cannot involve a reduction in spending in this area as the need is so great, especially to ensure progress with regard both to gender equality and equality between children. Any reform must be based on the principles of justice and on an approach to the welfare state that needs to be reviewed and renegotiated. Even though the budget constraints are serious, we cannot reduce the amount allocated to family policy, but nor should we retreat from the in-depth reform that is needed.

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[1] Note that mechanisms such as a tax break or incentive to promote employment tend to favour people who are cohabiting over married couples. The interactions between the multiple

tax provisions complicate comparisons of the tax treatment of people with different marital statuses.

[2] It is, implicitly, but for extremely high levels of income, reaching the upper end of the income tax brackets with or without the marital quotient (this implicit cap limits the advantage to 12,500 euros).

[3] On condition that these additional tax revenues are paid to the family branch.

[4] For a ceiling of 2,590 euros, the extra tax revenue from capping the conjugal quotient would be about 1.4 billion euros (HCF, 2013).

The taxation of family benefits – is this the right debate?

By Hélène Périvier and François de Singly

Debate on the taxation of the family allowance has begun once again. Faced with a deficit in the government's family accounts of about 2.5 billion euros in 2012, the idea of taxing the allowance has resurfaced as a way to refill coffers that have emptied, in particular as a result of the economic crisis. The debate often pits an accounting logic that aims to make up the deficits quickly against the logic of a conservative family policy. This post offers a broader perspective that goes beyond this binary approach to the issue.

From family accounts that were balanced…

In the current period, dealing with the budget involves squaring a circle: less tax revenue and greater social spending because of the economic crisis. The temptation is to solve this equation by reducing social spending to make up for declining revenues. It is in this context that the proposal to subject the family allowance to income tax has resurfaced.

During economic crises, the automatic stabilizer role played by social welfare, including family policy, is fundamental. It limits the effects of the crisis on the living standards of those who are most at risk, and therefore also helps to contain the rise in inequality. By supporting household income, it prevents a collapse of economic activity. During the kind of economic downturn we are experiencing today, cutting social spending is not desirable and can be counter-productive macroeconomically.

However, it is not absurd to try to balance the budget for family expenditure over the medium and long term, as this ensures that public action to support families will be sustainable. The deficit in the family accounts comes to 2.5 billion euros. But this is mainly because of the crisis and the consequent reduction in revenues, and is thus cyclical. Mechanically, with legislation unchanged, the family accounts should balance again within a few years if economic growth returns (these assumptions are based on an annual growth rate of 2% from 2014). Although a debt would still exist due to the accumulation of deficits in 2012 and the following years [1], this could be gradually eliminated using the surpluses generated after the return to equilibrium. But the outlook changes if there is no return to growth or if recovery takes longer than expected, in which case questions about the family budget allocation could be raised with regard to its redistribution or its level. The CNAF pays more than 12 billion euros for the family allowance [2], regardless of the parents' income. Families with two children receive 127 euros per month for the two children and 163 euros for each additional child. These family benefits are not taxed. Taxing them would reduce the amount of post-tax benefits paid to families, progressively in line with income. This would generate additional tax revenue of approximately 800 million euros. It might seem fairer if families with higher incomes bore more of the burden of budget cutbacks than families on lower incomes. But this issue is more complex than it appears.

The taxation of family benefits might seem to be a way to make up for the loss in the progressivity of the tax system that has occurred over the years, which is mainly due to lower marginal rates in the income tax system, and thereby make things more equitable. But this answer is only a race to the bottom socially, a headlong rush by our welfare state that would lead to reducing its scope of action.

Taxing the family allowance reduces the level of transfers from households without children to families with children, *i.e.* it violates the principle of horizontal equity. Of course, it also helps in particular to increase the level of transfers from the best-off families with children to those less well-off. But to strengthen the overall degree of vertical redistribution (that is to say, to increase the level of transfers from the richest households to the poorest), the tax system has to be made more progressive, which is what was done with the latest fiscal adjustments (introduction of a 45% tax bracket in particular). In this context, the universality of family allowances could then be maintained, which has the advantage of consolidating the support of high-income households for the principle of the welfare state: they pay more taxes, but they receive the same amount of family benefits when they have children.

The taxation of the family allowance is not simply an adjustment in family policy, it also affects its values and in particular the principle of horizontal equity. While it may be necessary to rethink the objectives of family policy, which are now outdated in many respects, as we show in the next section, the current period is probably not the best for conducting this debate, because the urgency of the situation and the desire to find more room for fiscal manoeuvring would lead to the adoption of a short-term vision, whereas family policy is intrinsically long-term policy.

…to a balanced family policy

Nevertheless, this debate on the relevance of taxing the family allowance should not lead to policy paralysis. The principles of current family policy were established based on the way society was viewed over 70 years ago. Although adjustments have been made, the principles remain. Yesterday’s objectives do not reflect tomorrow’s challenges. It is thus essential to renegotiate the foundations of family policy. How should the welfare state’s family activities be reoriented? What compass should be followed? This is the question we need to answer.

One of the goals of contemporary family policy is to prop up the birth-rate. State support increases with the birth order of the child, for example, by granting an additional one-half personal allowance on taxation per child, starting from the third child. When considering how to redeploy spending on family policy, removing the one-half personal allowance should be a top priority for proposals to rebalance the accounts. Similarly, the family allowance is paid only from the second child. France is one of the only countries in Europe not to grant an allowance from the first child. But the dynamic fertility rate found in France is not the result of pro-childbirth family policies like this; instead, it has more to do with the support given for working women with children: kindergarten, extracurricular childcare, care in early childhood, as well as support for mothers in the workforce (rather than stigmatizing this, as is the case in Germany). Family policy needs to be reoriented towards an objective that respects the rights of every child regardless of their birth order. It should focus on the social citizenship of the individual (that is to say, a more individually-based method of acquiring social rights) from birth to death (while taking into account longer life spans).

A renovated family policy would reflect the principle of equality between children and equality between women and men, including in particular an overhaul of early childhood support, a massive increase in childcare and changes in the system of parental leave. The cost of dealing with early childhood support would be about an additional 5 billion euros per year. Furthermore, the latest publication of the OECD, Education at a Glance 2012, shows that in France children's academic success is strongly correlated with the level of the parents' education. Finally, the level of child poverty is disturbing. These are all major challenges we must meet.

The rise of partnerships outside marriage but also of divorces (and separations more generally) and family recompositions are a sign of greater individual freedom with regard to life choices. This constitutes a progressive step in the way our society functions. But separations are often accompanied by a decline in living standards and often are not financially possible for individuals on low incomes. In addition, the economic consequences when the couple breaks down hit women harder than men. [3] Single-parent families, most often mothers with the children in their care, are more exposed to poverty than other households. A family policy that is more in line with these new living arrangements, and which would accompany changes in the family structure over the life cycle, needs to be considered.

It is necessary to redefine the content and contours of our future family policy, but the desire to balance the family accounts cannot be the sole engine driving this process. We must stop thinking about this kind of change in a narrow way, as we need to reform the very foundations of the system based on new needs and on the principles of justice and solidarity that underpin our social welfare state.

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[1] In 2011, the debt in the family accounts was transferred to the Caisse d'amortissement de la dette sociale (CADES), (Organic Law 2010-1380 – in French).

[2] Which represents about 15% of the total amount of benefits paid out of the family accounts.

[3] Jeandidier Bruno and Cécile Bourreau-Dubois, 2005, "Les conséquences microéconomiques de la disunion", In Joël M.-E. and Wittwer J., *Economie du vieillissement. Age et protection sociale*, Ed. L'Harmattan,, Vol. 2, pp. 335-351.

Should family benefits be cut? Should they be taxed?

By Henri Sterdyniak

The government has set a target of balancing the public accounts by 2017, which would require cutting public spending by about 60 billion euros. The Prime Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, has given Bernard Fragonard, President of the Haut Conseil à la Famille, France's advisory body on the family, a deadline of end March to propose ways to restructure family policy so as to balance the budget for the family accounts by 2016. Aid to families thus has to be cut, by 2.5 billion euros (6.25% of family benefits), *i.e.* the equivalent of the 2012 deficit for the CNAF, the French national family allowances fund. Is this justified from an economic perspective and a social perspective?

The CNAF accounts have been hit by the recession, as the amount of social security contributions and CSG tax that it receives has gone down. Based on an estimate that total payroll is 5% below its normal level, the loss of revenue for the CNAF can be estimated at 2.5 billion euros. The CNAF deficit as a whole is thus cyclical. Arguing that the way to cut the deficit is by reducing benefits undermines the stabilizing role of public finances. Consider a fall in private demand of 1% of GDP; assuming a multiplier equal to 1, GDP also shrinks by 1%; the deficit in the public finances will then increase by 0.5%. If you want to avoid this deficit, then government spending would need to be cut by 0.5% of GDP, which would then reduce GDP, and consequently tax revenue, thereby requiring further reductions. *Ex post*, public spending would fall by 1% and GDP by 2%. Fiscal policy would then be playing a destabilizing role. The CNAF therefore needs to be managed based on looking at its structural dimension, which was in fact balanced in 2012. On the economic front, in a situation of a deep depression, when consumption and activity are stagnant, nothing can justify undermining the purchasing power of families [i].

Moreover, successive governments have gradually made the CNAF responsible for both pension benefits for stay-at-home parents (4.4 billion euros in 2012) and increases in family pensions (4.5 billion in 2012). Thus, of the CNAF’s 54 billion euros in funds, nearly 9 billion is being diverted into the pension scheme and does not directly benefit children.

This diversion has been possible because family benefits have risen only slightly in the past, as they are generally indexed to prices, not wages. Worse, in some years, benefits have not even risen at the same pace as inflation. Finally, from 1984 to 2012, the monthly basis for calculating the family allowance (the BMAF) lost 5.7% in absolute purchasing power (column 1 of the table), but 25% in purchasing power relative to median household income (column 2). Should we perpetuate and even widen this growing gap?

Young people under age 20 represent 25% of the population. Using the INSEE's equivalence scale, 12.5% of household income should be provided by the family benefits that go to families with children in order to ensure that they have the same standard of living as people without children. Yet the totality of family benefits represents only 4.2% of household income [ii].

The RSA income support is significantly lower than the pension minimum under the pretext of encouraging RSA beneficiaries to work, but this is hurting the living standards of children, who usually live with people in the workforce, not with pensioners. The creation of the RSA *activité* [the income supplement for the working poor] could have provided significant additional resources for many families of low-wage workers, but it is poorly designed: many potential beneficiaries don't even apply for it. Moreover, it does not benefit the unemployed (and thus their children). In 2010, the poverty rate of children (at the 60% threshold) was 19.8%, compared with 14.1% for the population as a whole. At the 50% threshold, it was 11.1%, against 7.8% for the general population. This means that 2.7 million children are below the 60% poverty line, with 1.5 million even below the 50% line.

A family with three children has a lower standard of living than a childless couple earning the same wages: by 16% at the level of two times the minimum wage, and by 30% at the level of five times the minimum wage. Family allowances have become very low for the middle classes; the family quotient simply takes into account the reduction in living standards caused by the presence of children, but it does not provide specific assistance to families. Aid to children is not excessive at any level of income. In 2010, the average standard of living was 10% lower for children than for the average population. The opposite should be the case, since children need a decent standard of living to develop their full potential, and parents who raise their children play a fundamental social role, in addition to their role in the workforce.

Should the family allowance be taxed? This would mean ignoring that the amount is already very low compared to the cost of children. Median income per consumption unit was around 1 660 euros in 2012; the average cost of a child, who represents 0.3 consumption unit, is thus about 500 euros. Yet the allowance amounts to 64 euros per child for a family with two children and 97 euros per child for a family with three children. The allowance would thus have to be at least multiplied by 5 before taxing it became a legitimate question.

Making progress toward the goals on French family policy proclaimed in the Social Security Financing Act (LFSS) [iii] – reducing disparities in living standards due to family structure, lifting all children out of poverty, increasing the number of places in childcare – would require devoting greater resources to family policy. This is a burden that should be borne by all taxpayers, not just by middle-class families, who are not the ones most favoured under the existing system.

Cutting the amount that the nation spends on its children by 2.5 billion euros would be a mistake in terms of both macroeconomic policy and social policy. As Charles Gide observed, "Of all the investments a country can make, it is the education of the children that is the most profitable."

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[i] For a similar argument, see Gérard Cornilleau, 2013, "Should spending on unemployment benefits be cut?", *OFCE blog*, 6 February.

[ii] See Henri Sterdyniak, 2011, “Faut-il remettre en cause la politique familiale française”, *Revue de l’OFCE*, no. 116.

[iii] See the PLFSS, 2013, *Programme de qualité et d’efficience, Famille*.

In defense of France’s “family quotient”

By Henri Sterdyniak

At the start of 2012, some Socialist Party leaders have renewed the claim that the “family quotient” tax-splitting system is unfair because it does not benefit poor families who do not pay taxes, and benefits rich families more than it does poor families. This reveals some misunderstanding about how the tax and social welfare system works.

Can we replace the family quotient by a flat benefit of 607 euros per child, as suggested by some Socialist leaders, drawing on the work of the Treasury? The only justification for this level of 607 euros is an accounting device, *i.e.* the total current cost of the family quotient uniformly distributed per child. But this cost stems precisely from the existence of the quotient. A tax credit with no guarantee of indexation would see a quick fall in its relative purchasing power, just like the family allowance (*allocation familiale* – AF).

With a credit like this, taking children into account for taxation purposes would lose all sense. As shown in Table 1, families with children would be overtaxed relative to childless couples with the same income (per consumption unit before tax), and their after-tax income would be lower. The Constitutional Council would undoubtedly censor such a provision.

France is the only country to practice a family quotient system. Each family is assigned a number of tax parts or shares, P, based on its composition; the shares correspond roughly to the family's number of consumption units (CU), as these are defined by the OECD and INSEE; the tax system assumes that each family member has a standard of living equivalent to that of a single earner with revenue R/P; the family is then taxed like P single earners with income R/P.

The degree of redistribution assured by the tax system is determined by the tax schedule, which defines the progressivity of the tax system; it is the same for all categories of households.

The family quotient (QF) is thus a logical and necessary component of a progressive tax system. It does not provide any specific support or benefit to families; it merely guarantees a fair distribution of the tax burden among families of different sizes but with an equivalent standard of living. The QF *does not* constitute an arbitrary support to families, which would increase with income, and which would obviously be unjustifiable.

Let's take an example. The Durand family has two children, and pays 3358 euros less than the Dupont family in income tax (Table 1). Is this a tax benefit of 3358 euros? No, because the Durands are less well off than the Duponts; they have 2000 euros per tax share instead of 3000. On the other hand, the Durands pay as much per share in income tax as the Martins, who have the same standard of living. The Durands therefore do not benefit from any tax advantage.

The family quotient takes into account household size; while doing this is certainly open for debate, one cannot treat a tax system that does not take into account household size as the norm and then conclude that any deviation from this norm constitutes a *benefit*. There is no reason to levy the same income tax on the childless Duponts and the two-child Durands, who, while they have the same level of pay, do not enjoy the same standard of living.

Table 1. Family size and income taxation in euro

		Monthly wages / by tax share	Annual income taxation	Disposable income by consumption unit
Dupont	Couple	6 000/ 3000	8 472	2 526
Martin	Couple	4 000/ 2000	3 409	1 858
Durand	Couple + 2 children	6 000/ 2000	5 114	1858
Durand*	Couple + 2 children	6 000/ 2000	7 258	1798

* with a uniform tax credit.
Source: author calculations.

In addition, capping the family quotient [1] takes into account that the highest portion of income is not used for the consumption of the children.

Society can choose whether to grant social benefits, but it has no right to question the principle of the fairness of family-based taxation: each family should be taxed according to its standard of living. Undermining this principle would be unconstitutional, and contrary to the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which states that “the common taxation … should be apportioned equally among all citizens according to their capacity to pay”. The law guarantees the right of couples to marry, to build families, and to pool their resources. Income tax must be family-based and should assess the ability to pay of families with different compositions. Furthermore, should France’s Constitutional Council be trusted to put a halt to any challenge to the family quotient? [2]

The only criticism of the family quotient system that is socially and intellectually acceptable must therefore focus on its modalities, and not on the basic principle. Do the tax shares correspond well to consumption units (taking into account the need for simplicity)? Is the level of the cap on the family quotient appropriate? If the legislature feels that it is unable to compare the living standards of families of different sizes, then it should renounce a progressive system of taxation.

Family policy includes a great variety of instruments [3]. Means-tested benefits (RSA, the “complément familial”, housing benefit, ARS) are intended to ensure a satisfactory standard of living to the poorest families. For other families, universal benefits should partially offset the cost of the child. The tax system cannot offer more help to poor families than simply not taxing them. It must be fair to others. It is absurd to blame the family quotient for not benefitting the poorest families: they benefit fully from not being taxed, and means-tested benefits help those who are not taxable.

Table 2 shows the disposable income per consumption unit of a married employed couple according to the number of children, relative to the income per consumption unit of a childless couple. Using the OECD-INSEE CUs, it appears that for low-income levels families with children have roughly the same standard of living as couples without children. By contrast, beyond an earnings level of twice the minimum wage, families with children always have a standard of living much lower than that of childless couples. Shouldn’t we take into account that having three or more children often forces women to limit their work hours or even stop work? It is the middle classes who experience the greatest loss of purchasing power when raising children. Do we need a reform that would reduce their relative position still further?

Table 2. Living standard of a family according to the number of children and employment status relatively to a couple without children

In euro per month by CU in 2009

Adult 1	MI	MW	MW	MW	2 MW	3 MW	6 MW
Adult 2	Inactive	Inactive	½ MW	MW	1 MW	2 MW	4 MW
1 child	99.9	99.4	89.9	85.0	84.9	85.5	85.2
2 children	102.6	97.5	87.1	79.9	77.1	76.2	75.7
3 children	105.8	98.4	93.6	84.0	75.7	70.6	70.5

MI: minimum income; MW: minimum wage.
Source: author's calculations.

The standard of living of the family falls as the number of children rises. Having children is thus never a tax shelter, even at high income levels. So if a reform of family policy is needed, it would involve increasing the level of child benefit for all, and not the questioning of the family quotient system.

Overall, redistribution is greater for families than for couples without children: the ratio of disposable income between a couple who earns 10 times the minimum wage and a couple who earns the minimum wage is 6.2 if they have no children; 4.8 if they have two children; and 4.4 if they have three. The existence of the family quotient does not reduce the progressivity of the tax and social welfare system for large families (Table 3).

Table 3. Income distribution is more equal between families

	10*minimum wage/ minimum income	10*minimum wage/ 1*minimum wage
0 child	9.2	6.2
1 child	7.8	5.3
2 children	6.8	4.8
3 children	6.0	4.4
4 children	5.7	4.2

Source: author's calculations.

Consider a family with two children in which the man earns the minimum wage and the wife doesn't work. Every month the family receives 174 euros in family benefits (AF + ARS), 309 euros for the RSA and 361 euros in housing benefit. Their disposable income is 1916 euros on a pre-tax income of 1107 euros; even taking into account VAT, their net tax rate is negative

(-44%). Without children, the family would have only 83 euros for the PPE and 172 euros in housing benefit. Each child thus “brings in” 295 euros. Income is 912 euros per CU, compared with 885 euros per month if there were no children. Family policy thus bears the full cost of the children, and the parents suffer no loss of purchasing power due to the presence of the children.

Now consider a large wealthy family with two children where the man earns 6 times the minimum wage and the woman 4 times. Every month this family receives 126 euros in family benefits and pays 1732 euros in income tax. Their disposable income is 7396 euros on a pre-tax income of 10,851 euros; taking into account VAT, their tax rate is a positive 44%. The French system therefore obliges wealthy families to contribute, while financing poor families. Without children, the wealthy family would pay 389 euros more tax per month. Its income per CU is 4402 euros per month, compared with 5819 euros if there were no children. The parents suffer a 24.4% loss in their living standard due to the presence of the children.

Finally, note that this wealthy family receives 126 euros per month for the AF, benefits from a 389 euro reduction in income tax, and pays 737 euros per month in family contributions. Unlike the poor family, it would benefit from the complete elimination of the family policy.

It would certainly be desirable to increase the living standards of the poorest families: the poverty rate for children under age 18 remains high, at 17.7% in 2009, versus 13.5% for the population as a whole. But this effort should be financed by all taxpayers, and not specifically by families.

No political party is proposing strong measures for families: a major upgrade in family benefits, especially the “complément familial” or the “child” component of the RSA; the allocation of the “child” component of the RSA to the children of the unemployed; or the indexation of family benefits and the RSA on wages, and not on prices.

Worse, in 2011, the government, which now poses as a defender of family policy, decided not to index family benefits on inflation, with a consequent 1% loss of purchasing power, while the purchasing power of retirees was maintained. Children do not vote …

I find it difficult to believe that large families, and even families with two children, especially middle-class families with children, those where the parents (especially the mothers) juggle their schedules in order to look after their children while still working, are profiting unfairly from the current system. Is it really necessary to propose a reform that increases the tax burden on families, especially large families?

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[1] The advantage provided by the family quotient is currently capped at 2585 euros per half a tax share. This level is justified. A child represents on average 0.35 CU (0.3 in the range 0 to 15 year old, and 0.5 above). This ceiling corresponds to a zero-rating of 35% of median income. See H. Sterdyniak: "Faut-il remettre en cause la politique familiale française?" *[Should French family policy be called into question?], Revue de l'OFCE*, no. 16, January 2011.

[2] As it has already intervened to require that the Prime pour l'emploi benefit takes into account family composition.

[3] See Sterdyniak (2011), *op.cit.*