

## BRIDGING RESEARCH AND POLICY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF FAMILLENS FOR FAMILY IMPACT ANALYSIS IN ITALY\*

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*Abstract.* This article builds on the 2013 publication by Bogenschneider et al., “The Family Impact Lens: A Family-Focused, Evidence-Informed Approach to Policy and Practice”, which emphasises the shift from an individual-focused approach to a family-centered one in policymaking. This article outlines the adaptation process carried out by a research group at the Family Studies and Research University Centre of the Catholic University of Milan, detailing how the original US framework was modified to fit Italy’s unique cultural, socio-economic, and policy contexts. The FamILens includes principles, starters, and checklists for a thorough family impact analysis. It presents the complete FamILens toolkit, offering practical guidance for conducting family impact assessments. This adaptation has resulted in a robust tool that promotes family well-being by ensuring that policies and practices are evaluated for their impact on family dynamics, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of social policies.

*Keywords:* Family Impact Lens, FamILens, Italian Welfare System, Family-centered Policymaking, Family Impact Analysis.

ISSN: 0039291X (print) 18277896 (digital)

DOI: 10.26350/000309\_000202

To link to this article: [https://doi.org/10.26350/000309\\_000202](https://doi.org/10.26350/000309_000202)

### INTRODUCTION

The present work builds on the foundational concepts from the 2013 article “The Family Impact Lens: A Family-Focused, Evidence-Informed Approach to Policy and Practice” (Bogenschneider et al. 2012). The original article highlights the essential role of families in society and argues against the superficial acknowledgement of families in policy making and program development. The authors, founders of the Family Impact Institute, criticise the limited integration of families into policy and program processes despite widespread recognition of their contributions. They provide theoretical and

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empirical support for using the Family Impact Lens in policymaking and intervention practices.

Building on this foundation, this article emphasises the urgent need to move from an individual-focused approach to one that centers on families in policymaking, services, and interventions. The persistent focus on individuals and specific sectors must be replaced by a family-centered perspective. This transition is crucial because public policies, typically aimed at individuals, inevitably affect family dynamics, directly or indirectly. Recognising and addressing these impacts is essential for the effectiveness of policies and the well-being of families and communities.

Therefore, there is a critical need for analytical tools, such as the one proposed in this study, that are specifically designed to evaluate the impact of policies and practices on families.

The FamILens, as illustrated in the following pages, is an adaptation of the Family Impact Lens to the Italian context. This adaptation was necessary due to specific challenges encountered in Italy, such as the presence of a robust welfare system – absent in the US –, the prevailing model of “default familialism” (Saraceno 2016) wherein families, particularly women, bear a disproportionate burden of caregiving responsibilities, and the widespread presence of family associations, which is not common in the US context. The adaptation results from a collaborative effort between a research group at the Centro di Ateneo Studi e Ricerche sulla Famiglia (Family Studies and Research University Centre) of the Catholic University and the creator of the US model, who presented it at the Milanese University in 2018. Research studies were launched in our country, and the model was applied and tested. The results obtained prompted the filing of an Italian trademark, the FamILens, testifying to the intense research work and the international endorsement of the validity of the original model, making us all part of a global movement for family impact analysis.

This paper introduces the US Family Impact Lens and provides an overview of global experiences with family impact analysis. It then presents the theories and concepts forming the basis for developing a tool to assess the impact of policies and practices on families. Following this, it delineates the research journey that led to the adaptation of the principles of the US model to the Italian context. Finally, it details the FamILens, its guiding principles, and the comprehensive family impact analysis toolkit.

## I - FAMILY IMPACT ANALYSIS: MODELS AND EXPERIENCES AROUND THE WORLD

Family impact analysis, a method of evaluating the potential effects of policies on families, has been a significant area of research and policy development (Wong 2010). The US Family Impact Lens is one of many existing models for family impact analysis, although it should be noted that most of them were inspired by it. The Family Impact Lens, originally developed by the Coalition of Family Organisations in 1988 (Bogenschneider et al. 2012), initially included six criteria: family stability, family support and responsibility, family involvement and interdependence, family partnership and empowerment, family diversity and support for vulnerable families. Over

the years, the Family Impact Lens has been further developed and updated. In 2012, Bogenschneider and colleagues revised the checklist, reducing the principles to five and simplifying their definitions to make the model more applicable and understandable. The Bogenschneider, Little, Ooms, Benning and Cadigan (2012) checklist five principles are: 1) Family Responsibility (Policies must support, not replace, family responsibilities, ensuring families can effectively fulfil their duties), 2) Family Stability (Policies should promote family stability and reduce stressors leading to family breakdown or crisis), 3) Family Relationships (Policies should encourage healthy family relationships and support the emotional well-being of family members), 4) Family Diversity (Policies should recognise and respect the diversity of family structures and adapt to different family configurations and cultures), 5) Family Engagement (Policies must involve families in decision-making, promoting active participation and empowerment).

The Family Impact Lens is grounded in empirical research and was developed in close collaboration with policymakers. Since 1999, the Policy Institute for the Family Impact Seminars at Wisconsin-Madison University and later at Purdue University has continued to raise awareness among policymakers about the potential effects of policies on families through Family Impact Seminars (Bogenschneider, Olson, Linney, Mills, 2000).

The Family Impact Checklists have been used in various international research studies across diverse fields, including among others public health (Crandall et al. 2019; Novilla et al. 2020), substance abuse prevention policies (Groenewald - Bhana 2018), sexual education and support for LGBT families (McCarty-Caplan 2015), immigration policies (Mahatmya - Gring-Pemble 2014), and evaluation of nutrition education programs (Samal - Dehury 2017). The diverse applications of the Family Impact Lens are proof of its versatility and adaptability, establishing it as an effective tool for supporting families in various contexts.

In addition to the United States, other countries have implemented family impact analyses (Wong 2010). However, a review of available information on the web reveals that some of those initiatives have gradually ceased over time. For instance, in Canada, Alberta's Family Policy Grid, established in 1991, was discontinued in 2013. Similarly, in New Zealand, the Families Commission developed a Family Impact Assessment Checklist in 2005, but it ended in 2018. In Australia, although Family Impact Statements have been implemented in several states and at the federal level, they are no longer in use.

As for experiments still in progress, Hong Kong's, which made Family Impact Assessment mandatory in all policy documents, has lasted since 2013. In 2018, an updated version of the Family Impact Checklist was adopted based on four dimensions: family responsibility, family stability, family relationships and family involvement. However, despite being mandatory, many pieces of legislation state that "there are no family impacts" (Lau - Wong 2018). In the UK, the Family Test, which bears some resemblance to the Family Impact Lens, was introduced in 2014 to ensure that all national policies promote the strength and stability of families. According to the guidelines published in 2021<sup>1</sup>, detailed instructions are provided on how to apply,

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/family-test-assessing-the-impact-of-policies-on-families/the-family-test>.

the Family Test. These guidelines suggest that policymakers should ask themselves a series of specific questions to assess the impact of policies on families. The process also requires the production of a thorough report.

The experiences analysed show substantial differences between the checklists that are firmly rooted in research and academia and those that are predominantly policy driven. The US model, which has an academic origin and is based on scientific evidence, is more stable over time, while other experiences have been abandoned due to political changes. The exchange of knowledge and experiences between policy practice and research seems crucial for the resilience of family impact analysis models over time (Bogenschneider et al. 2012).

## II - THE THEORETICAL BASES OF MODELS AIMED AT ANALYSING FAMILY IMPACT

Bogenschneider et al. (2012) cite Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), Minuchin's family systems theory (1974), and Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1977). These psychological or psycho-social theories highlight how multiple internal and external factors influence family functioning. They recognise the importance of the cultural, social, and economic context while emphasising families' ability to adapt to changes and maintain resilient functioning. This adaptive capacity is supported by confidence in their abilities, a sense of competence, and the ability to face their challenges.

A broader theoretical basis underpins models aimed at analysing the impact on families. First and foremost, theoretical perspectives on well-being, which regard flourishing as a fundamental component, should be highlighted. Moreover, the development of the Italian version is rooted in the theoretical framework that inspired the research group at the Family Studies and Research University Centre, guided by the theoretical approach of relational sociology. Finally, in the European context, welfare policies are fundamentally based on the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity.

When considering the impact of a policy or practice on subjective well-being and the importance of flourishing (OECD 2013), it becomes apparent that a key indicator of a positive impact is the ability to promote the development and potential of each family to actively contribute to the common good. In this context, other indicators related to the objective component of well-being are of secondary importance. They are indirect effects of factors such as the ability to take responsibility, actively participate, and have a social inclination.

In relational sociologies (Dépelteau 2018), which view society through the lens of relationships, Donati's approach places the family relationship at the centre (Donati 2010). The family relationship is the foundation of every social bond, the intersection of subjective and intersubjective rights, and the generator of a relational common good. The family serves as a "litmus test" for the well-being of the society as a whole, testing the feasibility of the composition between different roles.

The principle of subsidiarity upholds the self-governance and accountability of families and local communities, acknowledging their right and capacity to address their issues without unnecessary interference from higher authorities. Intervention from

superior entities is warranted only when these smaller entities are unable to handle an issue effectively (Donati 2011; Jurado-Guerrero - Naldini 2018). On the other hand, the principle of solidarity ensures that, regardless of the level of intervention, efforts are focused on mutual support and the well-being of all members of society. When applied in public policy, the combination of subsidiarity and solidarity can result in more fair and efficient governance, where responsibilities are appropriately allocated, and each individual is aided in pursuing their development and well-being (Archer - Donati 2008).

### III - THE ITALIAN PATHWAY OF THE FAMILY IMPACT LENS

Starting in 2018, the Family Studies and Research University Centre of the Catholic University of Milan launched several lines of research on the Family Impact Lens, driven by the several similarities between the US approach and the research on family policies and services carried out by scholars in Milan since the 1990s. The studies could assess the model's adaptability and efficacy and tailor the principles to the Italian context, adapting them to align with local requirements. Those research studies entailed two phases: the initial phase involved directly applying the US principles, while the second phase, which commenced approximately two years later, resulted in the registration of the FamILens brand and the customisation of the principles to the Italian context. The research was participatory, encompassing both action and participatory research.

In the first Italian phase, among the most significant experiences, two projects, funded by the National Fund for Combating Child Poverty applied the Family Impact Lens: the project "Porte Aperte" ("Open Doors") used the Family Impact Lens as a model to assess the impact of interventions against child educational poverty and was implemented in a suburban neighborhood of an Italian town (Carrà et al. 2020); the project "Bambini: dalla periferia al centro" ("Children: From Margins to Centre") supported children and families in several Italian regions, using the Family Impact Lens to analyse early childhood services and promoting the educational alliance between families and services through participatory workshops (Bosoni - Moscatelli 2021). Then, a participatory action-research project involved various stakeholders in Lombardy to improve family policies, using the Delphi method and the Family Impact Lens to identify and prioritise needs, such as continuous training and caregiver support (Carrà et al. 2022).

During the second phase, the framework was applied in various specific contexts, focusing on interpreting the principles and adjusting the methodologies to better fit the Italian context. For instance, the FamILens was used in assessing the new Centri per le famiglie ("Family Centres") in Lombardy, where focus groups with project managers and professionals were employed to evaluate the family impact resulting from the concrete actions of the Family Centres (Moscatelli - Pavesi - Bosoni 2024). Additionally, the FamILens served as the foundation for a service redesign in an action research project on DAMAs (Disabled Advanced Medical Assistance) that used focus groups and co-design tables (Moscatelli et al. 2024).

Based on the results achieved so far, the Family Impact Lens and FamILens have proved to be effective and flexible tools for analysing and improving the impact of policies and services on family welfare, adapting to specific Italian contexts and promoting the active participation of families.

These studies, as well as all those carried out by the Catholic University Centre researchers on good family policies and practices (Carrà - Bramanti 2017), have confirmed the existence of clear empirical evidence supporting the applicability of the Family Impact Lens in Italy. However, this research also suggested that it was necessary to specify the concrete meaning the principles should take on when applied to the Italian context.

Starting from the principle of *family responsibility*, it immediately emerged that its valorisation could also have perverse effects in Italy, generating a far from positive impact on family welfare. In fact, in this country, there is a tendency to rely on family. Due to the lack of public support, families tend to shoulder multiple responsibilities, such as the care of children, frail persons and the non-self-sufficient elderly persons (Bosco 2018; Save the Children 2024), frequently without any recognition. Saraceno (2016) identified this phenomenon as default familialism regime: such regime mainly affects women, creating a substantial imbalance in the distribution of care loads. Thus, Italian studies shed light on the “hidden face” of empowerment, highlighting the risk that it may lead to delegation rather than the subsidiary promotion of the family’s irreplaceable capacities and functions, which are essential for ensuring a fair distribution of caregiving responsibilities.

The principle of *family stability* also deserves attention in Italy, where the damage from marital instability is increasingly high. However, Italian studies have made it possible to see that other family transitions, such as the birth of a child, or critical events, such as the disability of a family member, also contribute to destabilising the family’s previous balance (Rossi - Scabini 2012). These transitions have been defined as social risk situations, highlighting how post-modern society has “denormalised” them (Carrà 2013). Coping with a transition means facing a change fraught with expectations that can destabilise previously acquired certainties and balances, negatively impacting the family well-being.

With regard to the principle of *family relations*, which emphasises its irreplaceable function, Italian studies based on the relational approach mentioned above, highlight that the relevance of the family relationship stems primarily from their being at the centre of a complex interplay of individual rights and inter-subjective rights. In particular, the family is seen as the social relationship where differences between men and women and between generations are intertwined, where balances in the distribution of rights and duties are constructed, reproduced, negotiated or modified (Rossi - Carrà 2016). Research supporting the principle of family relations also includes those that have shown that families, if adequately supported, are the birthplace of social capital, a cornerstone where common good can be generated through trust, reciprocity, and the ability to cooperate (Carrà - Moscatelli 2019).

The principle of *family diversity* also appears consistent with the Italian context, where multiculturalism is increasingly prevalent, and significant territorial diversities

persist, both phenomena underlying great inequalities of resources and opportunities. Recent studies on family relational poverty offer a new perspective for analysing family diversity (Bramanti - Carrà 2021). These studies indicate that poverty is not one-dimensional but occurs when several structural or cultural criticalities converge in a single situation. Relational poverty directly affects relationships and subjective well-being, which is influenced by the density of supportive relationships.

Regarding the principle of *family engagement*, all the Italian studies on good practices in services for and with families confirm the applicability of this principle to our territory. However, the part concerning the need for policies and practices connecting families to resources – such as friends, family-to-family support, the community and neighbourhood, volunteer and faith-based organisations (Bogenschneider et al. 2012) assumes a considerable relevance in Italy, where family networks and family associationism are relatively widespread and significant phenomena. In contrast, such aspect was almost hidden between the lines in the US formulation of the principle. Numerous studies have investigated these forms of family pro-sociality and found that families that unite in associative forms have greater visibility and voice (Carrà 2017). This result prompted the addition of a sixth principle within a few years, focused on promoting family networking.

#### IV - THE FAMILENS: PRINCIPLES, STARTERS, CHECKLISTS

FamILens has tailored the US model's principles to the Italian welfare context. This adaptation, which adds a new sixth principle, *family networking*, ensures the tool's responsiveness and relevance. Given its use in highly participatory processes, the versions are continually updated. The most recent version, at the time of this article's publication, states:

*Family responsibility.* Policies, services, and interventions should aim to support and restore the family capacity to play their social functions and contribute to the common good. This structured system ensures that the replacement of families in their functions is only adopted as a last resort, and anything that hinders the performance of these functions is promptly removed. By no means should support be conceived as delegating to the family, but rather – in line with the principle of subsidiarity – as the allocation of the resources needed to adequately fulfil the functions they perform for the common good. The mutual responsibility of the members towards each other and a fair division of tasks should also be supported to avoid overburdening women and widening the gender gap.

*Family stability.* Policies, services, and interventions should actively encourage and strengthen couple, marital, parental, and family commitment and stability, mainly when children are involved. This is especially crucial during critical normative and non-normative events that could destabilise previously achieved balances and compromise the solidity of relationships.

*Family relationships.* Policies, services, and interventions should acknowledge the strength and persistence of family ties, both positive and negative, and strive to foster strong couple, marital, parental, and intergenerational relationships. When equipped

with adequate knowledge, communication skills, conflict resolution strategies, and problem-solving skills, these relationships fulfil the mutual expectations of the members, generating a supra-individual well-being that benefits the families themselves and the entire community.

*Family diversity.* Policies, services and interventions should reduce social inequalities and provide personalised solutions that respect individual circumstances. These solutions should be consistent with cultural, ethnic, and religious affiliation, economic situation, family structure, geographical context, presence of special needs, and stage of life. Standardised solutions could have different effects (if not perverse effects) on various types of families and increase inequalities.

*Family engagement.* Families should be actively involved in policy design and implementation by including family representatives in planning tables at the national and local levels. Collaboration between operators and families should be encouraged, with relational and participatory practices that allow families to contribute their experiential knowledge to identify solutions that are more consistent with their culture and family structure and with the expectations of the different members. The greater effectiveness of interventions that leverage family resources and the ability to meet families' expectations of policies designed with their direct contribution should be recognised.

*Family networking.* Policies, services, and interventions should recognise the vital function of social support networks in combating isolation, promoting a sense of belonging, and increasing resilience and agency. Therefore, the creation of links between families, both informal and formal, such as family associations, should be actively promoted in every context, underscoring their crucial role in the Italian welfare context.

#### 4.1. *The FamILens starters*

The vocation for policy education, maintained in the Italian version, results from a constant circularity between theory and research. This process of refining the principles is significantly influenced by the active participation of stakeholders, whose first-person contributions are integral to the realisation of family impact analyses. Their active involvement underscores that principles only exist with their corresponding starters, as in the US model (Bogenschneider et al. 2012). The principle always translates into questions, which imply constant interaction between the questioner and the respondent, providing interpretations to the principle itself. For example, the principle of “responsibility” can be translated into the following questions: “Is the family ownership supported in relation to the functions they play for the society and the common good, such as procreation, childcare and education, mutual support, and assistance – particularly for vulnerable members – and financial support? Is the replacement of families avoided, except when absolutely necessary? Is the delegation of responsibilities to families avoided unless they are provided with the necessary resources to fulfil these responsibilities adequately? Is mutual responsibility of members towards each other and a fair division of tasks supported to avoid overburdening women?”.

Participatory research methodologies and techniques are integral to FamILens, fostering robust debate and cross-pollination of ideas.

#### 4.2. *The FamILens checklists*

In addition to the transformation of each principle into starters, when it is necessary to improve the precision of the analysis, each question can be translated into an extensive set of indicators, creating a checklist – as was done for the Family Impact Lens (Bogenschneider et al. 2012). The accuracy of the analysis becomes increasingly significant as the concepts are operationalized and broken down into more specific sets of indicators. Such indicators reflect the different interpretations of each principle and the various actions required to comply with the principle's requirements. A noteworthy study was conducted in the US to create a checklist based on the Family Impact Lens to help public health practitioners *think family* (Crandall et al. 2019). The study applied the Delphi method to collaboratively develop a tool that aligns with the culture and practices of the practitioners. Following the American research, two significant projects in Italy, funded by the Catholic University and the Veneto Region, used the Delphi method to develop customised checklists for various professionals. In the first one, the checklists were designed for family mediators, social workers in child protection, integrated home care operators, and human resource managers involved in corporate welfare policies; in the second, the goal was to develop tailored tools for participants in the planning of the Veneto Piani di Zona (Area Plans), partners of the Alleanze Territoriali per la Famiglia (Territorial Family Alliances), and practitioners of the Sportelli Famiglia (Family help desks). The Delphi Method involves an iterative process, where experts are asked to provide input on the same issues over multiple rounds (Adler - Ziglio 1996). Typically, participants can review the anonymized responses given by others, allowing them to reconsider their initial answers in subsequent rounds. Feedback is managed to minimize irrelevant information, and while consensus is not mandatory, the objective is to obtain a reliable collective judgment. One of the key features of Delphi studies is the potential for consistency or reliability between stages, much like the saturation principle applied in other qualitative research methods. Thoughtful expert input enhances face and content validity. In our research, the four family impact checklists were developed using a two-round Delphi approach with small panels of experts for each checklist (from a minimum of 7 to a maximum of 18 participants). The process was conducted in several stages: firstly, two meetings aimed at adapting the checklist, carried out by a multidisciplinary group of 6-8 researchers and experts; secondly, Delphi Round 1 and Delphi Round 2 were conducted. This structure allowed for iterative refinements and feedback across the rounds, ensuring that the final checklists were informed by diverse expert opinions. Researchers are preparing publications in which the process will be described in a detailed and analytical manner.

The above-mentioned iterative research process adopted by the Italian researchers highlighted the ways and goals of using starters and checklists and the different types of family impact analysis that can be carried out. Starters help initiate a reflective process, that can either conclude at this first stage or serve as a basis to define specific indicators and develop checklists. These checklists are the product of collaborative efforts led by researchers and involving many qualified experts. Family impact analyses can be conducted qualitatively, with starters alone, or by means of quantitative methods, if the checklists are used for survey purposes.

The research process developed by the Family Studies and Research University Centre of the Catholic University of Milan has shown how the Family Impact Lens, adapted to the Italian context under the FamILens label, can be an effective and flexible tool to analyse and improve the impact of policies and services on family well-being. Through the re-signification of key principles, the participatory approach has allowed the model to be adapted to the specificities of Italian welfare, guaranteeing a more precise and contextualised analysis.

The studies conducted in Italy on issues ranging from child educational poverty to early childhood services, from family policies in Lombardy to Family Centres and DAMA services, has highlighted the importance of considering families not only as beneficiaries but as co-protagonists in the process of policy development and implementation. These findings led to concrete results, such as improved co-planning with families, promoting an educational alliance between families and services, and re-designing social and health services from a family perspective.

The validation process of the checklist items through the Delphi method, which involves a large number of experts and stakeholders, will result in further refinement of the family impact analysis tools. This process has shown the importance of adopting a participatory research approach, which ensures a better alignment with families' actual needs while enhancing the effectiveness of interventions.

However, despite the promising results and proven effectiveness of the FamILens, some potential limitations must be considered.

First, the cultural and contextual adaptability of FamILens might be a challenge. The considerable socio-economic, cultural, and geographical differences between regions could influence the model's effectiveness and applicability.

Another potential limitation is the methodological complexity. Implementing the FamILens requires a complex and highly participatory methodological approach. Moreover, its effective use requires a significant investment in time, training, and financial resources. This may be challenging for organisations and institutions with limited resources or little expertise in participatory methodologies.

Continuous validation of the checklist items is essential to ensure that the FamILens remains relevant and up to date with social and political changes. The participatory nature of the validation process requires constant revision, considering the changing context and stakeholder perspectives, to maintain the model's effectiveness. In addition, measuring the long-term impact of policies and practices using the FamILens requires longitudinal studies and continuous data collection, which can be costly and complex.

Finally, the FamILens was explicitly developed for the Italian context, which may limit its applicability in other national contexts without further context-specific adaptation and validation. This limitation does not diminish the value of FamILens, but it highlights areas where further improvements and adaptations may be necessary to maximise its impact and effectiveness.

In sum, the FamILens, despite its potential limitations, has proven to be a valuable tool for promoting community welfare that puts families at the centre, fostering their

active participation and empowerment. Future research should explore new contexts for applying the FamILens, further refining the methodologies and expanding the network of collaborations with local authorities, family associations, and other stakeholders. Only through a continuous circularity between theory, research, and practice will it be possible to develop increasingly effective policies responsive to Italian families' needs.

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