



## The UN's sustainable development agenda and the family

### The family remains a fundamental agent in all development

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*Last September the United Nations General Assembly, meeting in New York, unanimously endorsed and adopted the the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Unlike the Millennium Development Goals, which have guided international development effort for the past 15 years, Agenda 2030 was hammered out with the input of wide range of institutions and civil society groups. One of these NGOs is the Madrid based International Federation for Family Development (IFFD) which itself is meeting in Mexico City this month. .*

Ignacio Socias is Director of International Relations of the International Federation for Family Development, an umbrella organization for more than 200 Family Enrichment Centers that operates in 66 countries, benefit over 90,000 people annually and has been granted reclassification of the consultative status at ECOSOC from special to general, a situation granted to only 3% of the organizations working with the UN. He is also Director of International Relations of The Family Watch, a think tank committed to researching the family and finding solutions to the problems it faces.

In the following interview, published by MercatorNet\*, he talks about the role of the family in sustainable development and to what extent that is recognised in the SDGs.

**1. You have worked hard to get the role of the family recognised in the Sustainable Development Goals, but the word “family” only appears a few times and then, it seems, incidentally. Are you satisfied with the final result on this point?**

I think that the final document, as the result of long negotiations, contains an ambitious but realistic set of goals and targets for the benefit of the whole humanity and our future descendants. Unlike the previous Millennium Development Goals, the UN has conducted the largest consultation programme in its history to gauge opinion on what the SDGs should include. And the result shows that by 2030 we can end poverty, we can transform lives and we can find ways to protect the planet while doing that.

Though the concept of family is not mentioned explicitly in the SDGs, it is part of many of them and some of the targets refer directly or indirectly to it. The SDGs should remove barriers to the active participation of families in society, especially through decisions on investments in health, housing, poverty, and education. They should also recognize the social and economic contributions that families make to society through the time, effort and money families invest in their members— children, youth, the aging, and those who are unable to care for themselves. It is not just a question of “mainstreaming” family, because families are already mainstreamed, they are part of every society in many ways, all societal issues relate to family and family needs, either directly or indirectly.

Moreover, we need to keep in mind how these goals were defined. As the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons who made the first draft recommended, they had to be SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound. In that sense, family can't be a goal, but it is the right environment and agent for most of them.

Of course, consensus always means that not everything that everyone would like to include is there. For instance, we certainly supported a more explicit mention of the importance of families that was suggested and did get into the draft (“one measure of success of the new Agenda will be its ability to strengthen and protect all families”) but wasn't finally included.

So all in all, I guess we should be satisfied.

**2. Was there much discussion/disagreement about the family as the goals were formulated?**

Someone who has been in all the negotiations told me that family has been one of the most prominent topics. No wonder, as family is something we all cherish and sometimes miss if it is not there for us. But, again, we need to understand that the sheer size of the UN creates the need for compromise. It is difficult to reach consensus on the definition of family. First, because the richest realities are difficult to describe, as it happens with love or life, for example. And second, because not every country accepts the same regulations.

We shouldn't forget that the UN is the family of all Nations and, like a family, they can discuss. They can engage in vigorous debate over vastly different views. But, as it also happens in families, they can listen to each other, compromise, and finally find a common ground.

And the common ground is that, as the General Assembly has recognized repeatedly in its resolutions, “the family has the primary responsibility for the nurturing and protection of children and that children, for the full and harmonious development of their personality, should grow up in a family environment and in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.”

**3. Why is the family important to the development process, and to these new SDGs in particular?**

Let me quote one of the recent reports of the UN Secretary General on this issue: “As basic and essential building blocks of societies, families have a crucial role in social development. They bear the primary responsibility for the education and socialization of children as well as instilling values of citizenship and belonging in the society. Families provide material and non-material care and support to its members, from children to older persons or those suffering from illness, sheltering them from hardship to the maximum possible extent.”

In fact, many experts have considered that family is the most powerful, the most humane and, by far, the most economical system known for building competence and character and, therefore, good citizens and responsible workers. That is why I think we can say the family is not only the fundamental group unit of society but also the fundamental agent for sustainable, social, economic and cultural development.

**4. Back in July, family advocacy groups were happy to learn that the UN's Human Rights Council had passed a resolution reaffirming that the family is entitled to protection by society and the state, and recognising the family's role in poverty eradication and sustainable development. A number of countries opposed this – why?**

I don't think any Member State would oppose considering family as an important agent to eradicate poverty and a driver for development. Many resolutions of the General Assembly have confirmed that too, even recently. The only disagreement has been on the necessity to be inclusive when considering different social realities as families, or as diverse forms of families, or on the question of what should be considered vulnerable families and therefore, more in need of support.

Let me just put an example we are all now familiar with. Not all governments have the same attitude to immigrants and what the right to family reunification should imply for them. It depends not only on the ideological background, but also on the history, traditions and economic situation of the country. I wish each country would be ready to shelter each political refugee or even every single immigrant, but many would impose conditions or even deny any such obligation. In other words, it is not the UN that decides by itself, but the majority of governments of the member states. What the General Assembly decides is just a reflection of what you can find in the majority of countries. And you can be sure that this majority recognizes how important the family is.

One last remark. I have mentioned repeatedly the General Assembly, because it is the main deliberative, policymaking and representative organ of the UN. We shouldn't give the same importance to all decisions or expressions given within the UN, as we don't do it in any other political instance.

**5. There's a lot of scepticism amongst family and pro-life groups about the UN. How does your federation cope with issues like gender diversity and abortion "rights" that keep coming up there?**

I wonder what you mean by scepticism, regarding these 70 years of the UN and its influence in peace, development and human rights, the three pillars around which the whole system is built. Just watching what is happening this week is amazing. Most heads of State and Government of the world have gathered to sign a document in which they commit to achieving the new Development Goals. No other institution has ever been able to produce a similar agreement.

Regarding your question, I don't see any mention of "gender diversity" or "abortion rights" in the document we are talking about. I can add that our work focuses on the task of parents as primary educators of their children, with full respect for individual freedom and the singularities of each one of the 66 countries where we work, and stressing the importance of the family as the right environment to achieve personal well-being and social development.

In a few days we are holding our 19th World Congress in Mexico City, with more than 1,800 delegates from all over the world, and some conclusions and recommendations for our work in international bodies will come out. As a result, we will continue to implement international projects to promote the family perspective among governments and international bodies.

**6. A number of commentators are sceptical about the SDGs themselves, saying that 17 goals and 169 performance indicators (and further indicators for each of those) is too much. What is your perspective on this?**

It is always easier to criticize than to offer alternatives. As I said, I consider these new set of goals as a remarkable attempt and a historical occasion that should be given a chance. Is it too ambitious? I hope not. The difficulty will probably be how to distribute limited resources in each place and time and how to prioritize and reach synergies among some of them.

That is one of the reasons that the family is so important, because policies and programs focused on them would in return help all its members. As long as they promote the active participation of families in society, especially including decisions on investments in health, housing and education, the whole process will result in better health and education, more job opportunities and more equality. We also need to keep in mind the extent to which family breakdown has contributed to the feminization of poverty and the fact that family structure matters in the long term fight against poverty, in particular child poverty.

## 7. How will IFFD and other NGOs be involved in the SDGs from here on?

We are leading a world project for the definition of family global well-being indicators, carried out by experts from universities from the five continents. We hope to “promote the integration of a family perspective into policy-making at the national, regional and international levels”, which is one of the primary activities of the Focal Point on the Family at UN. To implement this perspective in a practical way, we suggest the introduction of a family impact report, to assess the impact of certain policy measures on opportunities for families. As a long term goal, we aim to identify and describe the key indicators to assess such impact in different situations and for different purposes.

And, of course, we will keep our work in the UN system, participating in meetings and taking advantage of the different opportunities that civil society will have to participate in the process.

## 8. What messages about the family did you take from Pope Francis during his visit to Cuba and the USA? What was he saying, specifically, to institutions like the UN and the US Congress?

I think that Pope Francis has the ability to show what he wants to say by what he does and not only by what he says. I think this is what makes his messages so powerful. For instance, we all saw that Fiat in the middle of the big cars of the Papal motorcade, or how he wanted to stop to bless a child with cerebral paralysis or to kiss a little girl who turned out to be the daughter of illegal immigrants. These three details alone tell us more than many speeches.

He also said many things, of course. To the US Congress, he mentioned “how essential the family has been to the building of this country!” and “the importance and, above all, the richness and the beauty of family life.”

But what surprised most was to see how he was able to stand up during the Festival of Families in Philadelphia – where we had been listening to artists like Aretha Franklin or Andrea Bocelli– and start talking about the importance of the small details in family life, about real families with difficulties. “In families we argue. In families sometimes we throw dishes. In families children cause headaches.” You can’t imagine how many mothers and fathers around me were confirming with their faces and gestures those words. He wasn’t reading, he was sharing his experience of many years and showing that those difficulties can be the way to make families “a workshop of hope, of the hope of life.”

Regarding his address to the UN General Assembly, I particularly appreciated the mention of education as the necessary way to empower people and overcome poverty and inequality. As he said, “To enable these real men and women to escape from extreme poverty, we must allow them to be dignified agents of their own destiny.”

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\* <http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/view/the-new-sustainable-development-agenda-and-the-family/16945>.