

A necessary and promising progress

The new resolution of the UN General Assembly on family issues

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The novelty is not the fact of having a resolution on this topic, but the new inputs this one provides and the path it initiates for future steps.

When the International Year of the Family was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly, it was agreed that "IYF will constitute an event within a continuing process. Measures will be needed to ensure appropriate evaluation and progress made and obstacles encountered both prior to and during IYF, in order to ensure its success and adequate follow-up." [3]

Consequently, "programmes should support families in the discharge of their functions, rather than provide substitutes for such functions. They should promote the inherent strengths of families, including their great capacity for self-reliance, and stimulate self-sustaining activities on their behalf. They should give expression to an integrated perspective of families, their members, community and society." [4]

But progress on this matter has been difficult to achieve since then, because even though the role of the family is considered essential in promoting social stability and economic development, and there is agreement in recognizing that families should be afforded the same rights, importance, and dignity as individuals, there is no universal agreement on the definition of 'family'.

The United Nations General Assembly has recently passed a new resolution on family issues, entitled 'Follow-up to the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family and beyond' [1].

Why is the family given this particular attention? Because "the family constitutes the basic unit of society and therefore warrants special attention. Hence, the widest possible protection and assistance should be accorded to families so that they may fully assume their responsibilities within the community, pursuant to the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Human Rights, the Declaration on Social Progress and Development; and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women." [2]

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"States retain some leeway in defining the concept of family in national legislation, taking into consideration the various legal systems, religions, customs or traditions within their society, including indigenous and minority cultures." [5]

The functional approach

In 2010, a Report from the UN Secretary General stated that "at the international level, the family is appreciated but not prioritized in development efforts. The very contribution of families to the achievement of development goals continues to be largely overlooked, while there seems to be a consensus on the fact that, so far, the stability and cohesiveness of communities and societies largely rest on the strength of the family. In effect, the very achievement of development goals depends on how well families are empowered to contribute to the achievement of those goals. Thus, policies focusing on improving the well-being of families are certain to benefit development." [6].

It seems therefore much more productive to focus on family functions and to assess the impact of policies, and that is what different initiatives have promoted within the UN system since then. It is interesting to realize that, even before that Report, the minutes of a Consultative Meeting on 'Mainstreaming the Family Issue' organized by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, mentioned that "most participants felt that it would not be useful to adopt any single definition of the family" and that "consideration of the family should instead focus on the caring, support and affiliation functions that families provide for their members." It also stated that "family perspectives are now an important factor in the development process, a fact that is increasingly reflected in national development plans". They made a "distinction between efforts to 'strengthen the family', which is a vague concept, and efforts to strengthen and support the functions that families perform." [7]

This is what many of the resolutions on family issues have focused on lately. "Recognizing that 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" [8]. These or similar words have been repeated during the last years. Also, in his Report already mentioned, the Secretary General says that, "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." [9]

20th anniversary of the International Year

The new resolution, adopted by the General Assembly on 17 November 2017, acknowledges first that "the preparations for and observance of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year in 2014 provided a useful opportunity to continue to raise awareness of the objectives of the International Year for increasing cooperation on family issues at all levels and for undertaking concerted action to strengthen family-centered policies and programmes as part of an integrated comprehensive approach to development".

As quoted by the Report of the Secretary General on the observance of that anniversary, "worldwide, civil society has been actively engaged in the preparations for and observance of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year. The civil society declaration on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year, proposed and disseminated by the International Federation for Family Development, was sponsored by 27 international entities and signed by over 542 civil society representatives from 285 national organizations, as well as by elected officials, academics and individuals. The Federation actively promoted the objectives of the anniversary, mobilizing support for its declaration and organizing a number of awareness-raising events throughout the year. It also carried out several communications projects to promote a family perspective among governments and international organizations, including a website listing events organized worldwide in observance of the twentieth anniversary and issuing research papers focusing on topics relating to the themes of the anniversary." [10]

Besides, IFFD also participated in another important initiative for this preparation — "the Doha International Family Institute organized an international conference in observance of the anniversary... It served as a non-governmental gathering and a global platform for discussion and debate where policymakers, non-governmental organizations, experts, academics and Government officials shared their views regarding the centrality of the family and its role in society." [11] The outcome document of this Conference is a 'Call to Action' directly addressed to governments with very specific recommendations "to continue to make every possible effort to realize the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes and to integrate a family perspective into national policymaking." It is the best way to summarize the contents of the Declaration and the outputs of the Conference, showing that a worldwide consensus has been reached on the occasion of this 20th Anniversary of the International Year of the Family and making totally explicit what civil society demands from governments as a consequence of it.

A comprehensive approach to development

Still in the preamble, the resolution quotes repeatedly how the objectives of the International Year of

the Family and its follow-up processes are “part of an integrated comprehensive approach to development”. They can contribute to most important goals of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda: “ending poverty [12], ending hunger [13], ensuring a healthy life and promoting well-being for all at all ages [14], promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all ensuring better education outcomes for children [15], achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls [16] and eliminating all forms of violence, in particular against women and girls.” The most recent Report by the Secretary General mentioned that during last year’s sessions, “Member States noted the recent progress in the development and implementation of family policy. Many delegations noted the link between family policies and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals.” [17]

Then, the resolution gets into the operative clauses, with seven interesting inputs:

1. *Work-family balance as conducive to the well-being of children*, as it will help to “the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, inter alia, through flexible working and leave arrangements, parental leave, affordable, accessible and good quality childcare and initiatives to promote the equal sharing of household responsibilities, including unpaid care work, between men and women.”
2. *Intergenerational living arrangements*, “encouraging extended family members to live in close proximity to each other, has been found to promote the autonomy, security and well-being of children and older persons, and that initiatives to promote involved and positive parenting and to support the role of grandparents have been found to be beneficial in advancing social integration and solidarity between generations, as well as in promoting and protecting the human rights of all family members.”
3. *Parenting education*. Many studies show that parenting is the ultimate long-term investment. The happiness of couples can be at risk when they become parents, and even get worse before it gets better, but in the long run it is usually the most rewarding choice in life. It is also interesting noting the change from ‘parental education’ in the original version of the resolution, to ‘parenting education’ in the final one, in an attempt to make clear that it is helping parents in their task what really matters.
4. *Inclusive urbanization*. To ensure that no one is left behind in the New Urban Agenda, strategies that have proven to be effective and measurable need to be taken, and there is no better holistic approach than a family perspective. The family unit has proven to be the main agent for development within societies and thus cornerstone for sustainable cities.
5. *Universal and gender-sensitive social protection systems*, “which are key to ensuring poverty reduction,

The United Nations General Assembly allocates to the Third Committee agenda items relating to a range of social, humanitarian affairs and human rights issues that affect people all over the world, and including the family in its Agenda item 27 (b).

At its seventy-second session, is chaired by H.E. Mr. Einar Gunnarsson, Ambassador of Iceland.

The resolution on the ‘Follow-up to the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family and beyond’ was sponsored by the Group of 77 (G77), as it has been for some years now.

Within the United Nations system, the G77 is a coalition of developing nations, designed to promote its members’ collective economic interests and create an enhanced joint negotiating capacity in the United Nations.

There were 77 founding members of the organization in 1964, but the organization has since expanded to 134 Member States.

Since China participates in the G77 but does not consider itself to be a member, all official statements are issued in the name of The Group of 77 and China.

Ecuador has held the Chairmanship for 2017, so they were in charge of presenting it with the special help of Qatar acting as facilitator. They were joined by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russian Federation and Uzbekistan.

including, as appropriate, targeted cash transfers for families in vulnerable situations, such as when headed by a single parent, in particular those headed by women, and which are most effective in reducing poverty when accompanied by other measures, such as providing access to basic services, high-quality education and health services.”

6. *Intergenerational solidarity*. It exists when generations have a positive view of one another or there is consensus between generations on the way forward. Some new factors affect negatively to it, like family changes (smaller, with more women in the paid labor force and more health issues), and work changes (prolonging working lives, stronger link between contributions paid into pension systems and benefits paid out, more non-standard work schedules, increasing precariousness of work).

7. *Social cohesion*, described by Larsen as “the belief held by citizens of a given nation-state that they share a moral community, which enables them to trust each other.” Following this definition, which is

in line with the academic origin of the concept, “social cohesion is a non-material phenomenon to be observed in the cognitions of citizens. And following this line of reasoning, phenomenon such as equal objective chances of citizens, employment and the rule of law are indeed important, maybe more important than social cohesion, but they are in themselves not indicators of social cohesion.” [18]

All these topics have been extensively studied and developed in publications and events by the International Federation for Family Development during the previous months.

The focal point on the family

Also, the new contents of the resolution “requests the Focal Point on the Family of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs to enhance collaboration with the regional commissions, funds and programmes, recommends that the roles of focal points within the United Nations system be reaffirmed, and invites Member States to increase technical cooperation efforts, consider expanding the role of the regional commissions on family issues and continue to provide resources for those efforts, facilitate the coordination of national and international non-governmental organizations on family issues and enhance cooperation with all relevant stakeholders to promote family issues and develop partnerships in this regard.”

According to the UN website, the Focal Point on the Family, located in the Division for Social Policy and Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, builds an awareness of the global situation of families and promotes family-oriented policies and programmes.

The mission of the Focal Point includes:

- Promote the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes.
- Advocate to integrate a family perspective into national, regional and international development agendas.

- Promote the integration of a family perspective into policy-making at the national, regional and international levels.
- Provide substantive servicing in the areas of family and family policy to United Nations intergovernmental bodies, particularly the General Assembly, the Commission for Social Development and the Economic and Social Council.
- Encourage and support coordination on policies and programmes within national governments and within the UN system.
- Support research on family issues.
- Provide technical assistance and capacity-building for family policy development and projects for family well-being.
- Exchange good practices in family policy making; disseminate information and support networking on family issues.
- Engage in dialogue with Governments, UN agencies, civil society, the private sector and academics, facilitating the exchange of good practices in family policy making.

This is the first time that this position is mentioned in a resolution on family issues, giving some kind of unprecedented consideration to it.

The path is marked

In conclusion, I think this new resolution of the General Assembly shows that progress is both possible and desirable, as long as it can help to support families worldwide not only in the fulfillment of their social role, but also in their own personal and common level of well-being and flourishing of their children. There are many more topics that can be covered in this functional approach, but now the path we should follow is well marked.

In fact, different concepts of the family have something in common—the conviction of being correct about it—and maybe only evidence can help us to narrow the differences and realizing what really works better for all of us.

[1] A/C.3/72/L.14. Any non-referenced quotes will be parts of this resolution.

[2] UN DESA website.

[3] Ibidem.

[4] A/RES/44/82.

[5] A/HRC/31/37.

[6] A/66/62-E/2011/4.

[7] Consultative Meeting on ‘Mainstreaming the Family Issue’, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs - Division for Social Policy and Development, 10-12 December 2003.

[8] The first one was A/RES/67/142.

[9] A/66/62-E/2011/4.

[10] A/70/61-E/2015/3.

[11] Ibidem.

[12] SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere.

[13] SDG 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.

[14] SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

[15] SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

[16] SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

[17] A/73/61-E/2018/4

[18] Expert Group Meeting on ‘Rethinking and Strengthening Social Development’, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs - Division for Social Policy and Development, 17-18 July 2014.