

Family trends and challenges

United Nations Secretary General's report on family issues

1 October 2019



Every year, the General Assembly requests the Secretary General to submit a report through the Commission for Social Development and the Economic and Social Council, on the implementation of the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes by Member States and by agencies and bodies of the United Nations system [2]. It calls upon Member States and the United Nations system, in consultation with civil society and other relevant stakeholders, to continue providing information on their activities, including on good practices, in support of the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes.

Since 2015 all "Member States were invited to invest in a variety of family-oriented policies and programmes ... to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development".

The recent report includes an analysis of family trends, with a focus on poverty and social protection; work family balance and unpaid work and the role of families in inclusive societies. It presents information on initiatives undertaken by Member States and the United Nations system based on responses to a note verbale sent by the Secretariat and outlines relevant initiatives of civil society organizations that cooperated with Division for Inclusive Social Development of the Department for Economic and Social Affairs on family issues.

Across the SDGs, if you look at the goals and targets, families are rarely mentioned and it could be to do with moving from where we want to go to how to get there [...]. In the SDGs&Families Global Report, the view of the family is taken as a conduit to social change. [...]

The family is the fundamental unit of society, it is our smallest social unit, it is the foundation on which we build everything else, all of our social interaction. In being that, it is the place where we intervene mostly when we want to intervene for children and other dependents, when we want to support labor market access, when we want to encourage health, when we want to lower violence and so on" [1].

Extracted from the Report of the UN Secretary General on "Implementation of the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes" (A/74/61-E/2019/4).

Poverty and social protection

Families with young children are the most vulnerable to extreme poverty, with more than 20 per cent of children below the age of 5 in the developing world living in extremely poor households [3]. The intergenerational transfer of poverty continues, with children more than twice as likely to live in extreme poverty as adults, with 385 million children living on less than \$1.90 a day [4].

Nevertheless, the proportion of the world's families living in extreme poverty declined overall during the past two decades, from 26.9 per cent in 2000 to 9.2 per cent in 2017[5], mainly attributed to the expansion of social protection coverage, including cash transfers and other programmes targeting families living in poverty, as of evaluations of conditional cash transfers for families with children point to multiple positive effects, including improvements in living conditions, a lower poverty incidence, increased spending on food and better access to education and health care.[6]

Work-family balance and unpaid work

Measures facilitating work-family balance and their uptake by men and women strengthen gender equality in the labour market and the workplace. The European Commission outlines several elements contributing to work-life balance, such as childcare services, parental and family leave, tax-benefit systems and work arrangements. The benefits of these policy instruments are enhanced when they are implemented together. The European Union, has required member States to provide a minimum of four months of parental leave up to three years or more per parent, has encouraged fathers to take parental leave, flexible working arrangements, including staggered hours, working time banking, part-time work, flex-time schedules and telecommuting [7].

The global recognition of unpaid work, done mostly by women, is an aspect of work-family balance gaining in visibility. In 90 countries, between 2000 and 2016, women spent approximately three times as many hours in unpaid domestic and care work as men, for example in Latin America women spend between one fifth and one third of their time each week on unpaid domestic and care work, with men spending approximately 10 per cent of their time on such work. There is therefore a growing need for policies that promote women's access to the labour market or other sources of income, to be accompanied by policies encouraging the sharing of responsibilities at home [8].

Families and inclusive societies

Families play an indispensable role in promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development through their contributions to raising the next generation of healthy and productive citizens. Although families are critical to creating peace at individual and household levels, they may need help in developing skills to build peaceful relations [9].

The eradication of all forms of violence is an integral part of promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, in line with

Sustainable Development Goal 16, specifically its target 16.2. Research indicates that close to 8 in 10 children between the ages of 1 and 14 in 81 primarily developing countries are subjected to some form of psychological aggression and/or physical punishment on a regular basis at home. In most of these countries, more than half of children experience violent forms of discipline [10].

Family policies and programmes

Some important objectives of the International Year of the Family are the strengthening of national-level institutional frameworks responsible for formulating, implementing and monitoring family policies and programmes; family poverty reduction; work-family balance; social inclusion; and family research promotion. There is a growing realization that family policies addressing critical areas of development contribute to the achievement of International Year of the Family objectives and Sustainable Development Goals relating to poverty, hunger, health, education and gender equality.

Targeting families with young children through cash transfers, child benefits and other measures are regarded as effective policy interventions for poverty reduction. Moreover, governments have increased their investment in work-family balance as a tool to improve gender equality. Parenting education features more prominently in government efforts towards social inclusion and intergenerational solidarity. In terms of research promotion, limited progress has been observed and more efforts are needed.

Institutional frameworks

In Hungary, policies are directed to achieve a demographic balance through stable, comprehensive, targeted and flexible family policy, adaptable to changing needs and conditions. The Italian National Fund for Family Policies finances work-life balance programmes, tries to reduce the costs of services for large families, reorganizes family centres, promotes parenting counselling and focus on child protection, the transition to adulthood and intergenerational solidarity. In Luxembourg, the 2017 fiscal reform benefited single-headed households. The Peruvian National Plan for Strengthening Families 2016–2021 provides guidance on family policy implementation. In Sudan, initiatives are targeted at older persons, children and women through anti-poverty programmes. The Russian Federation is making efforts to improve the quality of life for families and increasing their role in society.

In several countries, efforts are under way to modify family laws to safeguard the rights of women and ensure the best interest of the child and achieve full harmonization with relevant international human rights instruments, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Poverty, hunger and social exclusion reduction

Since 2016, Argentina has implemented the National Early Childhood Plan through numerous education

programmes as of family visits and community activities to vulnerable households with children 0–4 years old. In China, efforts are under way to meet the growing care needs of older persons and children, with a 3 per cent annual growth of facilities offering services for older persons. Djibouti has launched the National Strategy of Social Protection and the National Programme of Family Solidarity helping around 16,000 families and focusing on cash transfers, access to health care and quality education, employment creation and microfinance.

Hungary has an emblematic family tax benefit. The country allocates 1.1 per cent of its gross domestic product for family allowance and offers a family home-start subsidy to families with children. Jamaica focuses on vulnerable family members, including pregnant and lactating women. Mexico aims at improving capacities in nutrition, health and education, for more than 6.5 million families as of the end of 2017. Netherlands helps to lift single mothers out of poverty to labour participation, reaching 32,000 women weekly through an online platform. Serbia has regulated benefits for families with children with special needs and disabilities, as well as for children without parental care and family counsellor service that supports families with children at risk of relocation due to possible neglect or abuse.

Work-family balance and the empowerment of women and girls

The 2015 law on fair employment and work-family balance in Ecuador protects the right to social protection of individuals engaged in unpaid work at home. The “Growing up with our children” programme offers weekly visits to help vulnerable families with early childhood education based on a rights approach, with a focus on intergenerational inclusion and gender equality. Latvia implemented a pilot project on the provision of flexible working hours for employees who work non-standard hours, to support flexible childcare for children of parents with such work hours [11]

In Poland, more stable, longer-duration contracts and a higher minimum wage were introduced to promote stable employment and better working conditions, which are considered to contribute not only to better work-family balance, but also to demographic stability. The coverage of childcare facilities for 0–3 years olds in Portugal increased by 84 per cent between 2006 and 2017, and a cooperation protocol was signed with private non-profit organizations for the provision of childcare subsidized by relevant ministries. The Equality is Quality award recognizes companies and other employers with good policies in gender equality and work-life balance.

Parenting education

Belarus has organized research workshops on the international programme Generations and Gender, focusing on family formation, the stability of family relations and childbearing in changing socioeconomic conditions. Burkina Faso, has developed a national parenting education programme for early childhood education for the period to ensure that the needs of the child are met. Jamaica has launched the second phase of a parenting programme, focusing on

nutrition, budgeting and discipline for parents of children between 2 and 6 years of age. An early stimulation programme focuses on the needs of children with disabilities and is intended to promote strong intergenerational interaction. It offers parenting workshops and family counselling. Through its community-based interventions, it encourages support through parent-teacher and citizen associations, church groups and other collaborative community settings.

A National Strategic Policy for Positive Parenting for the period 2016–2024 is being implemented in Malta. Positive parenting refers to the parents prioritizing children’s best interests to help them to grow in an environment that is free from violence and conducive to their healthy development, while providing guidance and support. The policy is aimed at building and sustaining a positive culture and infrastructure for parents and their children, in which parents are supported to fulfil their role to the best of their abilities.

Conclusions

Member States, United Nations agencies and civil society continued their efforts towards the implementation of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes through national strategies and advocacy, as well as prioritizing family-oriented policies and programmes. Practical interventions focusing on family and children’s well-being have been seen as conducive to the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals and their targets.

Family-oriented policies for poverty, hunger and social exclusion reduction are an important part of overall social development strategies pursued at the national level. The provision of social protection for vulnerable families tops those efforts.

Social protection mechanisms in the form of universal and targeted cash transfers and child allowances contribute to poverty reduction, increased consumption and better access to education and health care, although the specific impact varies. The provision of universal cash benefits also serves as an incentive to register or document children, increases family investment and helps to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and exclusion.

Evidence and evaluations have shown that family-oriented policies and programmes, such as family cash benefits, are mostly effective at reducing family and child income poverty, deprivation and food insecurity. Family services and counselling are important for child protection and intimate partner violence prevention. Both cash and services tend to improve school enrolment and participation, health and nutrition, labour market participation and gender equity.

Family policy design requires that targeting criteria, and levels of cash transfers or level of services delivered, be determined on the basis of the full understanding of the competing family needs, levels of vulnerability and inequality, public budget issues and social and community factors that can moderate the effects of such interventions.

It is imperative to expand child and family-oriented social protection systems, in line with target 1.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals on expanding coverage. An important area of focus should be child and family grants, given that there is a clear evidence of impact, but relatively low coverage in most parts of the world. Social protection systems work best for children and families in which systems are strong and integrated.

Importantly, poverty, in combination with other stresses inherent in family life, can increase the risk of child abuse, neglect and exploitation. That is why, beyond poverty alleviation, it is imperative that family-oriented policies and programmes address other social, health and psychological factors that are bound to undermine child well-being.

Moreover, it is important to design programmes, such as cash transfers, that do not reinforce gender stereotypes. Employment policies favouring women's access to labour markets should be accompanied by measures equalizing the unequal share of time spent by men on unpaid work. In particular, such policies and programmes are a useful tool to help to redefine the traditional roles of men and women to lower the burden of women's unpaid work by promoting men's role as caregivers and their participation in household duties.

Work-family balance policies focusing on improving working conditions for families with children, reconciling professional and family demands and facilitating the sharing of household responsibilities between men and women continue to be a priority for many governments and form part of their efforts towards greater gender equality. Work-family balance for carers of older persons or adults with disabilities, however, is a relatively new issue on the policy agenda, as is unpaid work, and both require more attention.

In the area of social inclusion, however, more action is needed to ensure legal identity for all, including birth registration, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 16 targets. Parenting education focusing on positive forms of discipline also requires more attention and investment at the household and community levels.

There are many barriers preventing the social inclusion of migrant families, ranging from political feasibility and racial, religious and gender bias to stringent language tests and high costs. It is therefore imperative to make family reunification policies and regulations more flexible. Socially inclusive policies for migrant families should focus on the elimination of social, economic and housing barriers and on facilitating participation in host country social and cultural institutions.

The issues examined make it clear that many Sustainable Development Goals, especially those relating to poverty, health, education, gender equality and the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, cannot be achieved through stand-alone approaches focusing on individuals without the recognition of families, communities and the societies in which they function.

Importantly, family-oriented policies and programmes designed to address specific Sustainable Development Goal targets often have positive spill over effects on the achievement of other Goals and their targets. For example, poverty reduction strategies focusing on families contribute to reaching health and education targets, given that families have more resources to invest in children's health and education. In fact, the cross-cutting nature of family policies helps to achieve many development goals simultaneously.

International and national entities can cooperate in research activities to build a database to support the use of evidence-based family policy, innovation in cross-sectorial integration and implementation strategies. There is a need for more research, including in relation to the evaluation of family-oriented policies and programmes, to respond to the demand for evidence-based responses to the Sustainable Development Goals. Disaggregated data by family types, child age and other relevant factors is crucial. Moreover, evidence of scalability and the transfer of effective family policies is key, keeping in mind that specific family policies will work differently in various contexts.

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[2] UN Resolution 72/145.

[3] World Bank and United Nations Children's Fund, *Ending Extreme Poverty: A Focus on Children* (New York, 2016).

[4] Eurostat, "Europe 2020 indicators: poverty and social exclusion", May 2018.

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[6] United Nations Children's Fund, *Key Findings on Families, Family Policy and the Sustainable Development Goals: Synthesis Report* (Florence, 2018). United Nations Children's Fund, *Annual Results Report 2017: Social Inclusion* (New York, 2017).

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