Consultative Meeting on
Mainstreaming the Family Issue

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
Division for Social Policy and Development

INTRODUCTION

1.   The United Nations Consultative Meeting was held in New York from 10 to 12 December 2003. It was organized by the Division for Social Policy and Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA).

2.   The basic objective of the Meeting was to review the concept of mainstreaming, as a tool for strengthening capacities for more effective planning and coordination of family related activities. Specifically, the Meeting exchanged knowledge and experiences on approaches and problems relating to the mainstreaming process in general and with respect to the family. The Meeting also considered various practical measures for concerned policymakers, which would serve as a basis for follow-up actions by the Secretariat and facilitate the incorporation of a mainstreaming strategy within the work programme of the Division for Social Policy and Development and the policies of national governments.

3.   The Meeting was attended by experts, serving in their personal capacity, from the following countries: Belgium, Ireland, Mexico, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Uganda and United States.

4.   The Meeting was opened by the Director of the Division for Social Policy and Development. The Director referred to the consideration of the family given by the World Summit for Social Development, and specifically to chapter four of the Copenhagen Programme of Action, entitled "Social Integration". He noted that the Copenhagen document emphasized that the family should be helped in its supporting, educating and nurturing roles in contributing to social integration.   This involved: (a) encouraging social and economic policies that are designed to meet the needs of families and their individual members; (b) ensuring opportunities for family members to understand and meet their social responsibilities; (c) promoting mutual respect, tolerance and cooperation within the family and within society; and (d) promoting equal partnership between women and men in the family.

5.   The following agenda was adopted for the meeting:

(a) Conceptual framework of mainstreaming the family issue
(b) Modalities of mainstreaming the family issue at all levels
(c) Opportunities and problems encountered in mainstreaming the family issue

(d) Recommendations

6.   A background paper entitled "Mainstreaming the Family Issue" was prepared in advance of the session by Mr. Syed Shahid Husain, who served as consultant and resource person. The paper provided the starting point for the discussions.

I.   MAIN OBSERVATIONS

A.   The family and policy

7.   Prior to discussing the concept of mainstreaming, and on the Director's reference to the role and responsibilities of the family, most participants felt that it would not be useful to adopt any single definition of the family. Consideration of the family should instead focus on the caring, support and affiliation functions that families provide for their members. It was observed that the family can be viewed within the framework of its contextual setting or as a network of relationships.

8.   The Meeting recognized that family perspectives are now an important factor in the development process, a fact that is increasingly reflected in national development plans and in programmes of economic and technical cooperation of organizations of the United Nations system, other intergovernmental organizations, regional and global financial institutions, and bilateral donors. Yet, the issue of the family suffers frequently from a lack of clarity and direction, and from a paucity of resources. Sometimes, the need to distribute scarce resources among competing sectoral interests at the national level restricts the ability of planners to direct the desired levels of budgetary allocations towards the needs of families.

9.   The participants agreed that there is a need to strengthen families to enable them to carry out their social roles and functions, and to respond to emerging challenges and changes in society. 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. They voiced concern for formulating family policies within the framework of socio-economic development. In this regard, the importance of undertaking a diagnosis of the situation and needs of families was considered an important prerequisite for the elaboration of all national developmental policies and programmes.

10.   In the past, families were primarily viewed from the prism of the rights and responsibilities of their individual members rather than from the collective or community dimension. While it is important to protect individual rights, it is also important to recognize the family context in which individuals live and which they themselves seek to promote. The family, even while its individual members may not be living together, enjoys a sense of identity, responsibility and affiliation. For example, efforts to support children affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, in isolation of the family, have not been effective. The family may also be seen as a construct which could facilitate a mainstreaming approach to policies for individual family members. It was also noted that a family perspective could be a

vehicle to incorporate new and emerging issues such as fatherhood or parenting. These – and other relevant issues – would need to be identified, elaborated and addressed accordingly.

11.   Mainstreaming was viewed as a process, a strategy and a tool. As a process it concerns identifying the implications for families of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes. It is also a strategy for making family concerns an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes. Moreover, it can be a tool for strengthening family-centered policies and programmes as part of an integrated and comprehensive approach to development planning.

12.   In further discussions on mainstreaming, the concepts of social inclusion and integration were considered. It was recalled that mainstreaming in the 60's was a novel method of ensuring integration and inclusion, where disadvantaged groups did not remain on the margins of – but were brought within – the society. It was clearly stated, however, that the family, as the basic unit of society, is by virtue of that definition not marginalized but central to, and already in the mainstream of, society. Participants thus preferred to express the concept as "integrating a family perspective in policy making". The irony is that, often, the centrality of family has escaped the attention of policymakers. There has therefore been insufficient attention paid to the impact of policies on families, and insufficient regard for the contributions families make to the well being of their members.

13.   It was ultimately felt that the concept of "mainstreaming" has been subject to much critical analysis, misunderstanding and even controversy. For mainstreaming to succeed, it is important to maintain a strong advocacy function, located in a specific office or body. Participants cautioned about perceiving mainstreaming the family as a panacea, given the experience of other efforts, particularly those concerned with mainstreaming a gender perspective in policies and programmes.

14.   Mainstreaming should not be seen as a way to "make the issue disappear", or become an alternative to, or substitute for, a programme of advocacy and technical support. Participants stressed that it was important to develop a two-tier strategy that would combine a mainstreaming or integration approach, with a continued advocacy function. This function would provide the established expertise and appropriate technical support on family issues. A successful family programme, whether at the national or international level, would essentially require both these elements, to be promoted by a technically competent focal point, adequately equipped for this purpose. Such focal points, would require viable support programmes backed by budgetary resources.

B.   The United Nations and the Family

15.   A brief review of United Nations activities on the family since 1994 was presented, with its focus on five major components: (a) approaches to family policy development; (b) technology and its impact on the family; (c) parental roles and intra-familial support systems; (d) statistics and indicators for family well-being; and (e) HIV/AIDS and its impact

on families. These thematic areas were supported by seven types of activities, which could serve as a model for development planners intent on strengthening national capacity and synchronizing global and national level activities. The seven activities are: (a) standard setting; (b) exchange of experiences and expertise; (c) research; (d) technical cooperation; (e) promotion and advocacy; (f) inter-agency cooperation; and (g) interaction with civil society.

16.   Participants stressed that it was essential for the Division for Social Policy and Development to continue its lead entity role and responsibilities, in cooperation and partnership with Governments, United Nations agencies and bodies, other inter-governmental organizations, and civil society. The objectives of the International Year of the Family, which were reaffirmed during its tenth anniversary, provide a strong mandate to integrate the family perspective in the development planning process. This integration would respond to General Assembly resolutions and recognize the important role that families play in contributing to the well being of their members and in addressing problems of society, including the impact of HIV/AIDS and poverty. Consideration of a family perspective was also considered essential in policies and programmes concerning migration.

17.   It was evident from the discussion on mainstreaming that perhaps this terminology did not fully convey what was required in maintaining the centrality of the family in national development policies and programmes. Thus, it was not considered the most appropriate approach with respect to the future of the programme on the family. Indeed, it was strongly believed that "integration of a family perspective" would more appropriately reinforce the message and the methodology required to comprehensively tackle the concerns of societies worldwide. The *raison d'être* for integration generates a holistic development agenda. Integration of a family perspective, rather than mainstreaming, should thus be the focus of the Division for Social Policy and Development, and at all levels of policy planning.

C.   National mechanisms for the family

18.   A pivotal lesson emanating from the International Year of the Family was the need for a declaration of political will and commitment, followed by the creation, or reinforcement, of capacities and inter-sectoral consultation and coordination mechanisms. These mechanisms should incorporate an open process whereby various viewpoints and perspectives would be respected and shared.

19.   National institutional structures can take different forms according to political and administrative traditions and preferences. One proposal called for establishing a national coordinating mechanism – which could be either a single body or an organized system of entities under different authorities. The coordinating mechanism would be a consultative body which is recognized as the institution dealing with the planning, development and effective implementation of family policies and programmes.

20.   The overall objectives of the national coordination mechanism (NCM) should be to promote family policies and programmes, as an integral part of national development, and to

achieve a co-ordinated and integrated approach to incorporating family issues into all policies and programmes in order to derive maximum benefit from available resources.

21.   Among the functions of a NCM should be: (a) to sensitize public opinion on family-related issues and problems; (b) to undertake periodic reviews and assessments of the situation of families; identifying specific issues and problems; (c) to promote and undertake research; (d) to coordinate, monitor and evaluate family policies and programmes; (e) to mobilize resources from public and private sectors; and (f) to facilitate channels of communication with civil society. In order to undertake these tasks, the NCM must possess significant influence and high public visibility.

22.   Civil society is a strategic partner to both the United Nation and Governments. Indeed, civil society organizations are a resource of the self-organization of society and their networks. In the area of families, civil society serves as a collaborative partner in a variety of salient activities such as training and education. This partnership is further endorsed by the High Level Panel on Civil Society, created in 2003.

23.   It was felt that, at the national level, the integration of a family perspective need not necessarily entail significant budgetary implications, except for what may be required to establish or strengthen the coordination mechanism.

II.   RECOMMENDATIONS

24.   The participants made the following recommendations:

(a) To integrate family issues in national development policies and programmes, the establishment of three institutional pillars was considered highly desirable. First, a national commitment at the highest level of government, preferably in the form of a declaration, or proclamation, by the Head of State. Second, an effective national coordination mechanism. Third, appropriate family support legislation that takes into account the country's cultural, environmental, social and economic conditions.

(b) A healthy partnership needs to be maintained between Governments and concerned organizations of civil society (including NGOs, academia, professional societies and institutions, trade unions, employers federations, chambers of commerce and industry, the legal and medical professions, and other stake holders), especially through their participation in the national coordination mechanism

(c) The United Nations has a catalytic and supportive role in strengthening and enhancing concern for the family at the national, regional and global levels. This role can best be exercised by assisting in integrating family perspectives in the development process. In the exercise of this role, the Division for Social Policy and Development should maintain a focal point for the family, incorporating in-

house expertise to carry out an effective programme of work. This programme of work would be promotional and aimed at strengthening national capacities through the implementation of the objectives of the International Year of the Family entailing, *inter alia*, the provision of technical assistance to national coordination mechanisms, diagnostic studies, exchanges of expertise and experiences on salient family issues, orientation and training, research and data collection, information dissemination, networking at sub-regional, regional and inter-regional levels, and policy and programme coordination within the United Nations system, and with other inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations. The programme should highlight advocacy, capacity building and technical support to Governments, at their request, on the family issue.