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**GOOD PRACTICES IN FAMILY POLICY DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION
AND EVALUATION**

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Introduction

The rapid changes in societies and families need adequate family policy developments. The necessity of social policies to focus on families instead of individuals has been discussed before (e.g., Bogenschneider, 2006; Robila, 2009; 2011). The benefits of family focus are multidimensional, ranging from having healthier and happier families to having more comprehensive and cost-efficient public policies. A society cannot be healthy, prosperous and thriving without strong society modules such as the family. Therefore, supporting families in fulfilling their functions should stay at the basis of the policymaking field in all the countries around the world.

The upcoming 20th Anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2014, brings great opportunity to focus on families worldwide, once again. Some countries have extensive expertise in the family psychology and family policy field, while others do not have the same level of expertise and could benefit from the scientific cooperation in this area. While each country has its own specific socio-economic, political and cultural context that shapes its policymaking arena, much can be learned from the existent policies and programs and can be adapted. This knowledge sharing saves time and financial resources, rendering the policymaking process more effective. Much can be learned when societies are sharing their scientific and policymaking experiences and best practices approaches and programs.

Good Practices in Family Policy Development, Implementation and Assessment

Family Policy Development

In order to promote the Family as an important institution in a society previous reports have recommended that countries develop a Cabinet level organization such as a Ministry for the Family that would have sufficient organizational and budgetary capacity to promote the family as a policy priority and to develop family protection measures (IFP, 2008; UN EGM Report, 2009). It could also sensitize the public on family issues, undertake periodic assessments of the situation of the families, develop, implement and evaluate family policies and programs. Apart

from its own work, the existence of such Ministry is an example of a good practice enhancing the view that the Family must be considered a policy priority and ensuring that all legislation considers the Family as a social base with rights and roles that must be promoted.

Family policy development should be conducted using a strong evidence base. Evidence-based policies refer to policies based on high quality information derived from research, expert knowledge, and statistics (Nutley & Webb, 2000). As such, having a strong family science background is a necessity in having effective family policies. While many countries have comprehensive data and research on family issues, others have limited data collected on family relations and dynamics. Developing family policies that is based on sound theoretical frameworks (e.g., Family Systems Theory, Ecological Theory) and on comprehensive empirical research on families is also necessary (e.g., Jenson, & Fraser, 2011).

An important aspect in family policy development is linking the scientific community with the family policymaking field. This can be done by specialists who have multidisciplinary expertise, who would have a strong research and scientific background, but also a profound understanding of sociopolitical contexts of different societies which have a strong impact on the policymaking field. In many cases there are very strong scientists with limited policy experience, and policymakers with limited scientific background, and thus sometimes the transfer of knowledge between these areas becomes difficult.

As indicated, policy development cannot be based only on research. Policymakers must also be aware of the importance of linking with the academia and scientific community and the importance of the development of evidence-based policies. At times, there is a gap between these two groups.

Family Policy Implementation

The main provisions of family policy are the financial benefits and the family social services. Family social services consist in family life education as a prevention mechanism and in family counseling as a prevention and intervention strategy. These services are mainly dependent on having qualified personnel and high quality facilities. However, having the qualified personnel and state-of-the-art counseling facilities is a serious challenge in many countries.

An advanced degree such as a Master Program in Family Studies or Family Counseling is recommended to be developed at the University level to prepare family scholars and family counselors who would have the knowledge and the specific skills to work with the whole family system. This would allow the implementation of social services for families. Instituting family

life education and family therapy as fields of study in schools (e.g., high schools) and community is recommended, along with the development of family counseling centers.

Systematic research on families is also necessary for family policy development, implementation and evaluation. Conducting multiple-methods (quantitative and qualitative) and multiple-informants (parents, children) studies would provide a comprehensive analysis of family issues necessary in the elaborations of family policies and programs and in their assessment. Conducting national surveys on family dynamics would provide important information that can be used in understanding families at a larger scale. Many countries conduct periodic national household surveys which include questions about household composition and family demographics. However, they do not include questions on family dynamics, communication patterns, or marital and parental relationships, and therefore, their usefulness in family policy development is limited. As such, conducting more comprehensive family research would provide more details on the complex family dynamics.

Family Policy Assessment

In a discussion on good practices in family policy it is necessary to underline the importance of well conducted assessments and the dissemination of the results. Dissemination of the good practices is also recommended so that time and financial resources are preserved and mistakes or ineffective strategies are not duplicated.

Using examples of good practices in family policy development is highly recommended at international, national and local levels. Using one model or technique from one country to another would require its adaptation to the local cultural norms and socio-economic context. Local assessment needs to be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy or program being adapted.

Family policy monitoring and evaluation identifies the most effective use of resources and identifies practices that are not performing (Mackay, 2008). There is a transition from traditional implementation-based approaches toward results-based approaches, which examine the governments' capacity to implement policies but also the effectiveness of these policies and whether they produced the results (Kusek & Rist, 2008). Kusek and Rist's (2008) ten-step model to building a results monitoring and evaluation system is a good example that can be used to assess whether and how the goals are achieved over time. Given the current socio-economic context, when financial resources are limited in many areas around the world, prioritizing and adopting effective family policy strategies would assure economic, social and demographic progress (Robila, 2011).

Research indicate that the utilization of evaluation results is low, the problem being that the available evaluation information is not organized and communicated effectively, or not disseminated at all to users and stakeholders (Bamberger, 2008). As such, it is necessary to follow up after the evaluation and examine how the evaluation findings and recommendations are used by policymakers and how they influence decisions and actions.

Good Practices in Family Policies: The Role of the Stakeholders

Family policies development, implementation and assessment is a complex endeavor and it requires the collaboration of different stakeholders, such the Government, the academia, the civil and private sector. Without such a cooperative effort, it is doubtful that sound and effective family policies can be developed. Government officials need to be aware of the importance of creating multidisciplinary team that should include, besides policymakers, experts in family science, and representatives of the NGOs. These multidisciplinary teams represent examples of good practices that should be used in family policy development.

Family science experts with multidisciplinary backgrounds in family policy, family relations/family development, or family therapy, and with in-depth knowledge of empirical research in the family science field, are important resources for the family policy field. They could provide easy to understand synthesis of research in particular fields that could stay at the base and be justifications for family policies developments. This would facilitate policymakers' understanding of the scientific field of family research necessary for policy development. Thus, a good practice is for family scientists to translate complex and comprehensive family research in clear synthesis that could effectively support family policy development.

The role of non-governmental organizations in family policy development is extremely important. In many societies there are different organizations that provide important work supporting children, parents, and families, in general. One challenge that is also frequently encountered is that this work is not known by the society or by other organizations conducting similar work. As such, it is recommended as a good practice that the NGOs be active in advertising their work to educational forums (e.g., schools, universities) and the society at large.

While this might be difficult for starting organizations due to limited funding, a focus on advertising and presenting their work is extremely important for their beneficiaries, for educators and for other organizations in the field. It is recommend as a good practice in the field for NGOs to communicate with each other so that there is no duplication and overlap of the social services provided to families, and more family needs are met. In fact it is strongly recommended that

directories of NGOs providing social services to children and families are developed and distributed. It is important that such directories are updated periodically so that the information provided is accurate.

Meetings of NGOs that are providing social services to families should also be regularly organized so that there is communication among them regarding different types of services provided and their effectiveness. These would be opportunities for the NGOs to share their challenges and achievements. At these meetings it is recommended that academics are also invited to learn more about the family services in the community, and in return, they might provide suggestions and advice for possible upheavals. Equally important would be for policymakers to be invited to such meetings so that they become aware of social services provided to families at the community levels.

The collection of information regarding the NGOs work in supporting children and families, and the exchange of good practices is especially important in areas where there is shorter history in NGOs' activity. In Eastern Europe, for example, most of the NGOs providing social services for families have been developed in the last twenty years, after the fall of the communism in the area. As such, it is recommended as a good practice for NGOs to communicate in the international arena, so that good practices from one country be adapted for use in others.

Developing non-governmental organizations composed of family professionals is another good practice. In the United States, The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) is the oldest, multi-disciplinary non-partisan professional organization focused on family research, practice and education (founded in 1938) (www.ncfr.org). NCFR publishes three scholarly journals on family issues ("Journal of Marriage and Family", "Family Relations" and the "Journal of Family Theory & Review"), organizes an annual national conference, fosters dialogue among family professionals, promotes the field of Family Life Education. NCFR also provides public policy education, researchers and educators interpret and disseminate information on families to inform legislators and decision-makers about the impact of policy of families. Developing an organization such as NCFR is another example of a good practice that could be done in other countries in support of families and family policies.

National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) provides also the certification for the profession of family life education. The Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE) program encourages applications from professionals with preparation and experience in family life education (e.g., teaching, research/scholarship, public information, health care). The Certified Family Life Educator credential requires demonstrated knowledge in the ten family life content areas: family and individuals in societal contexts, internal dynamics of families, human growth and development across the lifespan, human sexuality, family law and public policies, interpersonal

relationships, family resource management, parent education, professional ethics and practice, and family life education methodology (www.ncfr.org). This assures that family professionals who receive this certification have comprehensive and in-depth knowledge on family issues. Developing such certifications that assures that family professionals are well prepared to help families tackle their problems is another example of good practice. It would also encourage family professionals to be involved at all stages of family policy development, implementation and evaluation.

Conclusions

Promoting good-practices in family policies making is an opportunity to make informed and sound decisions about policies and programs that are supportive of families, and efficient for society. Engaging multidisciplinary teamwork in family policy development, providing comprehensive and integrated social services and programs as part of policy implementation, and conducting thorough family policy assessments are themselves examples of good practices.

There have been significant advancements in the family policy area and that there are many opportunities ahead. With the family as the basis of any society, investing in families by conducting research on families, teaching about families at different levels (e.g., university, community), developing sound family policies should be a strategic worthwhile effort for any country.

Countries with strong traditions of sound family policies could provide support to other countries in developing effective explicit family policies and in using a family perspective when creating social policies; and subsequently in implementing and assessing these policies. This would contribute to supporting healthy families which in turn will constitute the basis of democratic, stable and healthy societies.

Policy Recommendations

- Family policy development, implementation and evaluation is a complex endeavor that should involve all relevant stakeholders (e.g., Governments, academia, civil society)
- Development of family policies that are based on sound theoretical frameworks (e.g., Family Systems Theory, Ecological Theory) and on comprehensive empirical research on families

- Conduct longitudinal, multiple methods (quantitative, qualitative) and multiple respondents (e.g., parents, children) assessments of family policies and their implementation and impact on families
- Use the family policy assessments as important informants in further revisions and developments of policies
- Report on family policies developments, implementation and assessments on the international arena, such that policymakers could learn from different experiences

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