



*International Day of Families*  
*15 May 2002\**  
*" Families and Ageing – Opportunities and Challenges"*



### **Revolutionary Demographic Changes**

Societies worldwide are ageing. Since 1950, life expectancy has increased by 22 years, to 66, and is projected to extend by an additional 10 years by 2050. In addition, global fertility levels decreased since the late 1970's. These two trends caused the shift towards a higher median age within societies also known as 'ageing'. Whereas there are 600 million older persons today, there will be nearly 2 billion by 2050. The share of persons 60 years and older will increase from, currently, 10% to 21% in 2050.

Although, currently, one in five Europeans is 60 years or older, the increase of the elderly in developing countries will be much more dramatic - it is expected that between 1998 and 2050 the share of older persons will increase nine fold. Worldwide, the group of the oldest old (80 years or older) will be the fastest growing segment of the older generation.

The above-mentioned demographic changes are of a magnitude never seen before in human history. The expansion of life expectancy as well as the ability to control one's fertility with new modes of contraception provided human beings with a greater variety of life options to choose from. These trends are revolutionary in scope and will have various impacts on all societies as well as family life in general.

### **Families during the Life Course**

Developmental processes are inevitable and important to understanding families. Families can be seen as having a life course of their own. Not unlike biological organisms, families go through analogous processes of union (family formation), addition of new family members (by birth or adoption), maintenance, shrinkage or separation (divorce or young adult children leave household), and eventually death. Since the focus is on time and change, the life course approach also looks at the social roles that family members play and how they change over the course of time.

Care giving to older family members is an essential and socially very important task that younger family members perform. Individual family members provide older people with caring services they need for free. Governments and society have to respond to these important tasks by recognizing the important role that families play. At the same time older family members often deliver important care giving services themselves. In many cases they look after their grandchildren or work as volunteers for important causes.

The roles that individual family members play change over time since the ones who once provided care to older persons become old themselves. By focusing on the life course of families, structural changes and other dynamic developments of families can be studied and should be reflected in any family policy design to benefit family members of all ages.

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\* The International Day of Families was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolution 47/237 of 20 September 1993. On 15 May 2002, the eighth year anniversary celebration of the International Year of the Family is being observed.

## **A Society for All Ages**

The concept of a society for all ages is rooted in the Programme of Action adopted at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995. Viewed as the fundamental aim of social integration, it is a society where "...every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play". The theme was also promoted during the 1999 International Year of Older Persons. The Second World Assembly on Ageing (Madrid, 2002), which commemorates the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna in 1982, presented member states a new 'International Plan for Action on Ageing 2002', which is based on the idea of a society for all ages.

In a society for all ages, there are numerous social problems that affect families and older people alike. In some countries, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has taken such a tremendous toll on the adult population that grandparents act as parent substitutes. They need support since their own health as well as their economic situation is often precarious. In many families, grandparents are the ones who have now taken on the task of socializing and educating the young generation in countries that were especially hard hit by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Governments need to respond with well-designed programmes to this specific situation in which older persons play a pivotal role for entire societies.

The issue of migration is of great relevance to both families and older persons. Family structures are disrupted and family life is interrupted by the occurrence of migration of one or more family members. The search for a better life often puts strains on family cohesion. Often, women assume a decision-making role when men decide to move to distant lands or to the next large city. Older persons who remained in their places of origin when the younger generation decides to move away suffer often from economic hardship and social isolation. Governments should ensure the well being of older people who remain in rural areas.

In various developing countries, many older

people never retire since there is no economic basis to do so. The United Nations urges Member Governments to establish far reaching retirement schemes to ensure the economic survival of older people in ageing societies. In developed countries, the issue of ageing has already led to the restructuring of retirement programmes, an extension of the mandatory retirement age as well as a renewed interest in family policy. The latter deals with issues such as the combination of work and child care or enhanced support for families with children among other issues. Apart from government action, it is equally important that older people are not barred from gainful employment beyond a certain age if they wish to engage in it.

The question of sufficient health care provision is crucial for families as well as older people. A functioning health care system is of great importance to all family members, but particularly to children and older persons. Health care services in developing countries, especially in rural areas, are often not adequate. It is equally important to promote healthy life styles throughout the life course to prevent various diseases that might occur in old age.

## **Policy Suggestions**

Both families and older persons perform important societal tasks. Families must not be portrayed as social entities that only cause costs for society. On the contrary, families should be seen as agents, who take on very important social functions when it comes to socializing and educating the next generation, care giving to the elderly as well as providing a supportive environment to all family members.

Older persons should be recognized for their social, economic and political contributions. Their life experience can offer valuable approaches to various problems that the younger generations face. Besides this, older persons contribute to the overall well being of societies through various tasks that they perform for free such as child care, voluntary work within their respective communities, etc. The amount of savings of older people in developed countries plays an important economic role. Not unlike that of families, the public

image of older persons can and should be changed from a group seen as being on the receiving end and dependent towards a group that contributes actively to the development of any society.

The following suggestions are applicable to various societies and play a crucial role in supporting families worldwide. To ensure a society for all ages, the implementation of these suggestions should be in the interest of any government.

- Intergenerational solidarity has to be furthered. The needs of all generations should be of equal importance in the political arena and serve as the basis for a holistic approach to ageing societies. Policies that favor all generations would benefit family life in general.
- Life long learning and development has to be promoted. In an ever-changing market place, which is characterized by greater global integration, families, older people and society as a whole can only gain from life long learning and development.
- In ageing societies of the future, it seems to be an anathema to tolerate age discrimination. Negative images of old age have to be eliminated. It is important for government agencies to promote appropriate images of older people that do not further stereotypes.
- Gender has to be one of the foci in regard to older people and families. The great majority of older people consist of women and most of the family work is still been done by women. Policy makers have to pay attention to the special needs of women in this regard.
- Crucial issues such as income security, social protection and poverty prevention should be components of any contemporary social policy to protect families and older people.
- Adequate housing for families and older people must be of great interest to any responsible government.

- Universal and equitable access to health care services must be ensured to all family members, young and old.

#### **Sources:**

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