

International Day of Families
15 May 2006
“Changing Families: Challenges and Opportunities”

Background Note

In resolution 47/237 of 20 September 1993, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed that 15 May of every year shall be observed as the International Day of Families. The theme for the 2006 observance is “Changing Families: Challenges and Opportunities”.

Changing families

Families all over the world have been undergoing many profound changes and transformations. Family size and structure have changed markedly and continue to evolve in response to powerful social, economic and technological developments.

One important transformation is urbanization and a continuing shift from extended to nuclear families. At the beginning of the 20th century, 15 per cent of the world lived in urban areas. As of 2003, 48 per cent of the world’s population lived in urban areas. The proportion of the world population that is urban is expected to rise to 61 per cent by 2030. As a consequence of this significant transition, the rural, farm-oriented family is increasingly being replaced by the urban, industrial and service-oriented family. Agrarian life-styles based on the extended family have changed dramatically towards urban life with the increasingly common nuclear family.

Another development is with respect to the education of girls and labour force participation of women. Following migration to cities and new forms of economic activity, the numbers of children attending school, especially girls, have increased markedly over the past half century. Families worldwide recognize the importance of schooling for their children, and more and more are also prepared to invest in higher education. The education of girls and women is also related to an important trend influencing families globally, namely the greater participation of women in the formal labour force. The pattern of women remaining in the home is increasingly being replaced with women in the labour force, especially immediately after completing their schooling.

Many significant changes are also taking place in marriage and childbearing. Both men and women are delaying marriage to later ages. With the many expanding opportunities for higher education, careers, and economic independence, coupled with highly effective contraception, young women are postponing or avoiding altogether the onset of motherhood. In many of the developed countries, well above 10 percent of women in their early forties remain childless. Those women choosing to have a child are doing so at later ages. Average ages of mothers at first birth have been rising for several decades, and are now typically in the late 20s for most developed nations. Postponing the first birth often translates into fewer first births and even fewer second or third births.

These transitions have resulted in a smaller average number of children per family. Fertility levels have declined in almost all countries and regions of the world. In 1950 the average number of children per woman was five; today it is about half that level. Approximately thirty years ago, 13 countries had fertility rates below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. Today, more than 60 countries – almost one-third of the countries in the world – have below-replacement fertility rates, and half of those countries have levels of 1.5 or less. This translates to an average family of less than two children in many countries, and in many cases the average family has one child.

Other shifts in family structure have also taken place. Despite the nearly universal appeal of marriage, increasing numbers of married couples are experiencing divorce and separation, particularly in developed countries. There is also a significant number of people remarrying after a divorce, with many children now living in a family with a step-parent. There has also been the appearance of new or alternative forms of union, such as unmarried cohabitation and couples who, because of migration or career reasons, live in separate cities or countries. Many countries also have significant numbers of both single-parent families and single-person households, including a rising number of older persons living alone.

During the last century, the proportion of older persons in the total population continued to rise throughout the world, and this trend is expected to accelerate during the first half of this century. The proportion of persons 65 years or older was 5 per cent in 1950 and 7 percent in 2000, and is projected to reach 16 percent in 2050. Population ageing is having major implications for all aspects of human life, including family composition and living arrangements, housing and health care. More people are reaching old age and, as a result, families of three or even four generations are more common.

Economic and social conditions are changing many aspects of day-to-day family life, including traditions favoring life-long co-residence of parents and children as a basic means of ensuring support for young and old. There is a general trend in developed countries among older persons toward living alone or only with their spouse, but there is a growing preference for separate residence in some developing countries as well. While the most common arrangement in the developed countries is for older persons to live apart from their children, a large majority of older persons in the developing countries reside with their children. Over 70 per cent of older persons in developing regions are living with a child or grandchild. In European countries, by contrast, the average is around 25 per cent.

Another condition greatly affecting families and leading to family change include the HIV/AIDS pandemic. HIV/AIDS is a disease that affects families in a profound and tragic way. When a family member, particularly a parent, becomes sick, weakened or dies, everyone in the family suffers. HIV/AIDS has greatly affected family structure and functions, disproportionately increasing the vulnerability of families living in poverty and in the poorest developing countries, which have the vast majority of people infected. The impact on families has been devastating and wide-ranging. In many parts of the world, it

is not divorce that creates single-parent and step-families, but parental death and orphanhood due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. As a result of these tragic events, new family forms are emerging, such as "skip-generation" families, where the parent generation has succumbed to AIDS and AIDS-related illnesses and the families are made up of grandparents and orphaned grandchildren, and child-headed families, where grandparents are not available to care for orphaned grandchildren.

Challenges and opportunities

All these changes, shifts and transformations present formidable challenges to families and their individual members, communities, civil society and all levels of government, as well as society at large.

On the family and individual level, every person belongs to a family, and everyone has a very personal understanding of what a family is. Therefore, many of these family changes can be unsettling, as they question this understanding and require everyone to reflect upon how we view the family and its role. Since the family is the basic unit of society, changes to the family also affect communities and society, leading us to confront both our collective vision of the family as well as societal problems relating to family difficulties. Civil society has been very active in the area of the family, advocating both their views of the family and their vision for what policies need to be in place to improve family well-being and the welfare of their individual members. And government is challenged to keep up and adapt, so that public policy "does no harm" to families, and so that essential services, such as education and healthcare, are provided to its citizens irrespective of their personal family situation.

But from formidable challenges also arise opportunities. Several of the transformations that have occurred in families are either the result of, or have resulted in, increased opportunities for girls and women. Changes to the family have also resulted in an increased interest and fervor to find opportunities to support families, including the efforts being made to integrate a family perspective into policy-making at the local and national level and also at the international level via the United Nations intergovernmental process.

The overall objective of family policy is to promote, protect and support the integrity and functioning of families. Achieving this goal requires the adoption of policies that reinforce healthy family relationships, protect and increase family resources and strengthen the resilience of families in an ever-changing environment. While there is no single format or perspective for the development of family-relevant policies, effective policies and programmes should help families to retain and strengthen their economic and care-giving functions.

During this time of profound family change, the family as an institution has remained remarkably resilient. The strength of families and family networks can be instrumental in determining how well individuals and communities adapt to family change and its consequences.

Sources:

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