Families and Inclusive Societies in Africa

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Introduction

Besides being a central aspect to the 16th sustainable development goals (SDG 16) and their achievement, promoting inclusive societies may also be regarded as the bedrock of the other objectives and targets of the SDG 16, including peace, justice and strong and inclusive institutions. The problems that SDG 16, among others, seek to redress have identifiable and strong connections to the absence of socially inclusive societies, social formations, structures and institutions. Underlying this, is the absence of equal opportunities for every member and group in society irrespective of their origins, background, class, ethnicity, race, gender and other markers of identity. Yet, equal opportunities is, perhaps, the essential defining element of an inclusive society, and makes it possible for all members of a society to fully attain their human potential (United Nations Department of Social Affairs - UNDESA, 2009). It provides the necessary conditions for every member of society to participate in every aspect of social life – economic, cultural, political, civic and all, and provides the platform for engaging and ending exclusion and poverty (UNDESA, 2009). However, at the heart of any society and the attainment of any sustainable developmental objectives in a societal context, is the family and its recognition as a fundamental social institution, where the building of a society begins (Carlson, 1999).

The African family charters unambiguously recognize the family institution as a foundation of society. This is in line with the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) guiding principles, which recognized the family as the basic unit of society, and thus societies are encouraged to strengthen this institution. The African Charter on Human and People's Rights as well as other regional and country specific charters also endorses the family as the natural unit, foundational basis and pillar of society (Department of Social Development - DSD, 2012). The African Charter further urges states to take care of family health and morale (Organization of African Unity - OAU, 1982). Although in the African charters there is a call for recognition of traits that have always been associated with the traditional African family, the fact that families on the continent have diversified both in form and in their function, has also been acknowledged. It is thus important to begin by demonstrating how the notion of African family has evolved.

African Perspectives on Family

The diversity of family formations in Africa is clearly illustrated by the expansive definitions of family in African family charters, which accommodate both the traditional African family and emerging family forms. While "Family" and "household" are sometimes used interchangeably, because of their close relationship to each other, in most African societies they are likely not to connote the same social unit. It is common for members of the same family (including members of the same nuclear family or a member of an extended family that functions as a close unit) to straddle more than one household. In turn, members of the same household are likely not to be of the same nuclear family. In Black South Africa, for instance, children are taken care of by an extended family who are not necessarily biological parents. Thus, in 2012 some 531 000

orphaned children were cared for by foster parents, most of whom are members of the extended family who in turn receive social assistance from the government. According to the Department of Social Development, approximately 80% of foster carers are extended family members (South African Institute of Race Relations, 2013, p. 660).

Family in the African context often refers to what in western terms would be the extended family. A family is generally constituted by three processes, which are blood relations, sexual unions or adoption. Societally sanctioned sexual unions between (two and in cases of polygamous unions, which are not uncommon in Africa, more than two) adults, and on the other hand, blood relations in Africa typically constitute wider relationship than those that are characteristically in western nuclear families. African families are typically extended to aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins and other relatives that form a family that functions in unison. The broad concepts of family in many African societies is illustrated in Mandela's autobiography "Long Walk to Freedom" where he states, "My mother presided over three huts at Qunu, which as I remember, were always filled with babies and children of my relations. In fact, I hardly recall any occasion as a child when I was alone. In African culture, the sons and daughters of one's aunts and uncles are considered brothers and sisters, not cousins." In several African communities, family is not limited to space and time, thus, it cuts across generations, relatives living far and near, the living and those who have joined the ancestors, as well as the ancestors themselves who continue to play a role in the lives of the living (Lugira, 2009). This may be viewed as a very inclusive family system, which models the broader inclusive nature and type of African communities, creating a family-like lens through which several social actors are included and relationships interpreted. Obligations to wider kin vary with time, and typically more widely invoked during times of crises, or during certain life cycle events such as funerals and this remains a common practice in extended families on the continent, despite social change.

Other dimensions of the family institution and systems in Africa, as observed by Therborn (2006) which offer both challenges and opportunities for SDG 16 in Africa include the strong patriarchal nature of such systems, with different levels of sexual permissiveness; the common practice of polygamy, and the cultural significance of family lineages and fertility. While patriarchy have negative implications for justice and gender equality, understanding the values associated with lineage and fertility and how this shapes notion of family, inclusion and exclusion in terms of belonging and access to resources could enhance efforts towards achieving inclusive societies. For instance, children are highly desired in many African communities and loved, and their presence have far-reaching consequences for social status, respect, quality of life, perception and veneration of an individual – in life and death. Thus, infant mortality and infertility are among the worse tragedies to befall an individual, the family and lineage (Siegel, 1999). Siegel (1999) also notes that lineage in the African family context is not only biological, nor is it always objectively genealogical, but can be sociological as well. This means that lineage and kinship can be edited. People can be inserted, or insert themselves into certain lineages, often symbolically, but in a very meaningful and effective way. In addition, the notion of family often expands and depending on place and context, non-blood relations and other kinds of relationships may assume familial significance and meaning. Families are expanded through marriages, for instance, and it is also not uncommon for a close friendship to mature into 'family', or a friend to be named, regarded and treated as family in acknowledgement of length of friendship and felt levels of closeness, trust and reliability. This is one way through which the

family is linked to the broader community. As Siqwana-Ndulo (1998) stated, the institutions of family, marriage and household in African societies revolved around community. Thus, not only is the family formation broader, its function is grossly enhanced by being interlocked with the general community.

Although the salience of family ties may be situational, they are rarely entirely lost, and often, take priority over certain kinds of ties in many instances, despite changes brought about by modernisation that sometimes create a rift between family members. The usefulness of these lasting family ties is often seen in the ways deportees are able to easily reintegrate into their families. Siegel (1999) cites the example of the over one million Ghanaian migrants deported from Nigeria in the 1980s, who, while western aids agencies planned intervention, reintegrated into their families and communities within two weeks. This is also seen among African deportees from several parts of the world.

As stated above, in recognizing both traditional and contemporary family forms, the charters did not imply a homogenous static institution but acknowledge that social changes have affected African family formations and structures over time. Thus, it expressed a need for family policies to acknowledge and embrace adaptations in families. The overview of families in Africa reveals that significant adaptations have happened over the years, brought about by a number of factors, which include globalisation, modernisation, migration and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Nevertheless, multi-generational and extended families remain the most common family structure among the majority of the African people. Unfortunately, the recognition of "African family" in policy documents has not been translated into social policies and programmes that take into cognizance the African extended families that has increasingly been influenced by mobility. Increasing mobility and migration have been such that there are fewer co-residing primary family units. Thus, families may live far apart or be dispersed 'across national borders and stretched kinship networks across vast geographic space' (Turner, 2002, p. 397). As Richter and Amoateng (2003) urge "……[G]iven the range of possibilities for family formations, accepting this multiplicity of social relations within and across households would offer an improved understanding of livelihood strategies and more accurate theorising of contemporary South Africa's social terrain." Thus, it is important to analyse the ways in mobility is shaping African understanding of family.

Family Movements and Challenges

Mobility is a broad concept of human movement that includes movements between dwellings or households even if it is within the same place. On the other hand, migration, in its classic usage, connotes a permanent movement between two clearly demarcated areas. Migration is usually classified as international or internal/ domestic. It should be noted though, that the difference between 'national' and 'international' migration is not clear-cut in Africa. This is due to a number of reasons, including the fact that most borders on the continent are porous, as well as the fact that in most cases current borders which were set during colonial times, typically divide extended families and linguistic groups. Because of vast disparities between African regions, and civil strife in some regions, mass migration across political borders for the purpose of survival is a common feature. Both mobility and migration are common in African families that function as a unit. It should be noted though, that "migration" as is commonly used nowadays does not necessary connote a permanent movement. Kok, O'Donovan, Bouare & van Zyl (2003)

have broadly defined migration as the range of patterns of movements of people from one place to another, within a particular period. According to Kalule-Sabiti and Kahimbara (1998), migration 'proper' and 'labour' migration are the two main constituents of migration in Southern Africa. Labour migration, is associated with rural to urban movements and is usually circular in nature. This type of migration has been a major feature of African economic systems given the continent's political history. The third form of family movements are those where families continually straddle the place of origin and their places of destination. Currently, not only are some rural-urban movements in Africa circular in nature, a recent trend is that many people straddle two or more places simultaneously. It is common in Africa for families to straddle areas of origin and areas of work, moving fluidly between the two, and creating divided loyalties, and this has an impact on family.

Inequalities bequeathed on the continent by colonialists have never been reversed, thus there have been consistent movements on the continent from economically deprived areas to areas that are economically more stable or better off. Rural-urban movements remain common as rural areas lack basic infrastructure and have low economic activity. In most African countries, this means that the major movement stream is towards capital cities or seaport cities. Although people might straddle their new areas and their areas of origin for some time, the dominant flow is usually from economically deprived areas to areas that are economically well endowed. International migration is usually a one-way stream from countries that are having an economic meltdown or suffering from social strife, to more stable or more developed countries. Skilled individuals are the most mobile in any society. As a result, they tend to move in their numbers to better performing areas, followed by people of lower skill levels. These movements have significantly produced new forms of families, ties, networks and extended families. Additionally, because of the one-way stream, urban growth in Africa is averaging at about 5% per year. The urban population is doubling every 15 years. Due to this process, the urban population is expected to grow substantially in the next 30 years.

An important feature of rural-urban migration in Africa is that it is gender biased, with more men migrating, leaving women and children behind in the rural areas (Khan, *et al*. 2008). This is still the case in spite of increasingly more proportions of women who are joining the migration streams to the cities in search of remunerable work as the demand for female labour is on the increase. The number of women who are joining migration streams has accelerated the increase in the numbers of the city dwellers relative to rural dwellers; approximately 412 million city dwellers are located in Africa, while population projections estimate that 60% of the African population will be living in cities by the year 2025 (Coleman, 2011). In addition to spatial disparities, high mobility is also influenced by the fact that the continent is experiencing a youth bulge. Youth is characterised by a high degree of mobility in any society. As young people move out of family homes, they are also likely to leave their childhood areas and in some cases do not have a stable place of abode.

There is also a problem with the integration of migrants into the local communities. Generally, in most communities there is a fear of being inundated by outsiders (Smelser and Baltes, 2001). In spite of this, only extreme cases get most publicity, with the xenophobic attacks in some countries that are recipients of large groups of migrants, South Africa being an example. For instance, a study conducted by Gordon *et al*. (2012) shows that xenophobic feelings in South

Africa are widespread across the socio-demographic and economic spectrum. Most communities would prefer that outsiders do not join them and, if need be, the new arrivals must be assimilated as quickly as possible, with a minimum of fuss, into the communities. The fact that workers are, by virtue of their employed status, relatively better off financially than many of the existing local community members is also a problem. The migrants feel local communities see improvements dedicated to migrant workers as in competition to their own interests and needs. The schism between new city dwellers and local communities generally discourage many from bringing their families to their places of work.

Thus, families have turned to modern technology as an instrument for overcoming spatial disruption. The proliferation of mobile phones on the continent has played an important role in retaining strong bond with relatives in the place of origin, thus reducing familial disconnection (Alzouma, 2008, Hahn and Kibora, 2008, de Bruijn, Nyamnjoh, and Brinkman, 2009). In addition to making communication easier in areas where communication was difficult, it is growingly being used for money transfers. The easy connectivity enabled by mobile technology is thus a lifeblood that maintains the translocal relationships (Hughes and Lonie 2007, Burrel, 2008). Physical movements among families that are geographically separated remains difficult. Modern technology helps families to continue to function across geographical spaces. In spite of proliferation of mobile technology, use of mobile technology remains expensive on the continent. Cheaper means of communicating through internet and mobile phones have become significant means for sustaining spatial family bonds. More importantly, as many families are distributed over many spaces, twinning of public institutions across geographical spaces will make extended families to function better social inclusion.

Relevance of SDG16 and Family Policies to African Family

In the above paragraphs, a certain movement has been highlighted: from the basic, generally inclusive broad family unit and community, to the broader society marked by mobility and migration, and which mirrors several forms of exclusivity and interruption of family bonds and structures. However, the problems and pointers to the non-inclusive nature of contemporary societies are much broader. The PwC network briefing on the SDG 16, highlight some of these challenges. These include the fact that more than a billion people in the world today suffer from conflict and fragility. There is a fear that if institutional building and reduction of poverty continues at the current snail pace, about half a billion people will join the number living below the poverty line by 2030. In addition, more than half of the world's population live in countries with serious corruption issues, which continues to weaken judicial and political systems and destroy people's trust in the state as an engine of development (PwC, 2016). Several indicators such as feelings of safety, prison population, efficiency of governments, property rights, and the number of births registered, inclusion of indigenous peoples and minorities, intergroup cohesion, interpersonal safety and strong civil society show that much more is still to be desired in terms of attaining the SDG 16 by the 2030 deadline. African countries particularly score below 50% on several of these indicators (PwC, 2016; Nicolai *et al* 2016). In their regional scorecard report, Nicolai *et al.,* (2016) observe that unless major changes and reversal occur, some of the SDGs, including 16, are not going to be achieved because current trends show them to be deteriorating both regionally and globally.

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs report (UNDESA, 2009), understood social inclusion as a process through which equal opportunities are made available for everyone to realise their full potential, and conditions created for active and full participations of people in all aspects of social life. It is at the same time a process through which societies seek to bring an end to social exclusion and poverty. This can be achieved through social cohesion and social integration. For social inclusion to be achieved, the UNDESA argues that certain elements are necessary and must be pursued. These include the rule of law; civic, political, economic and social participation, universal access to social infrastructure and facilities, strong civil society, equal access to public information, equity in wealth and resource distribution, effective leadership, education, respect for human rights and freedoms, and the creation of a positive narrative about the inclusive society of the future (UNDESA, 2009).

UNDESA's framework of inclusive societies has an affinity within African extended family. The African extended family is an institution that functions as a locus for social inclusion and individual's resource for sustainable development. It is an institution for mutual help and reciprocity, nurturing and sustainable development. While African societies have several challenges that promote exclusion, the positive values enshrined in the extended family institution are critical in promoting inclusive societies. The notion and practices around family discussed earlier, indicates that inclusion is a central tenet of African family life and meaning, and engenders different levels of participation in the family. However, more importantly, the family institution is the foundation and at the same time reflects the much-valued notion of Ubuntu, which has been conceptualized as inclusion, from an African perspective (Shanyanana and Waghid, 2016). While a highly discussed and almost overused concept is the principles and practices Ubuntu. The notion emphasizes the fundamental humanity and connectedness of everyone as the bases for life, individuality and community. Thus, by nature, this is a highly inclusive framework upon which African family is ground. It also promotes inclusive society as imagined by the SDG 16. The intention here is not to suggest that African societies at any historical stage perfectly enjoyed such inclusivity or that the notion itself does not contain some forms of exclusion (Shanyanana and Waghid, 2016). Rather, it is to suggest that this notion, which is interwoven with the understanding of family in the African context, offer a perspective from which to understand, justify and pursue inclusiveness of society. Ramose (2002), explains that the notion of Ubuntu implies that one's humanity is affirmed through the humanity of other people, and this forms the basis for family relationships that are nurturing, respectful and life enhancing. Ramose (2002) notes that faced with a choice between wealth and preservation of a human's life, Ubuntu demands choosing the preservation of life. This principle demands respect for life, respect for the happiness and prosperity of others, the welfare of extended family members, and above all, that of the community as a whole.

These values are learned and begin to be enacted from the family before they are manifested in the community. Thus, family, from an African perspective plays a fundamental role in the achievement of inclusive societies. Being a microcosm of the broader society and community, it shapes the individuals for participation in society from an early age. The family exposes people to their earliest learnings in social and personal values, and broken family institutions usually influence other social institutions. While emerging ideas in the west especially among elite groups attempt to view the family as simply one among several institutions, which has lost its traditional significance in society, the family has remains consistent as the basic, natural unit of

African societies (Carlson, 1999). Thus, social inclusiveness can both start and end with the family. The family can be a great resource as well as an impediment to achieving the goals of inclusivity.

Inclusive Societies Agenda: A Way Forward

This has tremendous implication for policies aimed to achieve the SDGs. Policies provide the framework, course of action and guidance for the achievement of public good (Reimer et al., 2009). Thus, the development and analysis of family policies targeting the goal of social inclusion are necessary the achievement of the SDG, considering the established role and place of family in the society. The UNDESA, Division for Social Policy and Development (2016) argues that family policy and design and implementation for any of the SDGs needs to keep in mind the diversity of families, partnerships with non-state participants, ways to include families in the design of the policies and how to inform families about the policies. Involving families in the design of policies is particularly important for building inclusive societies and achieving he targets of the SDG 16. This will give the policy makers an opportunity to capture family values and transform the society from the grassroots. Moreover, policies that in which the families targeted are involved in the design are more likely to be successful. Family policies should also seek to understand the understanding of inclusiveness and family in African communities, this will provide the necessary nuances for successful policy framing and implementation.

POLICY OPTIONS

More efforts must be made to translate the recognition family policies into other social policies and social programmes. Thus, societies should strive for the following:

- Continued recognition of the family institution as a foundation of society.
- Recognition and affirmation of complexities and diversity of families.
- Affirming the extended family as an institution that can function as a locus for social inclusion and individual's resource for sustainable development.
- Promotion of positive family values, which include the value of *Ubuntu*. The notion emphasizes the fundamental humanity and connectedness of everyone as the bases for life, individuality and community.
- Promotion of affordable communication technology and transport systems that assist interaction between family members that are stretched across vast geographic space to connect with each other.

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