

## **The Crucial Role of Families**

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### **The future our children deserve**

The original concept of sustainable development refers to this future while meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This notion used to be broken out into three constituent parts: environmental, economic and sociopolitical sustainability. But it has been suggested that a more consistent analytical breakdown is to distinguish four domains —economic, ecological, political and cultural sustainability.

Today it is fully acknowledged that a paradigm that aims to transform the world must provide operational tools to improve freedoms and welfare. A three-pillar paradigm fails because it lacks a soul, the values, practices and expressions providing coherence and meaning to development in cities, nations and in our existence as human beings: culture.

The outcome document of the UN's Rio+20 Conference recognizes that people are at the center of sustainable development and that there is a need for "holistic and integrated approaches to sustainable development", and then focuses on human development, which helps to pave the way for the recognition of culture as an important factor in creating appropriate, and therefore effective, development programmes.

### **The crucial role of families**

Consequently, we can say that sustainable development is not only an economic concept, but it also embraces a profound and fundamental ethical and human dimension. Culture is an important aspect of sustainable development, as it refers to how we understand and appreciate natural resources and each other. This dimension should be included in the definition of sustainable development, so that it refers to the future generations and the physical environment within the context of the redistribution of culture and wealth, and the eradication of poverty in the world.

And it is from this perspective that I feel families come in, as the environment where ethical and cultural values are achieved in a natural way. As basic and essential building blocks of societies, families have a crucial role in social development. They bear the primary responsibility for the education and socialization of children as well as instilling values of citizenship and belonging in the society. Families provide material and non-material care and support to its members, from children to older persons or those suffering from illness, sheltering them from hardship to the maximum possible extent.

Taking into account the broad experience of our Federation in dealing with families worldwide, we see every day that family is where the vast majority of people learn the fundamental skills for life, and other institutions confirm it. At the most fundamental level, family structure and family process

matters: evidence shows that outcomes for both children and adults are not equal regardless of family background, and public policy should reflect this. Children growing up in healthy, married, two-parent families are more likely to lead happy, healthy and successful lives than those who have not experienced the same level of family security and stability.

Those who build stable families have a higher life expectancy, lower risks of mental illness, alcoholism and domestic violence. The children show lower infant mortality rate, lower risk drug addiction, and lower incidences of engaging in criminal activities after puberty, higher academic achievements, lower incidence of mental illnesses and fewer teenage unwanted pregnancies. A stable family is the lowest cost option for both its members and the State. Furthermore, members of stable families are more disciplined when it comes to fulfilling legal and social norms, contributing towards financing social security.

Families need to be helped if they are to fulfil their irreplaceable social role. Since family stability has been in continuous decline for the last decades in many countries, adults and children today are increasingly faced with obstacles not only to their material but also to their emotional well-being. They often have to cope with families that are dysfunctional, broken through abuse, separation or divorce or fatherless. This is especially true in the least advantaged sections of society and for the weakest members of them, namely, the elderly, women, the indebted and children.

This doesn't mean that families could or should be replaced in their role. On the contrary, they should be helped and empowered in every possible way. Governments cannot afford to fully replace the functions families perform for the benefit of their members and for the good of society. The family is the most powerful, the most humane and, by far, the most economical system known for building competence and character. Still, families do better in a supportive policy environment—one in which, for example, schools actively seek parental engagement; employers recognize that workers are also family members; agencies and organizations are family-centered in their philosophy and operation; and laws support family members' roles as caregivers, parents, partners, and workers. A vital role remains for governments to supplement and complement the private investments families make. Policies and programs, along with community institutions and societal norms and values, shape the extent to which families can fulfil their functions and develop new capabilities when challenged to do so.

If promotion of sustainable development can't be set aside from empowering families, they should be also part of the future Development Goals. As the UN Secretary-General has mentioned in another one of his Reports, "The twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, coming (in 2014) on the eve of the target year of the Millennium Development Goals, gives us an opportunity to refocus on the role of families in development... The Millennium Development targets, especially those relating to the reduction of poverty, education of children and reduction in maternal mortality, are difficult to attain unless the strategies to achieve them focus on the family ... In effect, the very achievement of development goals depends on how well families are empowered to contribute to the achievement of those goals.