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## First United Nations Consultative Meeting of Regional and International NGOs on the Family

New York, 9 February 1998

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### Introduction

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1. The first United Nations Consultative Meeting of Regional and International NGOs on the Family was held on 9 February 1998 in New York. The Meeting was held in conjunction with the 36th session of the Commission for Social Development, held from 10-20 February 1998. The NGO Consultative Meeting was organized by the Family Unit of the Division of Social Policy and Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

2. The Meeting was attended by seven major NGOs dealing with the family [Asia-Pacific Forum on Families, International Family Policy Forum, New York NGO Committee on the Family, Vienna NGO Committee on the Family, International Federation for Parent Education, and the International Union of Family Organizations. The list of participants is contained in Annex 1. The Agenda is contained in Annex 2.

3. The Meeting was opened by Mr. Amr Ghaleb, Officer-in-Charge of the Family Unit, who welcomed the participants. In his opening statement, he stated that the joint cooperative efforts would enhance the objectives of the International Year of the Family [IYF], address the concerns of the United Nations Secretariat and respond to the needs of each of NGOs present. He noted that many of the issues confronting families today, in almost all instances, are issues of society as a whole. Moreover, family issues due to their intersectoral dimensions, necessitates collaborative attention. It is in this context that the NGO Consultative Meeting, first of its kind since 1994, aimed at developing a joint-long term strategy on family matters at the regional and global levels, and a common approach towards the relevant intergovernmental organizations.

4. He gave an assessment of the follow-up phase of the Year. He noted notwithstanding its many achievements, the IYF left some crucial issues unresolved such as: (a) the lack of consensus on relevant terminology and definitions e.g. family, family policies, family-sensitive considerations, etc.; (b) the non-existence of a long-term global plan of action on families, similar to other global programmes [women, ageing, youth, disability, etc.]; after 1994, many of the *ad hoc* IYF mechanisms were phased out and responsibility for national level follow up was assumed by a new array of actors; (d) the need to reinforce a partnership culture; and (e) the lack of coordination and complementarity between and among NGO umbrella groups on the family.

5. He informed the participants about the current and future activities of the Family Unit, which is envisaged as a catalyst and facilitator for global efforts on behalf of families. The Family Unit plays an important role in promoting regional and international exchange of experiences in addressing family issues and it is anchored on six basic principles: (i) A sub-regional approach; (ii) Policy guidance; (iii) Research studies, supplemented by sub-regional meetings; (iv) A data base on family matters; (v) Mobilization of resources through the UN Trust Fund on Family Activities; and (vi) the development of partnerships with a variety of actors interested in the family.

6. The Officer-in-Charge of the Family Unit suggested to the participants that a coordinated approach between the UN Secretariat and regional and international NGOs should encompass the following areas: assistance to Member States in achieving the goals and objectives of the IYF; research on the situation and needs of families, including the special problems confronting particular subgroups of families; development of technical assistance projects; dissemination of information; and advocacy and strengthening channels of communication between NGO's and the Family Unit.

7. He stressed the need for collaboration and cooperation between the UN Secretariat and regional and international family NGO's. Collaboration and cooperation requires a process of consultations and a dialogue which will lead to *inter alia* commonalities in policy content, concepts and an integrated perspective on the family topic at the regional and global levels.

8. He stated that coordination and cooperation should aim at: (i) ensuring an integrated approach to family issues, policies and programmes; (ii) reflecting an interdisciplinary and intersectoral dimension concerning families; (iii) providing an opportunity for more efficient use of capacities of concerned actors; and (iv) involvement at all levels. Particular emphasis should be given to the questions of governmental and intergovernmental process as well as family issues.

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## Observations

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9. The Participants reported on and discussed their various activities and programmes in the field of the family. They exchanged information on activities foreseen in 1998-2000 in light of the follow up to the International Year of the Family. The overviews presented by the participants underlined the importance of the objectives of the International Year of the Family such as: (a) Increase awareness of family issues among Governments as well as in the private sector and highlight the importance of families; develop a better understanding of their functions and problems; (b) Strengthen national institutions to formulate, implement and monitor policies in respect of families; (c) Stimulate efforts to respond to problems affecting, and affected by, the situation of families; and (d) Enhance the effectiveness of local, regional and national efforts to carry out specific programmes concerning families.

10. The participants referred to major family concerns and issues, which are of interest to their own organizations such as education, parenting public health, family policies, capacity building, family impact consideration, family relationships, etc. It was underlined that non-governmental organizations provide a means of focusing on grass roots, local and national initiatives and addressing development issues. Moreover, regional and global non-governmental organizations are important advocates for facilitating international cooperation within the framework of the follow up to the International Year of the Family.

11. The Group noted that during the post International Year of the Family, regional and international non-governmental organizations have continued to play an important role to improve the situation of families. Many non-governmental organizations organize meetings, seminar workshops and conferences at all levels to foster the welfare of families. They welcomed the fact that consultations between the Family Unit and non-governmental organizations are continuing with regard to the ongoing United Nations programme on the Family, the development of NGO programmes for the IYF follow-up and the promotion of meetings within and outside the United Nations system.

12. It was reaffirmed that the follow-up to the International Year of the Family must be sustained by effective actions at all levels by Governments, non-governmental organizations, other organizations of civil society, the private sector and individuals.

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## Conclusions



13. It was affirmed that this Regional and International NGO Consultations was useful and that the Group should continue to meet and address a much-needed topic: modalities of cooperation. It was agreed that (a) the Group must have a better awareness of individual and collective objectives of each of the member organizations; (b) the Group must focus collectively on national capacity building in the area of families; (c) the Group must have a better understanding of the UN intergovernmental processes; and (d) the Group must seek to develop a joint, long-term strategy for the year 2000 and strengthen the family programme within the United Nations Secretariat.

14. The participants decided that with respect to the multiplicity of family issues, an integrating framework for collaboration could be "Global Social and Economic Trends that Affect Families". There was consensus on the need to identify specific issues to be explored. The Family Unit was requested to initiate action in this regard.

15. The participants underlined that the areas of cooperation should entail: (a) Lobbying and advocacy; (b) Research; (c) Technical assistance/cooperation/project formulation, particularly at the grassroots level; (d) Collective inputs into the forthcoming sessions of the Commission for Social Development; and the General Assembly; and (c) Fundraising and provision of technical assistance to projects. National capacity building was viewed as a strategic focus for the deliberations of the Group. There is a need to review capacity building more fully, to benefit from collaborative efforts. There was agreement on the importance of lobbying and networking with particular focus on the UN intergovernmental bodies. In this regard, priority should be given to promoting family topics as an integral part of the review process of the Copenhagen Summit at the General Assembly of the United Nations in the year 2000.

16. The participants called upon the Family Unit to coordinate the dissemination of work plans of the member organizations and to facilitate information sharing between them. There was a firm commitment by the Group to support the work programme of the Family Unit, and welcomed the Family Unit's sub-regional approach. The Group also agreed with the Family Unit's idea of focusing on a 3-year strategy i.e. 1998-2000.

17. The Group reaffirmed that strengthening NGO-UN Secretariat relations in the area of the family necessitates a conceptual and operational framework. They called upon the Family Unit to act as a facilitator of the Group. The need for expanding the membership of the Group to include more concerned regional and international NGO's was stressed.