

## Balancing family life and work

'Exploring the possibilities of a European family-friendly label'



Brussels, 15 may 2013

### 2014 as a new opportunity to show the importance of the family

The Third Committee of UN General Assembly has recently approved a resolution on the 'Preparations for and observance of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family', [A/C.3/67/L.12/Rev.1.] as a follow-up of all the previous decisions about this observance. In particular, it should be noted that 2004 the General Assembly decided to celebrate the anniversary of the International Year on a ten-year basis and in 1989, after proclaiming 1994 as International Year of the Family, proposed the creation "among Governments, policy-makers and the public a greater awareness of the family as the natural and fundamental unit of society" [Resolution 44/82, n.2]. With all that background, it is clear that "the upcoming twentieth anniversary of the International Year offers an opportunity to focus on family-oriented policy frameworks capable of responding to new challenges faced by families since 1994," as the different reports by the Secretary General have declared.

The preambulatory clauses of this new resolution mention what we consider crucial aspects for these preparations, namely:

- the importance of designing, implementing and monitoring family-oriented policies, especially in the areas suggested for this celebration: poverty eradication, full employment and decent work, work-family balance, social integration and intergenerational solidarity;
- the recognition of the primary responsibility the family has for the nurturing and protection of children;
- 2014 as a useful opportunity for increasing cooperation to strengthen family-centred policies and programmes as part of development;
- the need for continued UN inter-agency and regional cooperation on family issues in order to generate greater awareness of this subject;
- the pivotal role of civil society in advocacy, promotion, research and policymaking in respect of family policy development and capacity-building.

Consequently, the operative clauses of the resolution address different agents with specific recommendations for each one of them:

1. *To Member States:* improve family well-being through the implementation of effective national policies, strategies and programmes that address family poverty, social exclusion, work-family balance and intergenerational issues; promote the delivery of family-centered benefits; strengthen provisions for parental leave; extend flexible working arrangements for employees with family responsibilities; promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, enhance paternal involvement, support a wide range of quality childcare arrangements; provide social protection assistance and investments in cross-generational facilities, volunteering and job-sharing programmes; create a conducive environment to strengthen and support all families; recognize the principle of shared parental responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child; and share good practices and data on family policy development.
2. *To Governments:* integrate a family perspective into national policymaking; provide for data on family well-being; identify and ensure support for constructive family policy developments; design strategies and programmes aimed at strengthening national capacities to address national priorities relating to family issues; and support the United Nations trust fund on family activities to enable research activities and provide assistance to countries.
3. *To civil society organizations:* play a supportive role in promoting the twentieth anniversary of the international year and support the preparations for regional meetings.

2014



20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE FAMILY

## Empowering the families

Using the term 'empowerment' in UN documents has become quite popular. Even though it is not a 'closed concept' yet – it was originated by the 'popular education' developed by Paulo Freire from the 1960s and onwards –, it is usually defined as "enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes" [World Bank's 2002 Empowerment Sourcebook]. Consequently, it has been used with reference to human groups considered to be discriminated in some way (empowerment of women, of handicapped or of any others suffering from social exclusion).

Discrimination of some types of families (single-parent, large, immigrants, indigenous, with dependant members) has been recently mentioned in different sources, adding that empowerment should refer to them as well. In this sense, the Report of the Secretary-General on the Follow-up to the Tenth Anniversary of the International Year of the Family (2010), states that "there seems to be a consensus on the fact that, so far, the stability and cohesiveness of communities and societies largely rest on the strength of 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."

Moreover, as the Commission for Social Development has decided that the priority theme for the 2013-2014 review and policy cycle should be 'Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all' [Report on the Fiftieth Session], we consider especially appropriate to take advantage of it to apply this concept to family, as we will actually do in the Commission sessions. We try this way to consolidate a meaning fit to human nature requirements, from the four dimensions in which empowerment can be found:

- *Social empowerment* is about the removal of social, political, legal and economic barriers to the active participation of certain social groups in society. There is no doubt that families find those barriers in many countries when they want to share their views and offer their opinions for consideration in the public square. That is why we propose social recognition as the first level for family empowerment.
- *Economic empowerment* enables marginalized people to assert greater control over their resources and life choices, especially including decisions on investments in health, housing and education. It is difficult to find three more important fields in which many families often need help to fulfill their role. Therefore, we consider all different forms of economic help, such as tax benefits, parental leave entitlements, educational grants and other ancillary services, as a second level for family empowerment.
- *Political empowerment* is concerned especially with state and social institutions that serve people's needs, and entails an emphasis on constructing responsive government and cultivating citizen participation. Too often, the time, effort and money families invest in their children finds no social or economic incentive from the society benefitting from them, because there are no political instruments to implement it, such as cash transfer programmes. The effort that the United Nations and other international institutions are making for the voice of civil society to be heard –and, more specifically, families as the 'basic building blocks' of society– is to be welcomed and encouraged.
- *Legal empowerment* refers to possibility of people to demand and exercise their rights while at the same time strengthening institutions so that they can better respond to the needs of people. Again, family rights are often ignored and no legal instruments can be found to advocate on their behalf. In that sense, we feel that the consideration of family as subject of rights has to be studied in depth and developed consequently.

The link with the family is well based in the 2010 Report of the Secretary-General on the Follow-up to the Tenth Anniversary of the International Year of the Family, which states that "the very contribution of families to the achievement of development goals continues to be largely overlooked, while there seems to be a consensus on the fact that, so far, the stability and cohesiveness of communities and societies largely rest on the strength of 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."

As the consequence of all the actions referred above, we hope to "promote the integration of a family perspective into policy-making at the national, regional and international levels" [Mission Statement of the Focal Point on the Family], which is one of the primary activities of the Focal Point on the Family at UN. To implement this perspective in a practical way, we suggest the introduction of a family impact report, to assess the impact of certain policy measures on opportunities for families. As a long term goal, we aim to identify and describe the indicators for such a report to be made in different situations and for different purposes.

