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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all

Statement submitted by International Federation for Family Development, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

The concept of empowering

A working paper of the NGO Committee on Social Development, prepared for the expert group meeting on promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all, held in New York from 10 to 12 September 2012, offers some very interesting considerations on empowerment.

First, it says that little consensus has emerged around the exact definition of the term and that one review of literature found over 30 concurrent definitions. In fact, the holistic environment in which empowering conditions more readily emerge include concepts as varied as choice, freedom, agency, capacity, participation, control over one's own destiny, increased resources and capacity and improved quality of life. It is then obvious that greater clarity will be needed if empowerment is going to become a viable and practical standard by which development can be assessed.

Second, empowerment is conceived of as a process, an outcome or both. It could be understood as functioning along a number of clearly defined dimensions (social, economic, political and legal).

At the same time, it observes that equally important are the normative or "spiritual" dimensions of empowerment that are required for sustainable social advancement, things such as ethical leadership, principled action and moral courage. Empowerment of this kind focuses not only on capacities and resources, but on the social ends towards which those resources will be directed.

As a consequence, it defines empowerment as the expansion of the capacity, volition and vision necessary for people to become effective agents of human well-being.

Question of whether families should be included

From the experience and background of the Federation, both this definition and the preceding ideas show how important it is to consider the family as a main subject for empowerment. In dealing with families worldwide, we see the crucial importance of stable families as the environment in which most people learn the fundamental skills for life. The same concepts that were mentioned above as part of the definitions of empowerment relate in a very direct way to that holistic environment and to those skills and motivations that are either learned at home or in a much harder way, if they can be achieved at all.

In her paper presented at the expert group meeting on promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all, Zitha Mokomane of the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa discusses relevant issues.

The four dimensions of family empowerment

With regard to the four dimensions in which empowerment can be found, the relation to families and their needs can also be clearly seen.

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 public consideration. 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 with regard to 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 fulfil their role. Therefore, we consider all different forms of economic help, such as tax benefits, parental leave entitlements, education 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. The effort that the United Nations and other international institutions are making for the voice of civil society to be heard is to be welcomed and encouraged.

Legal empowerment refers to the possibility of people demanding and exercising their rights while 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 rights and the family has to be studied in depth and developed.

According to the Secretary-General in his 2010 report on follow-up to the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family and beyond, there is still a long way ahead, given that the very contribution of families to the achievement of development goals continues to be largely overlooked (A/66/62-E/2011/4, paras. 9 and 10).

With regard to the so-called normative or spiritual dimensions of empowerment, we add that numerous studies have shown that the family is where a person's well-being is not limited to their own happiness, but extends to their capacity to contribute to the happiness of others. It is never directly related to how much money a person has, but rather to how that money is spent. It is never directly related to material resources, but rather to the purpose that they are given.

Additional key elements

In his 2011 report on the preparations for and observance of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2014, the Secretary-General stresses that the continuing negative consequences of the economic and social crisis pose numerous challenges for families (A/67/61 E/2012/3, para. 9). He also mentions that the financial crisis has another important consequence in that, in times of increased vulnerability and uncertainty, the importance of families' economic and social functions becomes more visible (para. 10).

Conclusions and proposals

To make real progress during the coming months and years on poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all, we need

to empower not only people and societies, but also families, because they are the best link and bridge between them.

The upcoming twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family is an opportunity to review challenges faced by families and reflect on how best to support them in fulfilling the economic and nurturing roles that are so important for stable and cohesive societies.

Consequently, we would like to recall the conclusions and recommendations of the European expert group meeting on confronting family poverty and social exclusion, ensuring work-family balance and advancing social integration and intergenerational solidarity in Europe, which was co-organized by the Federation in June 2011 in Brussels and convened as part of the preparations for the twentieth anniversary, insofar as they can be applied to the rest of the world.

We also support and stress the following recommendations made by the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 2012/10, on preparations for and observance of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family:

- Establish relevant national agencies or governmental bodies responsible for the implementation and monitoring of family policies and to research the impact of social policies on families.
- Adopt effective means of delivering family-centred benefits, such as social protection and social transfer programmes, including cash transfer programmes, to reduce family poverty and prevent the intergenerational transfer of poverty.
- Strengthen provisions for parental leave, extend flexible working arrangements for employees with family responsibilities, including flexible part-time employment opportunities and arrangements, promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, enhance paternal involvement and support a wide range of quality childcare arrangements, noting the importance of reconciliation of work and family life and recognizing the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child.
- Support, as appropriate, the preparations for regional meetings in observance of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year and share good practices and data on family policy development.