



**UN COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
FIFTY-FIRST SESSION (2013)**

**Statement
Promoting empowerment of families**

Last year, the Commission for Social Development 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*). Following this mandate, the recent Expert Group Meeting held by the United Nations has provided the most authorized approach to a practical definition of empowerment relevant to achieving the three core objectives.

The concept of empowering

In doing so, the *Aide-Mémoire* for that Meeting 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,” so that “it is clear that empowerment could be understood as functioning along a number of clearly defined dimensions (social, economic, political and legal).”
- At the same time, “equally important are the normative or ‘spiritual’ dimensions of empowerment that are required for sustainable social advancement — things like ethical leadership, principled action and moral courage. Empowerment of this kind focuses not only on capacities and resources, but on the social ends toward which those resources will be directed.”

As a consequence, it offers this working definition: “Empowerment is the expansion of the capacity, volition, and vision necessary for people to become effective agents of human well-being.”

Should families be included?

From the experience and background of our Federation, both this definition and the precedent 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 through a much harder way if they can be achieved at all.

In the paper presented by Zitha Mokomane at the Expert Group Meeting by on the *Role of Families in Social and Economic Empowerment of Individuals*, confirms that: “Indeed, the family environment in which children grow up has been considered a key predictor of their future outcomes. International multidisciplinary research evidence, for example, indicates that children growing up in low-income families and households—where parenting practices and behavior are created as a result of economic strain and material hardship—generally experience social and health conditions that place them at risk of later academic, employment and behavioral problems. Conversely, early positive childhood experiences acquired through strong and effective parent-child attachment and communication; a nurturing, loving family environment; enhancement and support of academic functioning; and monitoring of peer influence promotes the development of pro-social and foundational psychosocial systems in children and young people. Stable functional families have also been shown to contribute to youth social empowerment by providing many of the factors that protect young people from engaging in risky sexual behavior, drug use and abuse, delinquency, and other anti-social behaviors. It has been shown, for example, that teenagers who talked with their parents about sex are also more likely to discuss sexual risk with their partners, and are less likely to be involved with deviant peer groups. In a very general sense, therefore, negative family experiences—poor child-parent attachment; a chaotic, dysfunctional, abusive, neglectful, or impoverished family environment may directly or indirectly hamper youth’s social and economic empowerment. For example, explanations have been offered at several levels as to how poverty may increase youth’s susceptibility socio-economic and health disadvantages. Many research findings have shown that at its core, poor childhood is associated with weak endowments of human, capital and financial resources such as low levels of education and literacy, few marketable skills, low labor productivity, and generally poor health status—all of which can exacerbate young people’s socio-economic and health vulnerabilities including HIV infection. With regards to the latter, it has also been argued that many poor young people often adopt risky sexual behavior not because prevention messages do not reach them, but because such messages are often irrelevant or inoperable given the reality of their lives.”

The four dimensions of family empowerment

Coming back 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 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.

There is still a long way ahead, because, as the 2010 Report of the Secretary-General on the *Follow-up to the Tenth Anniversary of the International Year of the Family* states, “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. Thus, policies focusing on improving the well-being of families are certain to benefit development. Such policies should not only help families to cope with their numerous responsibilities and shelter them from vulnerability; they should aim at supporting a variety of family functions rather than replacing them and treating families as collections of individuals, who independently need support.”

About 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. Consequently, they suggest that ‘well-being’ is not limited to a person’s own happiness, but it extends to the capacity that a person has 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 they are given.

Additional Key Elements

Another element has been stressed by the 2011 Report of the Secretary-General on the *Preparations for and Observance of the Twentieth Anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2014*: “The continuing negative consequences of the economic and social crisis pose numerous challenges for families. In developing and developed countries alike, falling family incomes force parents to make cuts in health and education expenditures for their children. Once taken out of schools, children are unlikely to return and their educational attainment, productivity and future income prospects are greatly diminished. Economic stress also jeopardizes family cohesion and has been linked to increased domestic violence and divorce rates, as well as to the neglect and abuse of children. There is a growing concern that economic stability measures, including reductions in social spending undertaken to counteract the current crisis, may further negatively affect families worldwide.”

At the same time, the financial crisis has another important consequence, also mentioned by the Report. “In times of increased vulnerability and uncertainty, the importance of families’ economic and social functions becomes more visible. The ability of families to fulfill those functions, however, is put into question as families find it increasingly more difficult to care for household members young and old, reconcile work and family life and maintain the intergenerational bonds that sustained them in the past.”

Conclusions and proposals

To make real progress during the months and years to come on poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all, we need not only to empower 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; advancing social integration and intergenerational solidarity in Europe*, co-organized by our Federation last June in Brussels and Convened as part of the preparations for that Anniversary, as far as they can be applied also to the rest of the World.

We also support and stress the following recommendations, as proposed by the Resolution adopted by the Economic and Social Council in its Substantive session of 2012 on the *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-centered 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 to share good practices and data on family policy development.
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