



What can we learn from the situation of the families in Europe?

*"Declaration of the Civil Society on the Occasion of the
20th Anniversary of the International Year of the Family "*

*Speech by Ignacio Socias
The Family Watch
Director of International Relations of IFFD*

Warsaw, April 3- 4, 2013
Conference Room B - North Lawn Building - United Nations - New York

I.

Back in December 1994, the General Assembly proclaimed in its Resolution 59/111 the decision "to celebrate the anniversary of the International Year of the Family on a ten-year basis."

In response to this and other relevant General Assembly and Economic and Social Council resolutions, the International Federation for Family Development, which I represent here today, included in the conclusions of its last International Congress "to encourage and promote the fulfillment of the mission of the United Nations Programme on the family, in particular regarding to promote the integration of a family perspective into policymaking at the national, regional and international levels and support family research and diagnostic studies."

Consequently, and together with the United Nations Focal Point on the Family, we co-organized several events in Brussels last May hosted by the EU Committee of the Regions and convened as part of preparations for the Twentieth Anniversary of the International Year of the Family, coordinated by the International Institute for Family Research - The Family Watch.

A raise awareness meeting was held on the 5th June, with the participation of speakers from the European Parliament, the European Commission and the OECD, among others.

Then, a European Expert Group Meeting took place during the following three days, in which 26 experts and observers from 15 countries discussed about family-oriented policies and strategies. Experts dealing with various aspects of family policy have been invited from a broad geographical distribution to participate in the meeting in their personal capacities and the primary objective of this meeting was to provide UN Member States and other

stakeholders with expert opinion and recommendations regarding the three topics suggested for this Anniversary:

- Confronting family poverty.
- Ensuring work-family balance.
- Intergenerational solidarity.

Moreover, there was also an explicit intention in giving Europe this priority and considering its outcomes as especially valuable. The vast family experiment that has been conducted in this continent for the past 40 years can show results that should be considered, in order to take advantage of the positive and avoid the negative ones.

Europe's families are changing with declining birth rates, lower marriage rates and union commitments, rising divorce rates and the increasing number of single-headed households. With lower fertility and longer life expectancy, Europe is rapidly ageing. To respond to these trends family policy in Europe aims to help people have the number of children they desire (2.2 as an average in the EU, according to Eurostat); and face the decreasing number of people in the labour market and ageing population. The demographic challenges in Europe have been addressed in the context of a competitive social market economy aiming at high level of social protection for its citizens, high employment and intergenerational solidarity.

The main reason doesn't seem to be the incorporation of women to the labour force, but more the way the market is tailored. A recent OECD study shows that the countries with the most working women have higher fertility rates, which can be seen as a sign that working women are better able to balance work and family, probably because their job gives them more economic capacity.

The other point is to see the effects of society placing less value on marriage, family stability and marital commitment in recent years. Furthermore, "quickie" divorce legislation has left people who get married hoping to create a stable family with little guarantee of being successful in their aspirations, even though the majority of people still fall into this category.

Many recent studies agree on the negative effects marital breakdown has on. Although the evidence demonstrating the impact of couple relationship breakdown is highly complex, the overriding conclusion is the association it has with adult and child disadvantage. This association remains strong despite the fact that divorce and separation is widespread in today's society with research showing that the negative impacts have not diminished through time. Rather, the increased exposure of adults and children to couple relationship breakdown means that more people are affected compared to those of a previous generation. Hence the urgent need to increase the policy recognition of promoting family functioning and stability.

II.

The final report of the Expert Group Meeting, as well as expert papers, have been used as an input to the 2012 Report of the Secretary-General on the preparations for and observance of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family. All the outcomes have also been published in a book and have inspired the Declaration of the Civil Society on the

occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the International Year of the Family that will be mentioned later.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the experts discussed the importance of collecting and disseminating the information on good practices in family policy making in Europe. The good practice presented was that of the European Alliance for Families, a portal which is devoted to family policies in the European Union. It aims to encourage more family-friendly policies through the exchanges of ideas and experience in various EU Member States. The Alliance was founded in 2007 by the Council of Europe with a view to improving the living conditions of Europeans who have children or would like to start a family. It also focuses on child poverty and on equal opportunities for women in the workplace. The Alliance website serves as a medium for exchanging good practice, ideas and experiences among the different EU Member States.

Experts agreed on some general recommendations that could improve the situation of families in Europe. They suggested different recommendations for each of the three main topics of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family:

- About family poverty and social exclusion, in Europe there is a need for developing family friendly policies aimed at providing sustainable and affordable quality living conditions for families as well as ending child poverty and promoting family-friendly taxation policies. Avoiding economic and income traps is a good way to be more efficient in policymaking so large and low-income families can receive the necessary support.
- Regarding work-family balance it is very useful to first recognize the high value of work-family balance in the economy and society. Such recognition should lead to the development of more flexible parental leave entitlements throughout the life course of the family and in periods of transition as well as family-care leave arrangements and part-time working arrangements not just for couples but for lone parents as well. The provision of affordable quality childcare would also promote work life balance.
- Programmes strengthening social integration and intergenerational solidarity, like those based on the case method, should focus on investing in parenting and family communications as a good way to prevent conflicts and to reduce public costs. More investments should also be made in programmes that support the reintegration of parents into work and professional life after periods of parental and family leave as well as for older people in order to reduce intergenerational transfer of poverty.

Experts also recommended wider exchange of good practices in family policies and programmes so that Governments, civil society and other stakeholders can learn from one another. Such exchange of good practices is currently under way through the European Alliance for Families which should be strengthened.

Finally, experts agreed that more research on families should be conducted in Europe. Although there are different family-focused policies and actions, the family perspective in overall policy making is not fully developed in Europe. Mainstreaming of family perspective in overall policy making is needed to analyze and improve existing socio-economic policies and make them more family-friendly. That is why we are proud to be part of the most important research project about family in the EU, which is starting now:

'FamiliesAndSocieties'. The project has secured a grant of € 6.5 m from the EU's Seventh Framework Programme for a four-year period. We will work together with researchers from 25 leading universities and research institutes in 15 European countries.

We are also organizing raise awareness events in different cities of the 5 continents, such as the one that has gathered us here today. Cities as Madrid and Paris in Europe, Lagos and Nairobi in Africa or Santiago de Chile and Sao Paulo in America have already a fixed schedule for them, and we will try to keep adding others during the next months. We are also planning to organize a North America Expert Group Meeting in May 2014, taking advantage of the infrastructure of the World Congress we will have the previous week.

IFFD will also implement international communication projects to promote the family perspective among governments and international bodies. We have also created a web site where all this information and the rest of documents and initiatives regarding the twentieth anniversary are included or linked to: www.family2014.org. Through the members of the Federation and many others NGOs and entities in the five continents, we aim to raise awareness of this twentieth anniversary and the opportunity it brings worldwide.

III.

One of the topics we are addressing for it is the importance of empowering 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 when it says that "Empowerment is the expansion of the capacity, volition, and vision necessary for people to become effective agents of human well-being."

From the experience and background of our Federation, this definition shows 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.

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.

That is why we have made that link between families and the four dimensions in which empowerment can be found:

- Social empowerment as the “removal of social, political, legal and economic barriers to the active participation of certain social groups in society,” and 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,” and that is why we consider different forms of economic help 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,” and that is why we value and encourage so much 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.
- Last, 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.” In that sense, we feel that the consideration of family as subject of rights has to be studied in depth and developed consequently.

The economic and financial crisis makes this empowerment, if anything, more urgent. As mentioned 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”.

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.”

IV.

As the consequence of all the actions already mentioned, we propose a Declaration of the Civil Society in which the basic contents of this last resolution and the precedent ones are included, as well as the main recommendations of different Expert Group Meetings, particularly the European one we organized in Brussels.

To this end, we aim to enrol as many politicians, academics and representatives of NGOs in every country as we can, so that we can present it together with the rest of international organizations to the UN. This has been a very successful call, because it is co-sponsored by the European Delegation of the World Movement of Mothers, the World Family Organization, the Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development, the World Youth Alliance, the Home Renaissance Foundation, the World Union of Catholic Women’s Organisations, the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe, the European Federation of Parents and Carers at Home, the European Large Families

Confederation, the European Christian Political Foundation, New Women for Europe, European Women's Forum, CARE for Europe and the Veneto Region.

Moreover, as many as other 62 national NGOs from 47 different countries have joined it too up to today.

The Declaration is intended to be signed primarily by representatives of the civil society organizations, academics and policy makers.

Its preamble contains most of what has been said about family in the Reports of the Secretary-General and Resolutions about family, such as its crucial role in social development; its primary responsibility for children; and the care and support they provide to its members, especially important in times of increased uncertainty and vulnerability. It also mentions that family-focused policies have proven both valuable and efficient in many areas of social development, and that the very achievement of Millennium Development Goals depends on how well families are empowered to contribute to it.

The operative clauses include the welcome to the call made by UN to celebrate this anniversary, as an opportunity it provides, among other things, "to integrate a family perspective by introducing a family impact report or assessment as a standing and compulsory part of policymaking." We feel this is, at the same time, the most efficient recommendation we can make and the task we should face for the next years, because the definition of that report is something that has to be done and explained as soon as possible.

Then, the rest of the Declaration also proposes very concrete and practical policies for each one of the 2014 topics:

- Regarding the need to eradicate poverty, some ways to help to single-parent, large and immigrant families; to aim at ending child poverty through the eradication of family poverty; to promote the provision of integrated services for families and family-friendly taxation policies and practices.
- Regarding work-family balance, comprehensive well-resourced and flexible parental leave entitlements, skill development and learning systems throughout the life course of the family and in periods of transition, promotion of parents' re-entering the labor market and of the dialogue and partnerships between social policy makers and relevant stakeholders.
- Regarding intergenerational solidarity, to facilitate quality couple and family relationships, parenting programmes; high-quality childcare and other ancillary services which support families, as well as active measures to support the psychological well-being of children and youth, and to develop public policies concerning the support to the elder members of the family, especially in situations of particular need.

Other concepts such as family mainstreaming in policy making; sustainable, affordable and quality living conditions for families; and to empower families and recognize their role in social cohesion and economic development are also developed.

The Declaration will be disseminated in all our actions during this year's preparations of the twentieth anniversary. We hope all stakeholders who see it as a valuable instrument to show a common agreement on the purpose of this celebration. That is why we wanted it to

be a Declaration of the Civil Society as a whole. We also hope that its contents can become a part for the contents of a resolution by the UN General Assembly on the occasion of this anniversary.

Let me know encourage you personally to sign the Declaration today if you haven't done it yet. Also, please consider the possibility of the entity you represent to become part of it.

I hope that all this effort can find a response in United Nations agencies and bodies, regional commissions, civil society organizations and academic institutions, also in Poland. That is why we are here today, and allow me to thank all of you before finishing for it.