

Addressing Sustainable Development from a Family Lens

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In September of 2015, United Nations member states adopted the new global development agenda, *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. The main priorities of the 2030 agenda focus on ending poverty, increasing gender equality, and promoting shared economic prosperity, social development and people's well-being, while also protecting the environment. The 2030 agenda proposes that global development requires a cohesive, worldwide vision that aligns social, economic, and environmental goals. A central tenet is that this vision be grounded in sustainability, equity and inclusion. Importantly, the agenda stresses the importance of creating and adapting policies that are appropriate to specific national and cultural contexts, in order to achieve sustainability (United Nations General Assembly, 2016).

Although the 2030 agenda recognizes the need for strengthening the social aspects of development, a fundamental omission is that it does not highlight the importance of empowering the family unit to be a critical player in attaining the sustainable development goals. The family is only specified in relation to family planning, to highlight assistance to family farmers and to promote shared responsibility within the household. However, it is in the arena of the family that each of the SDG's comes into play, and needs to be addressed as such. Specifically, the goals that are clearly directly connected to family issues include:

Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

In order for the 2030 Agenda to succeed, implementation in every country that is a member state of the United Nations is key. This can only be achieved through an integrated approach that stresses the linkages between the social, cultural, economic and environmental arenas and that recognizes the need to be "people" and specifically "family" centered. The family realm is the natural arena to help achieve the goals set forward by the 2030 Agenda as that is where critical decisions about education, employment, and caretaking are made. Family processes, relationships and cultural values all are central elements of decision making – and those decisions impact the implementation of policies and goals. Taking varying cultural contexts into account, thus needs to be primary goal

in this process. A primary obstacle to implementation of the 2030 Agenda is that the current state of scholarship on which so much policy formation is founded, primarily stresses the Western experience of social life. Creating policies that are based on Western models is unsustainable in contexts where very different belief systems, ideologies and cultural practices are at play (Trask, 2010; Trask 2014). Thus, it is imperative that different regions of the world undertake their own analysis of their societies and devise policies that will benefit their unique constellation of stakeholders to ensure the success of the 2030 agenda (United Nations Economic & Social Affairs, 2016).

The Western Individualized Focus vs. the Importance of a Family Perspective

Currently, a primarily Western conceptualization of social life emphasizes directing social initiatives, programs and policies at individuals (Connell, 2005). Much of the family centered scholarship stems from the English-speaking part of the world, specifically the United States, and has not been conducted in non-Western settings (Bogenschneider, 2014). Thus, we tend not to know if this research is culturally relevant or has any application at local levels. Particularly problematic is the fact, that this Western lens obscures the continued global importance of families to most people's lives, specifically in non-Western societies. In most parts of the world and amongst most various ethnic and cultural groups in the West, families continue to function as a fundamental protective mechanism especially for girls and women (Ganguly-Scrase, 2003; Trask, 2010; Trask, 2014). The family group serves to shield individuals from the discrimination, oppression, and violence they may face in the larger society (Collins, 1991; Trask, 2010).

Social science evidence indicates that families help create and support healthy societies and culturally appropriate policies strengthen families. Decisions made at the family level, impact policies and those decisions in turn, affect the strength of their respective communities and societies. It is thus *imperative* to take families into account in the development and implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This would make the SDG's more effective and efficient. For instance, family caregivers are the "backbone" of the long-term care system in many countries around the world; without policies that support family caregiving, the societal costs will be astronomical in Western and non-Western countries. Viewing the SDG of population aging through the lens of family impact, would recognize the contributions that older people make to families and society, and also the contributions that families make to caring for older people. Family impact is critical to other development objectives as well, such as the goal of youth unemployment. It is in families, through early preschool programs, and quality primary and secondary education that children and youth learn the hard and soft skills they need to succeed in the work force. When youth attain adequately compensated employment, they contribute to a sound economy and are then able to commit to marriage and the family life that a strong society requires.

Gender Equity and Gender Mainstreaming

A significant aspect of sustainable development is addressing the gender divides that still characterize much of the world, and certain segments of the Arab world in particular. A striking

absence of gender equality with respect to economic, social, educational and employment opportunities continues despite the commitments and efforts of most governments around the world to this issue. A primary focus of the Millennium Goals targeted gender equality and empowerment and various research studies indicate that 95% of states have instituted policies and programs focused on ensuring gender equality. However, these efforts have been largely unsuccessful. Currently, governments acknowledge that their efforts have had limited success (UN Women, 2015). Only about 25% report significant progress on this goal. Thus in 2017, gender inequality, i.e. the unequal relationship between men and women, remains a significant obstacle to making social progress in much of the Western and non-Western world and continues as a complex aspect of social relationships (Ganguly-Scrase, 2003; Trask, 2014; UN Women, 2015).

A key aspect to ensuring the success of the new 2030 Agenda is making progress on gender equality and empowerment. If gender equality and empowerment improve, then the other Sustainable Development Goals – especially Goals 1 – 4, become more likely to be achieved as well.

Gender equality and empowerment are intimately intertwined with family and cultural issues. Girls and women do not live, and are not socialized, in a vacuum. Instead, decisions about every aspect of their lives are embedded in family relationships. The current academic and policy orientations that targets social initiatives, programs and policies primarily at the individual level obscures the reality of most girls' and women's lives. In virtually every society, across social class and ethnic/racial groups, all individuals are situated in a variety of family relationships (Bogensneider, 2014). Girls and women are not immune to these processes. In fact, much research indicates that it is the decisions made in families that determine many of the positive or negative trajectories of girls' and women's lives (Plan UK, 2015). Especially in patriarchal settings, many decisions for girls and women are made by the men in their lives; their fathers, brothers, and husbands. These decisions can include if and when to study and work, as well as more basic issues such as nutrition and access to health care. For millions of women, particularly in the developing world, Western gender issues such as the division of labor in families, patriarchy, or the struggle for self-realization and autonomy are not the primary focus of their lives, nor are these issues that they can relegate time to. For these women, basic survival for themselves, their children, and other members of their families is of overriding importance instead (Plan UK, 2015).

The socialization of girls into limited gender roles also contributes to their lack of access to educational and occupational opportunities. In many parts of the world, girls tend to be “protected” to ensure their modesty, which includes restricting their sphere of movement once they enter puberty. Research suggests that as girls enter adolescence their mobility and free time decrease, and their domestic responsibilities increase (UN Women, 2015). Due to worries about chastity, the reputation of the family, or just the demands of the household, girls are kept at home with an increasing lack of movement (Mensch et al, 2003; Plan UK, 2015). For example, a survey of Egyptian girls between the ages of 16 to 19 indicated that 68 percent of girls were involved in household chores in comparison to 26 percent of boys (Mensch et al., 2000). However, even when girls are allowed more freedom and attend school, their domestic responsibilities may still impact their schooling. Global data indicates that children aged 13 who

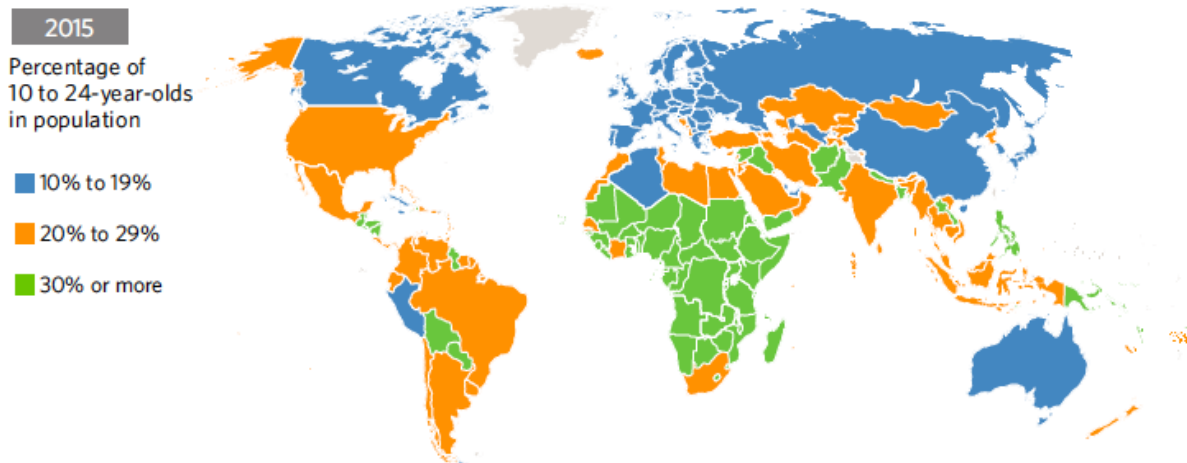
go to school and have household responsibilities or other work related obligations, are not able to progress through the grades at the same speeds as their non-working peers in all countries (UNFPA, 2014). Moreover, in many societies gender disparities rise over the course of the educational trajectory. This leads to a growing gap between boys and girls resulting in only 29% parity by the upper secondary level of schooling. In 2012, specifically in the Arab States and Sub-Saharan Africa, there were 19 countries with less than 90 girls for every 100 boys in secondary school. This inequality persists despite the fact that girls are less likely to drop out of secondary school than boys (UNGEI, 2015).

There are a number of other factors that explain the fact that global gender parity has not been achieved despite significant efforts in this arena. These include specifically early marriage and early motherhood combined with the cultural favoring of boys in families' educational investments and a strictly gendered division of household labor. Girls are also often perceived as having lesser income-generating capabilities and may even cost the family due to the expenses associated with their marriages (Hallman & Roca, 2007; Plan UK, 2015). This is particularly the case among lower-income families and / or rural families in non-Western societies. Depending on cultural context, families may also believe that it is more prudent to invest in boys who are seen as providing a form of old age insurance to their elderly parents one day. Another obstacle to increasing gender equality is that this is an ideology that is often perceived in non-Western contexts as part of the neo-liberal economic package that forces countries to emulate Western style models of contemporary life. Thus, it is not uncommon for local responses to reject initiatives that empower girls and women as these are based on the assumption that they are part of a larger Western style of cultural domination (Freeman, 2001; Plan UK, 2015).

We therefore, have a situation where despite global improvements in girls' and women's educational and occupational opportunities, these have not universally translated into gains for them with respect to economic participation or empowerment (Plan UK, 2015). Without addressing the relationships of men and women in families and the cultural ideals that so often influence these processes, we cannot make progress on the goals of gender equality and empowerment, and subsequently the other Sustainable Development Goals that are intimately connected to these concepts. Analyses indicate that the most frequently cited obstacles to implementing policies were related to the low status of girls and women and the limited empowerment and participation of women is based on prevailing local customs, beliefs and practices (UNFPA, 2014). Gender equality and empowerment initiatives need to be understood as embedded in widely disparate economic and cultural contexts, and the success of the new SDG's is thus, dependent on incorporating gender issues in families and communities into their implementation.

Addressing Youth Concerns for Sustainability

A major concern in the coming years is also the growing population of adolescents in the world. According to a recent UN report, there are more young people alive today between the ages of 10 and 24 than ever before in the history of human beings (UNFPA, 2014). Our current global population is estimated at about 7.4 billion, out of which 1.8 billion are young people.



(UNFPA, 2014 p. 4)

This staggering figure is raising concerns about the sustainability of our current educational systems, providing adequate training opportunities for young people, and concerns about their incorporation into the paid labor force. Every year, approximately 120 million youth reach working age (UNFPA, 2014). In order for such large numbers to have a positive effect on their respective societies, they need to be meaningfully employed and they need to be integrated into the civic side of their societies (Heckman, 2006). Particularly in low-income countries where there is a lack of opportunities for young people, these large number portend a difficult future unless this issue is addressed directly. We are already seeing ripple effects of youth unemployment with social unrest in various places in the world, and migration from low-income contexts to high-income places. Often times, young people in low-income contexts are faced with multiple problems: poverty is rampant, they lack access to adequate health care and schooling, and there are very few if any job opportunities (Waldfogel, 2010). As was mentioned previously, this issue has a strong connection with family issues: without economic means, most young people cannot marry and create stable families and this has the potential to leading to great social unrest. Moreover, through communication technologies and social media, young people today are extremely aware of the divides between themselves. The experience of great inequality and the perceived lack of opportunity is dangerous as it causes political and social unrest (Word Bank, 2006).

We cannot speak of sustainability without incorporating youth issues into the discussion. It is this new generation that will live with the effects of climate change and environment deterioration and the accompanying risks to well-being (Heckman, 2006). How we assist youth in their positive development is a critical aspect of attaining the Sustainable Development Goals. This ensures that they will be able to help their own children thrive and is one, if not the most, important aspect of the human experience.

Family Centered Approaches to the Sustainable Development Goals Are Key

It is argued in this paper that in order to achieve the key Sustainable Development Goals, a family centered approach is critical. By emphasizing a family centered approach, gender equality, the eradication of poverty, the elimination of hunger, education for all and the improvement of health and well-being are more likely to be accomplished. From a broader perspective, a family focus will also help anchor the SDG's which otherwise risk not being achieved due to the complexity of their high number and complex variety of targets (Maurice, 2015).

Critical to this mission is the use of a family impact lens. Thus, we need to ask: how are families affected by the issue, how do families contribute to the issue, and would certain policies be more effective if families were involved in their formulation and implementation (Bogenschneider, 2014). This necessitates that we illustrate how families contribute to larger social and economic objectives. For instance, paid family leave has been shown to significantly impact child morbidity and mortality (Widener, 2007). When mothers have access to time at home with their children after their birth, their health improves as well as that of their babies. Children recover faster after an illness and their illnesses are better controlled. Working families cannot afford to take time off without pay and they put themselves at risk of losing their jobs if family leave policies are not in place. This is a significant obstacle in particular for low-income families whose budgets are precarious and who are often engaged in vulnerable employment.

Another important family policy is after-school programs both for young children and adolescents. High quality after-school programs have been shown to be highly effective. These types of programs decrease the rates of juvenile crime, drug use, and other types of juvenile victimization. Children who attend these types of programs tend to complete their schooling more frequently, and are more likely to enter into higher education. Generally speaking, individuals with high educational levels also have the healthiest outcomes (Widener, 2007). These findings solidify the concept that investing in education at all levels impacts individuals, families, and health in significant ways and thus, needs to be at the top of state's social agendas.

Conclusion

Families continue to be the most effective and economical institution for developing, nurturing and sustaining human capacity. Within families, women, men, children, engage with each other in reciprocal forms of economic, emotional, and ideational exchanges. Families continue to function as the initial and primary site for the early socialization, nurturance, education, and protection of children, and remain a source of status and identification for most adults. Families are the initial entre for individuals into community and societal relations. The status and position of women, of children, of men, and of individuals with disabilities is closely related to family life.

Families remain at the center of social life and continue to be the primary mechanism for coping with social, economic and political adversity and the socialization and education of children. It is thus, critical that the SDG's targets and benchmarks also acknowledge the fundamental family

dimensions that either constrain or advance social progress. In order to raise awareness about the importance of family to the actual success of the SDG's, it is critical to introduce researchers, civil society and policy makers to the issues discussed throughout this paper.

Key issues to be raised/considered:

Family impacts need to be considered by gathering multiple perspectives from individuals who are part of family groups as gender and age affect perception and decision making capabilities within families.

Approaches that focus on intersection of families with labor market need to account for the fact that women and men face different issues with respect to work; there are very important differences between high income and low income countries; women in poor countries do not always benefit from working – their workloads just increase. Working women face life cycle consequences with respect to earnings– they drop in and out of the labor force; affects their retirement;

Youth are particularly vulnerable in the contemporary employment sphere.

Acknowledging and rewarding carework is a key component of discussions of employment for all; women globally spend more than twice the time on care work than men; difficult to account for in conceptualizations of “decent work”

Invisibility of elderly, ill, disabled – especially for poor families and marginalized groups;

Educational policies, programs today are focused primarily on early childhood; reflected in policies and funding of education. More attention to occupational training of youth and life-long learning skills are necessitated.

Recommendations:

Data Collection

Employ social scientists to provide empirical data on individual concerns and the needs of families in order to support and strengthen them.

Conduct more analysis on the impacts of social, economic and environmental policies on the well-being of people. Gather multiple types of data that include statistical descriptors but also qualitative evidence. Data is key for evidence-based policy-making, but it needs to be supplemented by case studies at the local level. This is particularly the case for those areas/groups where data is unavailable or limited. Narratives are key aspects of influencing policy choices and decisions.

Investing in data collection and the analysis of cultural norms is key to tracking how social norms change and how that impacts the developmental trajectories of girls and women. Today's technological advances allow for new data gathering techniques that could be taught at the

community and even family level. States and communities need to work in collaboration with transnational organizations and educational institutions to implement such data gathering and analysis techniques.

Policies:

Acknowledge and create policies that take into account that families exist within the same society but often within very different cultural contexts; factors include social class, regionality, social exclusion, environmental and / or human crisis. Analyze and identify the economic or social processes that are causing great inequalities.

Gather best practice examples that have proven helpful in supporting certain vulnerable populations in similar cultural contexts.

Emphasize investment in education and training for women, under-skilled workers, vulnerable groups

Improve the function and efficiency of the education system to enhance the employability of individuals, including through adopting skills trainings that reflect the needs of national realities, especially for those engage in the informal sector.

Revise educational and outreach materials to overcome gender stereotypes that are specific to certain regions. These materials need to specifically target boys and men.

Build capacity and strategies for youth in order to combat religious radicalism and ensure equal opportunities for boys and girls to access quality education. To achieve universal education, alternative models of education need to be investigated.

States need a repository of examples of policies / initiatives from different parts of the world that have proven to be successful in strengthening educational systems and families; for instance, in some Scandinavian countries & Singapore, care labor at home is now compensated; also distance learning has become much more sophisticated.

Institute initiatives to promote access to decent jobs for working-age youth and adults with access to health and pension benefits needs to be prioritized. Simultaneously, there is a need to promote a social protection floor that is inclusive of the social inclusion of entire populations. Access to quality social services (health, education, water and sanitation, etc.) needs to be guaranteed in order to provide a minimum level of welfare for all however, vulnerable populations need to be targeted especially.

Ensure a social protection system that ensures that individuals can exit from poverty reduction programs but do not forfeit their rights to social protection. This necessitates data that supports the impact of these types of investments.

Agree on a *regional* social contract – ie. the countries that self-identify as being part of a language or cultural group (ie. the Arab countries) should come together and agree on a basic

social contract that focuses on social, economic and environmental protections and policies with a focus on families.

Work with multiple stakeholders in order to integrate this information into policy formation (ie. Build teams that include social scientists, policy makers, NGO representatives, community leaders, and other participants). Bring together community leaders in order to better understand the obstacles facing vulnerable individuals and families.

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