

Expert Group Meeting on the Family and the Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab Region “Integrating a Family Perspective in the SDGs in the Arab Countries: Aspirations and Challenges”, 29-30 November 2017, Qatar National Convention Center (QNCC), Doha.

Keynote address on:

“Families and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”

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Ladies and gentlemen,

At the outset, I would like to thank the organisers, the Doha International Family Institute (DIFI) for convening this meeting, in partnership with the Arab States Regional Office of the United Nations Population Fund, (UNFPA – ASRO) and for their warm hospitality.

Close collaboration between DIFI and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs on research and advocacy on family-oriented policies goes back a long time and we are very happy to continue and build on this basis.

Therefore, it is an honour for me to deliver a keynote address at this Expert Group Meeting which is to explore ways of integrating a family perspective within the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the Arab Region.

Our discussions during the next two days are expected, among other things, to provide an analysis of the contribution of families to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. I will speak on this topic from the United Nations perspective. Hence in my remarks I will focus on families and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the role of families in support of SDGs achievement, touching on several aspects of family policy contributing to the realization of several goals and targets.

As you know, the 2030 Development Agenda has an overarching objective to leave no one behind. It is also quite clear that families all around the world do their best to leave none of their members behind.

The role of families in development goes beyond their reproductive and productive functions. In fact, the ambitious and transformative 2030 Development Agenda cannot be achieved without full engagement of families playing their nurturing and educational roles as well.

We can all agree that well-functioning families make sure that their members are well taken care of and can count on other family members in times of need.

Families are primary caregivers to their members starting with children, through adolescents and older persons, as well as those with special needs, like persons with disabilities.

Parents and caregivers play a crucial role in early childhood development by nurturing, socializing and educating young children. In fact, family support in early childhood is crucial for success later in life. It is in the family unit where the very recognition of our human capabilities starts and steady and consistent support for early development of children is crucial for their future thriving life trajectory.

Families bear the primary responsibility for the socialization of children and the development of their social skills, which are vital in all aspects of adult life, be it economic, social, public or personal. Parenting plays an important role in children's success in school and further development of their human capital.

Families often support adult children well beyond their school years helping them economically so that they can gain experience, credentials and social competencies necessary to pursue their careers in the more and more competitive economies of today.

Families also care for older persons and those in vulnerable situations. It is still mostly families who assist persons with disabilities. This important social protection role of families is often taken for granted despite mounting challenges for families to continue providing it.

Recent trends, such as rapidly falling fertility rates in developed and some developing countries, family instability, growing divorce rates, as well as mounting difficulties in family formation encountered by young people, necessitate urgent action, especially around work-family balance and sustainable livelihoods.

Similarly, changing family structures, urbanization and mobility, as well as rapid ageing and challenges of ensuring human rights and dignity for older persons require a serious look at policies supporting healthy and reciprocal intergenerational interactions so that generations are not perceived as competing against one another.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

All these issues and adequate policies to tackle them are very relevant for the achievement of many Sustainable Development Goals.

Starting with SDGs 1 & 2 -- end poverty in all its forms everywhere and end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition -- families and family policies targeting poor households with children are crucial if we want to do away with poverty in general and the intergenerational transmission of poverty in particular. That is why increasing family resources through cash or in-kind transfers, child allowances, tax credits and other innovative approaches is crucial.

Regarding SDG3 -- ensuring healthy lives and promoting of well-being for all ages -- there is no doubt that families influence children's health, starting with health

visits and immunizations and overall physical care. Clearly, children in families with better resources and better care are healthier. Public policies providing parents with more resources to afford better care and offering equitable access to health facilities result in better outcomes for children. In line with this finding, many conditional cash transfers are linked to parental obligations in health and nutrition.

Ensuring better outcomes for children is also linked to family policies for work-family balance. Working conditions of parents impact their ability to play an active role in their children's development. Such policies help parents to be both productive employees and involved parents. Here, policies encouraging corporate responsibility and family-friendly work environments are essential and have already been proved to improved workers' productivity and dependability.

Within work-family balance policies, parental leave, especially maternity leave has been found indispensable for the well-being of children. For instance, paid maternity leave enables mothers to breastfeed their babies, which in turn is associated with a reduced risk of several health problems and overall infant mortality. In fact, some studies found a positive correlation between the length of maternity leave and child health. The longer the leave the better the health, as reflected by a lower infant mortality rate.

The length and flexibility of parental leave are also linked to children's well-being. At the same time, we should not forget that special leave for family members who may care for older relatives or those with disabilities is also crucial. This area has not gained much traction yet but there are countries where families can decide how to spend funds provided for care. For instance, in some countries parents may designate family members, such as grandparents to care for their grandchildren and receive paid remuneration. Similarly, older persons can decide if they prefer a family member or an external care worker to care for them, and a monetary stipend is given.

In terms of SDG4, -- quality education -- in the 2030 Agenda, Member States commit to 'strive to provide children and youth with nurturing environment for the full realization of their rights and capabilities, helping our countries to reap the demographic dividend, including through safe schools and cohesive communities and families.'

The evidence shows that cohesive, stable, supportive and well-functioning families are vital educators for young children. In fact, children with supportive parents have better school attendance records, better attitudes towards school and homework. They also receive better grades and have higher career goals.

In this area policies supporting parental education have an often-untapped potential in developing parental skills and contribute to the achievement of SDG4 in terms of child and youth school success and lifelong learning.

We recently devoted the 2017 International Day of Families observance to the topic of "Families, education and well-being" where we focused on several aspects of early childhood education, the role of parents and parenting education, as well as innovative work-family balance policies.

For young children, early stimulation and interaction with parents and caregivers start brain development and a lifetime of learning. Investments in early childhood care, education and development help to reduce gaps stemming from socio-economic backgrounds. In fact, research demonstrates that such investments are highest among poorer children and often serve as stepping stones out of poverty and exclusion.

While there is broad consensus on the importance of parents in support of early childhood education, the role of grandparents should not be overlooked. Due to migration, the number of so called skipped-generations households where grandparents are primary caregivers is rising. There are also many grandparents raising children due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. We also know that older person's pensions often support their grandchildren's educational expenses, especially in developing countries.

In conclusion, as agents of development, families are key contributors to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in many areas. In my remarks, I focused specifically on poverty reduction, better nutrition, health and well-being, and education.

The key message I would like to leave with you is that families provide economic and emotional support to all their members and especially to the most vulnerable ones: they truly do their best to leave no family member behind. Families build competence and character and 'generate' not just future productive workers, but also responsible future heads of households and good citizens.

Governments should implement family-oriented policies that lead to self-sufficient and resilient families; healthy and educated children; improved access to decent work for family bread-winners, men and women alike; better work-family balance; gender equality; fulfillment of children's rights, and stronger intergenerational bonds. Other stakeholders should advocate for these objectives in order to build the necessary political will for Governments to act. They should also continue to provide the evidence to make the case for these policies, just as this event will do during the next two days. Only then will families be fully empowered to contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

Thank you very much.