

Beyond 2014: Making families matter

Excellencies, Distinguished delegates and civil society representatives,

It is a privilege for me to participate in this commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family and to speak to you on behalf of the Doha International Family Institute, a member of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development.

The Doha Institute was established in 2006 by Her Highness Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser, Chairperson of Qatar Foundation, to support, through research, policy and outreach activities, the implementation of the Doha Declaration on the Family, adopted by civil society organizations who gathered in Qatar to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the International Year of the Family.

This explains the Institute's active role during the preparatory process for the 20th anniversary. The Institute organized expert group meetings, in Doha, participated

in the activities of the UN Focal Point on the Family at the Division of Social and Economic Affairs (UNDESA) and supported civil society activities.

The response of civil society all over the world to the observance of this anniversary has been extraordinary: raising awareness days and other programs were organized at national and regional levels. The Doha Institute's major contribution to this process was the organization of *an international* conference on 16 & 17 April, in Doha, to commemorate this anniversary, under the patronage of Her Highness Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser.

The conference was a nongovernmental gathering and constituted a global platform for discussion and debate where policymakers, NGOs, experts, academics and other stakeholders shared their views and experiences regarding the centrality of the family and its role in development.

The conference theme "Empowering Families: A pathway to development" was selected in response to the UN resolutions on the "observance of the Twentieth Anniversary of the International Year of the Family and Beyond" which encouraged civil society, in addition to governments, the UN and regional entities,

among others, to promote and advance family empowerment through appropriate family centered policies and programs.

The main objective of the conference was to refocus the world's attention on the mounting evidence that links empowering families and the achievement of development goals. It explored, through the contributions of 69 experts from all around the world, how families can be strengthened and supported to fulfill their numerous functions.

The Doha Call to Action, the conference's outcome document, is a significant and **powerful consensus statement** by major civil society organizations. It calls on governments to acknowledge that families are at the center of sustainable development, to empower them by implementing specific actions including the integration of a family perspective in policymaking, and to ensure that families are an integral part of the post-2015 development agenda.

To move beyond the commemorations, the Doha Institute would like to emphasize that, since families are the fundamental building blocks of society, a body of family policy that allows safe, stable and nurturing relationships to

flourish, can have transformational effects on a nation's development and therefore on its economic competitiveness.

Family breakdown, on other hand, is a driver of poverty and social disintegration. Welfare systems can compensate, to some extent, for financial loss, but the scale of family breakdown and fiscal austerity, in many countries, makes this increasingly difficult.

Therefore, policies and programs that promote **family stability** should be implemented without condoning violence and criminal activity. This should include recognition that commitment to marriage provides greater stability.

Despite much rhetorical support for family and family policy, what tends to dominate, instead, are policies that focus on individuals rather than the family as a unit. The idea behind this (to focus on individuals) is that by 'essentialising' the institution of the family there is a risk of condoning dysfunctional family relationships, including forcing women and children to remain in violent, abusive or otherwise profoundly unsatisfactory settings. This is true at national levels as well as within the UN system.

There is no dispute that if individuals are unable to flourish, their wellbeing and productivity suffers and they fail to achieve their social and economic potential, which ultimately impact a country's social and economic development. At the same time, policy that is based on the conviction that the family is fundamentally incompatible with the advancement of individual rights and wellbeing is ill-founded and disregards the mounting research evidence that clearly shows that men, women and children flourish and have better outcomes in a stable family environment.

The World Family Map Report 2014, co-sponsored by the Institute and launched during the Conference, indicates that family instability is associated with an elevated child mortality risk of at least 20 percent in much of the developing world.¹ The authors of the report noted that data “suggests that family instability compromises parents’ ability to provide the kind of consistent and attentive care that is most likely to foster good health in children.”²

Moving forward after this anniversary, the UN system, in particular, is required to promote the empowerment of families by integrating a family oriented approach in its own work and applying the family impact lens in assessing its programs, interventions and policy recommendations.

¹ *World Family Map 2014, Mapping Family Change and Child Well-being Outcomes*, p. 60 (Union Instability and Death).

² *Id.* at 5 (Essay on Union Stability and Childhood Health).

The report of the Secretary General of the United Nations on the follow up to the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2011 stated, “the majority of the millennium development targets, especially those relating to the reduction of poverty, education of children and reduction of maternal mortality, are difficult to attain unless the strategies to achieve them focus on the family.”³ Evaluating why certain millennium development targets were not met could be assessed against that yardstick.

More importantly, as governments are deliberating on the post 2015 development agenda, they should be reminded that families matter and that empowering families is good for the individual, is good for society and good for the economy.

³A/66/62