

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING THE FAMILY

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ONCE AGAIN, IT IS A PRIVILEGE to be called upon to address such a distinguished gathering of scholars, civil servants, diplomats, theologians, and social reformers, and to discuss possible national and international strategies for strengthening the family in our time. I have vivid recollections of our discussions at the First World Family Policy Forum, held here at Brigham Young University in January 1999, when we shared information, views, and thoughts on different aspects of this fascinating subject, and of the stimulating and educative exchanges of views we had at the Second World Congress of Families in Geneva, in November last year. Since then, our contacts and dialogues with several of the organizers and participants, in particular Professor Kathryn Balmforth, Professor Richard Wilkins, and Dr. Allan Carlson, have renewed and sharpened our awareness of the importance of preserving and strengthening the family, and of the need to continue to identify and develop the instrumentalities to do so within the framework of national economic and social developmental efforts.

I propose to start off today's presentation with the same four assumptions I made at the Second World Congress of Families in Geneva, namely, that I am addressing a family-friendly audience. Secondly, that we here all identify the family in the natural sense—husband, wife, and children, extended in varying degrees of closeness, to grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, in-laws, and so forth. Thirdly, that we recognize the family as the basic social unit of society upon which the quality and strength of the whole human race rests. And fourthly, that while the family faces threats, serious threats, from some strange directions, we have come together to reaffirm our faith in the sanctity of family life, with the resolve to reinforce and strengthen our ability to maintain and address the interests of the family in our journey towards the global village that is our destination in the current millennium.

My focus will be on the developing countries, and the discussions, henceforth, will concentrate on actions to be taken at the national level, with such support as might be attracted from external sources, especially from institutions of higher learning and research, Brigham Young University being prominent among those institutions.

Moving now into the substance of our discussion, I would say that action at the national level must, of necessity, mean governmental action, complemented by societal action. At the governmental level, a declaration, or proclamation by the

head of state in support of the family would establish a national commitment. This instrument needs to be drafted responsibly, skillfully, and in cooperation with all possible stakeholders, including relevant government ministries and departments, NGOs, academic institutions, lawyers' federations, chambers of commerce and industry, religious institutions, and so forth. In fact, this leads to the proposal for the establishment of a national council for the family, at which all those stakeholders I mentioned a moment ago would need to be represented. This proposal was among those that emerged from the discussions following the United Nations General Assembly's proclamation of 1994 as the International Year of the Family.

The establishment of a national council would be the first or at least, a facilitative step towards the setting up of a viable national coordination mechanism for the support of the family. This need not necessarily be an expensive exercise, but a very useful device for harmonizing policies, plans, and programs of numerous governmental and nongovernmental entities in support of the interests of the families. The national council could, among other things, provide appropriate input into the country's development planning process, to ensure that family interests are fully safeguarded before any macro- or microsectoral programs receive approval and go into implementation. Here I see a useful role for universities, which could provide guidance in the establishment of national councils, and in developing their terms of reference, rules of procedures, and working methods. The universities could, in fact, develop a database on experiences with different types of national councils and, from their research and outreach programs, become knowledgeable about what works, and what may be wrong, in the embryonic and later stages of operations of these bodies. Similarly, universities could undertake a compilation of declarations or proclamations in support of the family and provide technical or advisory services to national councils in the preparation of these important policy instruments.

Next would be the matter of establishing the functional secretariats of the national councils. These secretariats, constituting the national coordinating authorities for family policies and support, by nature and sensitivity of the tasks involved, would need to be headed and staffed by trained, competent, and truly committed persons.

Mr. Chairman, in making this proposition in my last year's presentation, I emphasized this point. I take the liber-

ty to do so again today because of personal experiences of dealing with national coordinating authorities in some other spheres of activity; this has made me cautiously aware of what can go wrong if precautions, such as what I am hinting at, are not taken. It is imperative that national coordinating authorities for the family are treated as more than just typical government departments that are staffed by rotational civil servants, placed there for normal stints in their career progression. This warrants the selection of staff, especially those carrying leadership roles, on the basis of professional competence and unambiguous commitment to family values. They would be required to play a crucial role in supporting and advancing the interests of the family in our national developmental undertakings.

In addition to the quality and caliber of staffing, the working procedures would need to be carefully devised so that the coordinating authority refrains from becoming unduly authoritative and bureaucratic, and remains a facilitator and promoter of family values and interests. Again, I spot here a role for universities, including the great academic institution that is hosting our conference today. Their studies and research activities should place them in the ideal situation to assist in developing viable organizational modules for setting up national coordination mechanisms that would work and produce desirable results. Institutes and schools of public administration all over the world are undertaking this task in relation to transformation of civil administrations, in response to the changing needs of the time. I see no reason why a similar effort can not also be undertaken in relation to the establishment and strengthening of national coordinating machineries for the support of the family.

The report of the secretary-general of the United Nations to the current fifty-fourth session of the General Assembly on the follow-up of the International Year of the Family describes the different forms of national coordination mechanisms that have, and are being, introduced in many countries since the proclamation of the Year of Family in 1994. Universities, undertaking or initiating programs of support to these efforts, should be able to enter into a constructive dialogue with governmental and academic authorities, with a view to extending their cooperation in reviewing with them the structures and working of their family-support mechanisms, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and jointly developing remedial measures, wherever necessary.