

Mainstreaming Families and Children's Issues in National and International Measures for Economic and Social Development

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Imagine I was asked to undertake this task because of my association with two of the world's major intergovernmental organizations: the United Nations (UN), in which I served for about thirty-three years, in a number of countries, concentrating on economic and social development, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), in which I have the honor to serve presently under the guidance of His Excellency Ambassador Mokhtar Lamani, permanent observer of the OIC to the UN in New York. While I believe that the views I present would not be contrary to those of the two international organizations I have served, they are, nonetheless, my own.

I shall move now into the substance of our discussion with four basic assumptions. First, that I am addressing a God-fearing audience who maintains absolute faith in the inevitability of accountability in the life hereafter. Second, we commonly understand what we mean by the term "family"—the natural one, comprising husband, wife, and children. And, we understand that, depending upon the societal situation, the family could also cover close relatives such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces, and so forth. Third, at the national level, one of the principal functions of the state is to promote the economic and social well-being of the citizens. And fourth, the family, as we have defined it a moment ago, remains the basic social unit of society. In fact, in view of this forum's thematic emphasis on children, I would add a fifth assumption—children are gifts of God and the flowers of the family, and they carry the key to the future shape and destiny of human society.

At the risk of projecting doom and gloom, I would draw attention to some of the realities that confront planners in much of the developing world today. There are important social transformations, illustrated by uneven variations in fertility rates and increases in the size of elderly populations. Migration and displacements due to conflicts and/or increases in poverty because of slow economic growth or stagnation are also factors that limit the introduction of active social protection measures. Furthermore, servicing of external debt reduces domestic revenues that could otherwise go to social development programs.

On top of this all, the impact of globalization has not been entirely beneficial, and, in many instances, it has actually reduced government revenues because of trade liberalization, further shrinking the pool of resources available for social policies. To be fair to the other point of view, however,

it is argued that, notwithstanding the negative implications of globalization, domestic factors remain far larger determinants of a country's inability to improve the performance of their social protection systems.

In support of this point of view, it is said that the strengthening of institutions and the introduction of appropriate regulations at the national level could help shield domestic economies from external shocks. According to this view, countries should institute economic and social policies that seek to reduce their exposure to such shocks. Externally dependent countries will require support from the international community, both in terms of external debt relief and technical cooperation. We shall visit this aspect later when we review international measures in mainstreaming family issues.

Developing countries at the start of the new millennium are cognizant of the need to develop self-reliance, and, insofar as the OIC member states are concerned, they are increasingly conscious of the need to frame development policies supportive of a more healthy family and productive life, as embedded in the teachings of Islam and reflected in their respective cultural heritage. At the UN, OIC member states joined forces with all other like-minded countries in adopting General Assembly resolution 44/82 of 8 December 1989, which proclaimed 1994 as the International Year of the Family, with the aim of creating among governments, NGOs, and all others concerned, a greater awareness of the family and of promoting activities in support of the families. As a result, family policy now finds expression in multiple family services and programs at national and local levels. These include child care, counseling, social services, income maintenance, etc. The significance of their effort lies in its reinforcement of the interrelationship between family well being and sustainable development. Action is, therefore, being directed toward integrating a family-sensitive approach to development strategies, lending credence to the view that the family is entitled to the widest possible protection and support.

Speaking before the Second World Congress of Families in Geneva in November 1999, I stated that a declaration or proclamation by a head of state in support of the family establishes a national commitment to the family and sends out the right signals to all elements of the government and to society in general—to keep the interests of the family foremost in national development plans and programs. A declaration or proclamation also provides the basis for NGO

dialogues with governmental authorities, especially when new development initiatives are planned and follow-up activities are undertaken. The next step I suggested was to establish an appropriate national coordination mechanism that would harmonize policies, plans, and programs of a multiplicity of governmental, quasi-governmental, and non-governmental institutions to ensure that family interests are fully safeguarded before any plans or programmes are approved or implemented.

It is gratifying to see that interest in establishing national coordination mechanisms for family policy support is spreading steadily and information on the experience is being gathered by concerned international organizations. A UN publication issued in January 2001, under the title of "Approaches to Family Policies," documents an informative profile of eight countries, three developed and five developing, who have made strides in this direction.

I shall briefly describe the national family policy mechanism of two of these countries, Malaysia, an OIC member state, and Mauritius, an island developing country of Africa. In doing so, I will illustrate diversified approaches toward coordination based upon the specific needs of the countries concerned.

Malaysia, as the publication describes, is undergoing rapid economic development. The government is concerned with the emerging issues affecting Malaysian family institutions as families strive to adjust to the fast tempo of development. The government's developmental strategy to strive toward industrial nation status by the year 2020 aims to balance economic growth and human development. In this situation, family issues are the concern of the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development. Under this ministry, the National Population and Family Development Board is the national focal point for the developing programs. The general objective of the board is to contribute toward the development of society through strengthening and improving family well being. More specifically, the UN document states that the board supervises the inclusion of population and family development factors in the formulation of national, regional, and sectional development policies and programs. Its development program, initiated in 1991, covers various modules that include family health, parenting, and development of human potential. In its effort to promote healthy families, the board provides information to all families in areas of health promotion and disease prevention, nutrition, child development, and so forth. The board trains master-trainers from extension agencies and relevant NGOs, and has developed training modules on family-related issues such as preparation for marriage, parenting of young children, parenting of adolescents, adolescent development, fatherhood, reproductive health, and so forth. The government of Malaysia has declared the fifteenth

of May as National Family Day in line with the International Day of Families.

In Mauritius, our second example, the Ministry of Women, Family Welfare, and Child Development carries the responsibility for the development and implementation of policies and programs for the family. The ministry operates through a number of centers located in different parts of the country. Besides this governmental mechanism, three councils operate under the aegis of the ministry: the National Women's Council, which serves as the coordinating body for women's associations; the National Children's Council, with which NGOs for children are affiliated and which has the responsibility for coordinating the activities of NGOs dealing with child protection and welfare; and the National Adoption Council. Women and family centers located in different parts of the country organize a wide range of activities in support of the family, such as education and information on health, nutrition, consumer protection, and environment, as well as training programs on family-related issues. And the Women and Children in Distress Scheme provides assistance to the family, including much needed financial assistance in tragic events. Counseling services are also provided in several decentralized centers in cases of stresses and tensions in families and in times of marital crisis.

Participants in the audience from Malaysia and Mauritius will be able to shed more authoritative light into the workings of these coordination mechanisms. Notwithstanding diversified economic and social conditions, the role and interests of the natural family in maintaining cohesion in several ways, its components entail laws, regulations, benefits, and programs that are designed to achieve specific objectives for the family as a whole.

I submit that the family, as the basic social unit of society, portrays God's unique and most imaginative way of fostering cohesion in society; children within the family come across not only as the strongest binding force to keep it together but also as the key to shape things in the future. In the development of children lies the future destiny of the family and of society as a whole. While grownups in the family will recede into old age and eventually depart for the life hereafter, children will become adults. They will construct and lay down the foundations of new families and of healthy transformation in society. It is, therefore, incumbent upon the family to give its best toward the development of its children so that through them the families of the future may inherit finer qualities, skills, and character worthy of their heritage. Toward this goal, families need support, and it is the task of the government to provide support both directly, wherever needed, and indirectly through the creation and fostering of the necessary enabling environment. This can best be done through national policies and programs that will strengthen the family and give it the tools and

resources to feed, educate, train, and raise its children for their future roles and tasks in society.

This brings me to the issue of measures at the international level, and to the roles of intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations, academic institutions, the private sector, and other actors in national efforts towards strengthening the family and mainstreaming family issues in the development process. While advocacy for the natural family may continue to be needed because of the intensity with which the concept of what I would call “unnatural families” is being pursued by some misguided human missiles, particularly in the West, I believe that strong traditional and religious values of the Third World will make the effort less important at this time. On the other hand, external support would be most effective in building and strengthening of national capacities, as well as national and local institutions that aim at strengthening the family and empowering its role in economic and social development at the national level.

Toward this goal, the UN, OIC, Commonwealth Secretariat, and other intergovernmental organizations are taking steps to ensure that in their development support programs, appropriate emphasis is given to the centrality of human development and family values are not ignored. However, the extent to which these aspects are considered needs to be watched, particularly in bilateral and multilateral structural adjustments programs and in project loans. The same consideration applies to private sector financing of development projects in which sectoral targets and the bankability of the proposals sometimes override human factors. For academic institutions of developed countries, and those engaged in research work, a worthwhile role would be reinforcing the education and training capacities of national and local institutions in developing countries. In fact, an invaluable support would be identifying developing countries with successfully functioning national coordination mechanisms that may, with some adaptation, be emulated in other developing countries. This could be followed by triangular cooperation arrangements in which study visits from one developing country to another would be supported by the academic institutions of developed countries that initiated the program. Toward this goal, the building up of an up-to-date database that records information on needs and the capacities to cater to those needs would be a step in the right direction.

To recapitulate, the thoughts I have shared today visualize three institutional actions at the national level to sustain and strengthen the family and mainstream family issues in measures for economic and social development: first, a national commitment at the highest level of the government in the form of a declaration or policy statement clearly defining the role of the family as the basic social unit of society; second, the establishment of an appropriate national coordination mechanism for strengthening the family and providing the

necessary social services toward that effort; and third, appropriate linkages between governmental authorities, NGOs, and other concerned elements of society in furthering the aims and objectives of national family policy at all levels of society. I also visualize a crucial role for international, intergovernmental, nongovernmental, and appropriate educational institutions and centers of excellence in supporting national efforts in this direction—through triangular arrangements that would transfer experiences and skills within and among developing countries. Therefore, the period of transformation will be minimized and appropriate techniques and skills may be utilized in the best interest of natural families and, particularly, their children who will constitute an important factor in the development of the human society in the new millennium.