



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
28 December 2022

English only

Commission on Population and Development

Fifty-sixth session

10–14 April 2023

Population, education and sustainable development

Statement submitted by the International Federation for Family Development, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council¹

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

¹ The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Parenting: a key non-formal education tool for better population outcomes

A decade ago, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution to proclaim the Annual Observance of the Global Day of Parents. Since then, June 1st has marked the celebration to honor parents throughout the world and foster support for their role as caregivers and secure the best layer of protection for children and youth. After the pandemic, it is important to highlight the role of parents to protect their children and promote the best outcome for their families ([A/RES/56/138](#)).

In this regard, UNICEF Innocenti contributed with a report that examines and analyses policies and provisions for family support and parenting support. The goals of the research are to identify relevant global trends and develop an analytical framework that can be used for future research and policy analysis. For these purposes, new evidence was gathered and existing evidence systematized and analyzed.

The report is based on general literature searches and evidence gathered from 33 UNICEF national offices, located in different parts of the world, and detailed case studies of nine countries. The focus was on the features and characteristics of interventions, the underlying rationales and philosophical orientations, and the factors that are driving developments.

Policies and provisions for family support and parenting support are relatively under-researched, especially in a global setting, so there is an information gap. But there is also what might be thought of as a knowledge gap, as there is no analytical framework taking an integrated and global approach to both family support and parenting support. Aimed at providing such a framework, this report examines the main approaches being adopted in different locations in the name of supporting families and parents. It identifies the different modalities of policy and provision and links them to the underlying rationales and the contextual and other factors and considerations driving developments.

The goals of this report are aligned with the broader research priorities of the UNICEF Office of Research, centred on building evidence in this rapidly expanding field. More concretely, this study aims to research and identify global trends in policy and provision of family support and parenting support and to provide an analytical framework that can be used for future research and policy analysis.

Family is a contested concept, with different cultural traditions and understandings of family prevailing within and across countries. This makes for complexity and variation. In this report, the variation and sensitivity around family are acknowledged from the outset. Policy and debate in this area are not purely technical matters but are interwoven with ideologies, values and culture in fundamental ways, and the provisions that are put in place there.

The research undertaken centred on a scoping of policy and provision across a range of world regions. New evidence was gathered and existing evidence systematized and analysed to identify common trends and gaps in policy and practice. The evidence was analysed through four main lenses or research questions:

What are the forms and modalities of relevant policies and where are family support and parenting support located in national policy portfolios and provisions? What are the theoretical underpinnings and guiding rationales of family support and parenting support? What are the key features of the policy background and the main actors involved? What are the most outstanding gaps in research, knowledge and information?

Family Support and Parenting

Concerns about the conditions and practices of child-rearing, and factors relating to children's well-being and development, are leading to a growth of measures oriented to family support and parenting support. In some cases this involves the introduction of new policies and provisions; in others, it involves a re-orientation or reframing of existing policies.

Family support and parenting support vary widely in practice. In some regions of the world, for example in South-East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, systematic, government-led support initiatives are rare. Regions where support seems to be developing strongly include Europe, the Central and Eastern European and Commonwealth of Independent States regions, Latin America and a few countries in Africa and Asia. Countries vary in the emphasis they give to one form of support over another.

The evidence suggests that, where it exists, family support is being developed in two main forms, through services – especially social, health and psychological services to families; and the establishment or re-orientation of economic support to families, especially cash payments.

Parenting support, on the other hand, is primarily focused on imparting information, education, skills and support to parents in the form of health-related interventions for parents and young children, and educational support on child development and child-rearing for parents. While parenting support is much broader than educational parenting programs, the latter play an important role and are one of the main ways in which parenting support is being developed within and across countries.

One of the key issues at the forefront of this research is the relationship between family support and parenting support. The results suggest that they are best regarded as related but distinct. Both have at their core a focus on the rearing of children, seeking to support or alter the conditions under which children are reared. Furthermore, they focus on this in a familial context (although neither is confined to a particular family setting). But family support and parenting support have distinct orientations and it is possible for each to exist without the other. Parenting support is the narrower of the two, being focused on parents and parental engagement and practices. It is therefore not necessarily oriented to the unit of the family or wider familial considerations. Family support is broader; concerned with the family as a social unit and its ecological balance – the relationships and resource flow between members as well as how well the family is embedded within supportive networks. Hence, family support is oriented to family stability and general family functioning as against the more parent-centered objectives of parenting support.

Some of the key observations coming out of the research are related to the fact that family support and parenting support are providing a focus for innovation and policy development within and across countries. Policies are driven by many rationales and aims: most typically they combine a mix of objectives relating to children, parents and family. In relation to children, there are four main rationales: furthering children's rights, ameliorating child-related risks, enabling positive early childhood development, and addressing anti-social and aggressive behavior, especially on the part of adolescents. In relation to parents, rationales driving policy and provision of services include improving parental competence and increasing parental engagement with the development of their children. Among the family-related rationales are improving family functioning and child-rearing, preventing child-family separation, alleviating poverty, facilitating adjustment to demographic developments, and supporting the family as an institution and way of life.

The provisions can be universal and targeted, although targeted interventions, for example for parents of young children and/or families experiencing difficulties, are predominant. This focus on young children and their parents works to the relative neglect of older children and adolescents, an issue that emerged from the case studies as being of pressing concern and one of the key recommendations.

Conditional and non-conditional cash payments to families for children are playing a significant role in generalizing family support and parenting support. The evidence suggests that both types of cash payments to families are bringing about a change in behavior, especially in regard to child-rearing. While mothers or female caregivers are the main targets and recipients of both family support and parenting support, including cash transfers, this can lead to the ‘feminization’ of programs, which insufficiently target fathers or other male members of the household and reinforce traditional gender roles.

While family support and parenting support are being introduced in very different settings, they take account of context to varying degrees and in varying ways. Challenges have been noted in the transferability of existing pre-packaged parenting programs because insufficient attention is paid to the context. The research has identified the following key contextual factors that have a major impact on the nature and progress of family support and parenting support: cultural and social factors, economic factors, and the institutional and political background (especially legislation, policy systems and the history of policy and public administration in relation to child protection, child welfare and family well-being, among other domains).

Key actors that stood out across contexts as playing a leading role in the introduction and running of family support and parenting support are state and other political actors, intergovernmental organizations and various community-level actors (including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious institutions and volunteers). Parents and children or young people are also important actors, although in most settings their capacity for influence and voice is modest and under-developed in policy and provision. Professional groups or individuals, market-based actors and employers are among other potential or actual actors associated with the growth and implementation of family support and parenting support.

The research also looked briefly at gaps in information and evidence. Here the dearth of information and knowledge on outcomes is very striking. Most information comes from parenting programs – standardized programs typically delivered in packages of sessions to parents – in a high-income setting. Other prevailing information gaps include evidence about: what provisions are in place; how they are being implemented; the conditions necessary for sustainability or successful delivery; the interaction between formal and informal support and their mutual consequences; the connections between measures oriented to the behavior of family and parenting and more structural support – such as anti-poverty and anti-inequality measures, as well as human rights and other measures to address discrimination and stigma; how to change the political context.