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General Debate 3 (a): Actions for the further implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development at the global, regional and national levels

(b) Review and appraisal of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and its contribution to the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Statement submitted by International Federation for Family Development, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council²

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 E/CN.9/2019/1.

² The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Vulnerability of families with children

The Families and Societies Research Project

In recent decades and years, families have undergone tremendous change that has resulted in a great diversity of family forms and relationships. Even though, among families with minor children, the married couple with one or two children is still the most common family form, children nowadays are raised in many different family settings. There are families with a larger number of children growing up together, many children raised by unmarried parents, while – due to increasing divorce rates – others grow up with only one of their parents or their parents share physical custody over them. The number of children growing up in reconstituted (patchwork) families has increased as well. These trends open new questions on the wellbeing of children in different families.

The International Federation for Family Development has been part of the Families and Societies Project, the largest European research project investigating the diversity of family forms, relationships and life courses. The project has explored the growing complexity of family configurations and transitions across and within European societies and examined their implications for children, women and men with respect to inequalities in life chances, intergenerational relations and care arrangements.

Among the general aims of the Families and Societies European Project has been to gain knowledge about the impact that family-related policies have, in the long run, on families' and children's wellbeing and on satisfying the needs of families and children.

In the work package, quantitative methods are applied mostly to outlining possible future trends in family configurations and qualitative methods are used more to drawing policy implications. In the qualitative part, the main aim is to “explore what challenges for social policy might appear in the future given different economic and cultural developments”.

This general question was the point of departure of the focus group interviews (FGIs) with policymakers and other stakeholders. Our aim was to rely on their expertise to identify main areas for future policy interventions. The content of FGIs was outlined based on the results from the stakeholder workshop in Tallinn, linked to the Families and Societies Project, which had been organized as a part of the work package activities in January 2014.

Drawing upon the outcomes of this workshop, three themes were explored in more detail in the FGIs:

1. The family forms that might be vulnerable and need special attention
2. The effects of divergent future developments on vulnerable families, that is, families susceptible to poverty and/or social exclusion, and
3. Policy measures to prevent the “reproduction of vulnerability” within families in need.

The above topics were addressed in five focus group discussions in selected cities in Europe: Vienna, Madrid, Stockholm, Warsaw and Brussels. They gathered policymakers and stakeholders local to the respective countries and politicians and social actors at the supranational level (European Union).

Vulnerability of families with children

There are several factors that might be crucial for the wellbeing of families with children in order to define prime areas for policy interventions.

We aimed to learn about practitioners' perspectives on the following three issues:

1. Which types of families with children might be particularly vulnerable and why?
2. In what ways might different future developments affect these families?
3. What policy measures would be crucial to prevent the "reproduction of vulnerability" within families in the future?

The experts discussed various aspects and dimensions of vulnerability (economic hardship, social exclusion, stigmatization, lack of stability, etc.). Thus, they presented different reasons for which families might need more attention and support. While some informants argued that no family configuration causes vulnerability inevitably, there was a general consensus that some family types are more "at risk".

Single parents and families with many children (large families) were perceived as most vulnerable. These families may face a higher risk because the reconciliation of work and family is particularly challenging for them. The ability to combine family life with paid employment was identified to be decisive for family wellbeing. Notably, the link between paid work and family life appeared central for the concept of vulnerability as it conveys economic, social as well as emotional dimensions. The inability to reconcile the two spheres of life is likely to lead to serious economic problems. Parents can get trapped in precarious jobs or they may feel forced to limit their working hours, which, in turn, substantially reduces their income. In extreme cases, they might need to leave the labour market altogether. Consequently, they would no longer be able to meet the financial needs of their family. Being out of the labour market can also reduce the social contacts parents have, limiting their social inclusion. Facing substantial difficulties regarding the reconciliation of work and family, parents might also choose to greatly reduce quality time with their offspring for the sake of economic safety, but this may have a negative impact on the relations with their children and on the children's emotional wellbeing. Problems with the reconciliation of work and family life are also related to time pressure and high stress levels. Indeed, the link between paid work and family life was central throughout the discussions with the experts.

In the second part of the group discussion, the informants considered various directions of macro level developments and named numerous forces that might be crucial for the wellbeing of (vulnerable) families. These forces were related to work-life balance: changes in institutional childcare provision, changing gender roles (women's higher participation in the labour force but also the higher engagement of fathers in the care after their children) as well as the role of the "culture of workplace" and employers' attitudes towards family responsibilities of their employees. Also, other drivers possibly important for the futures of (vulnerable) families were named, such as the general economic development (crisis versus growth), cultural and social shifts in intergenerational relationships, and a possible weakening of social ties related to the liberalization of social norms.

Importantly, the experts expressed ambivalent opinions about the possible consequences of various future developments. For example, on the one hand, economic growth was perceived as necessary to sustain low levels of unemployment and to ensure decent levels of wages as well as substantial public support for families,

which reduce poverty and thus vulnerability. On the other hand, the experts also pointed out that economic development might bring more pressure to families if not being accompanied by more general changes in the workplace culture (e.g. if employers are not considerate of parental duties) and lifestyle in general (e.g. if individuals neglect interpersonal relationships because of too much focus on work).

A similar ambivalence was visible in how the experts spoke of the increasing female labour force participation. On the one hand, higher engagement of women in paid work has a positive – the expert used term “culture of workplace” to describe organizational culture, as well as values, attitudes and practices shared by the employees and employers that shape an overall working atmosphere – impact on family incomes and improves women’s situation in terms of financial independence, also with regard to their future pensions. On the other hand, several experts pointed out that the pressures it imposed on women should not be overlooked. Without family-friendly workplaces and sufficient childcare, and without changes in men’s roles women may run the risk of being overburdened, given increased pressure to do their best both in the role of a mother and of an employee. We believe that all ambivalences about possible economic and cultural developments need to be carefully considered, as they may require different policy measures. Even the most positive changes may raise new challenges for policy-makers.

Finally, our informants discussed various policy measures that, in their opinion, would be crucial to improve the situation of vulnerable families and, in particular, to prevent the “reproduction of vulnerability” from one generation to another. The ability to combine childcare responsibilities with paid employment was identified to be decisive for family wellbeing, as reconciliation policies were seen as a central aspect of any political strategy to counteract vulnerability. A better future for children requires both secure financial means and time for parents to be there for their children. Therefore, the informants did not only discuss institutional childcare provision but also options that enable parents to reorganize or reduce their workload when more time for parenting is needed. In their opinion, flexible measures are necessary also to meet the challenges of new ways of living (e.g. to enable divorced parents to share physical custody of their children).

One key challenge for the future is to help vulnerable families not only temporarily (by mitigating the most urgent needs) but to improve their situation in a sustainable manner. In all five focus groups participants strongly emphasized the importance of education in this respect. Early childhood education in formal childcare empowers children from vulnerable families, providing them with the skills necessary for breaking the “cycle of reproduction of vulnerability” as it also improves their position in the labour market when they enter adulthood. Also, parents should be educated, to understand the importance of schooling for their children’s future, and to improve their parenting styles. Finally, employers need to be educated about the importance of family-friendly working environment.

The experts also discussed the situation of children from the most disadvantaged families, confronted with poverty, social exclusion and high levels of conflict (or even violence), hence with the most urgent needs. In addition to concrete measures (e.g. daily assistance for children in need) state support strategies in general were also addressed, especially how social support services could be improved. The development of perceptive preventative actions and early support (e.g. psychological support for families with conflicts or on the verge of divorce) were identified as key challenges for the future. The difficulty for policy is to design measures so families in need will not be punished or stigmatized for their difficulties. Instead of dictating what to do, social services should be sensitive to people’s situation and their specific needs and offer relevant support.

Conclusions

In general, the experts recognized a necessity for a comprehensive strategy and complementary policies in supporting vulnerable families and children in them: single measures have to go hand in hand with each other. Education, employment and the creation of a more family-friendly society were seen as indispensable. While financial transfers are required to address the most urgent needs of vulnerable families, they alone do not solve the problem of reproduction of vulnerability but might even lead to the socialization of state dependency. Instead, it is crucial to facilitate for families to sustain themselves. Economic growth, the availability of jobs and wages matter greatly, but most important is the ability to combine childcare responsibilities with employment. The views of the informants encourage us to consider employment from the family perspective. As governments aim at increasing the levels of labour force participation, the balance between family life and paid work should be a starting point for any policy measures.

The study addressed the future of vulnerable families in Europe, especially those with children. The discussions with policymakers and stakeholders concerned with family issues provided valuable insights into the “drivers” relevant for the wellbeing of such families and allowed for delineating several areas where policy interventions are essential. The study illustrates the necessity for a closer dialogue between researchers and practitioners. Practitioners can draw the attention of researchers to important dimensions and show the complexity of relevant issues. Researchers should incorporate these insights into their research and, in turn, provide policymakers and stakeholders with improved evidence-based policy recommendations. Such collaboration would allow us to predict the futures of families more precisely, and to design actions that promote the wellbeing of families.
