

Supporting families worldwide

A report on the follow-up of the International Year of the Family

1 May 2018



The strengthening of national institutions to formulate, implement and monitor family policies and respond to problems affecting families was one of the main objectives of the International Year of the Family, 1994. Some Member States have made efforts to strengthen existing institutions charged with the implementation of family policies. In some cases, such implementation was integrated into the work of several entities that dealt with gender, children, youth and older persons. Several governments also established new, long-term national plans or strategic policies to improve the well-being of families.

Member States have enacted a number of family-oriented policies for poverty reduction in line with the main objective of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year: confronting family poverty and social exclusion. Recognizing the multidimensional aspects of poverty, the anti-poverty efforts often focus on education, health, employment, social security, livelihoods and social cohesion. Social security provisions, including child allowances for parents and pension benefits for older persons, feature prominently in poverty reduction efforts in many countries.

In its resolution 71/163, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit a report at its seventy-third session, through the Commission for Social Development and the Economic and Social Council, on the implementation of the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes by Member States and by agencies and bodies of the United Nations system. In addition, the resolution called upon Member States and agencies and bodies of the United Nations system, in consultation with civil society and other relevant stakeholders, to continue providing information on their activities, including on good practices, in support of the objectives of the International Year and its follow-up processes, to be included in the report of the Secretary-General.

Extracted from the Report of the UN Secretary General on "Implementation of the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes", (A/73/61-E/2018/4). Available at: <http://goo.gl/7Jps7p>.

Full employment, decent work and ensuring work-family balance was the second major objective of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year. In many countries, new measures have been designed to promote reconciliation between family and working life, aiming to improve working conditions and facilitate more quality time between parents and their children. Longer maternity, paternity and parental leave provisions, the option to work reduced hours and telecommuting have been introduced in several Member States. Some governments enacted new legislation to improve working conditions for workers with family responsibilities. The public sector has often been a pioneer in offering work-life balance measures for its employees.

Advancing social integration and intergenerational solidarity was a major objective of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year. In many countries, intergenerational initiatives focused on investing in children, young people and older persons in family contexts and on facilitating intergenerational exchanges.

Promoting knowledge of the economic, social and demographic processes affecting families and their members, with attention to the rights and responsibilities of all family members, formed part of the objectives of the International Year. Several Member States and regional entities supported initiatives in that area.

Supported by the European Union, the large-scale Seventh Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development included a project entitled 'FamiliesAnd-Societies', aiming to investigate family diversity, assess the compatibility of policies with family changes in Europe and enhance evidence-based policy-making, on the basis of the joint efforts over a four-year period of 25 research organizations from 15 European countries and 3 transnational civil society actors, as well as 80 national and international stakeholder organizations. The outcomes presented at the project website in the form of working papers, publications, new databases and policy briefs, as well as the published policy recommendations report, extend knowledge with regard to how policies promote well-being, inclusion and sustainable societal development among families in various contexts. By making the results publicly available and identifying the key findings and related policy recommendations, the project assists policy-makers in designing policies to successfully cope with societal challenges related to the recurring nature of vulnerability in societies and across generations.

Family policies and programmes

During the discussions of the Third Committee at the seventy-second session of the General Assembly,

Member States noted the recent progress in the development and implementation of family policy. Many delegations noted the link between family policies and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals.

At the discussions during the fifty-fifth session of the Commission for Social Development, held from 1 to 10 February 2017, the Group of African States noted the critical role of the family in cultural, political and socio-economic development and emphasized the importance of concrete efforts to improve the well-being of family in the areas of poverty reduction, work-family balance and intergenerational solidarity.

In addition to the main meetings, many parallel events of the Commission for Social Development focused on several aspects of family policy. The briefing 'Leaving no child behind: promoting youth inclusion through quality education for all', organized by the International Federation for Family Development in cooperation with the Permanent Mission of Qatar to the United Nations, promoted the importance of quality child education for responsible citizenship. It highlighted the positive impacts of early childhood education on later success in life.

In its response to the note verbale sent by the Secretariat pursuant to General Assembly resolution 71/163, the World Food Programme (WFP) noted the importance of promoting, protecting and supporting breastfeeding as a family-oriented policy and a critical measure in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2. With regard to its mission to eliminate hunger by 2030, WFP recognized that optimal breastfeeding could save the lives of an estimated 823,000 children under the age of 5 every year. Through its programming and partnerships, WFP continued to strive to reach global targets to improve maternal, infant and young child nutrition, including the target to increase the current rate of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months from 38 per cent to at least 50 per cent of all infants.

UNESCO, in its response to the note verbale sent by the Secretariat, emphasized that the social setting of families was essential to improving education and enabling sustainable development. The achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5 required the engagement of individuals, communities, institutions and societies. The sociocultural contexts of families and the socialization processes within them played a critical role in influencing access to early play and educational opportunities throughout their lives, and in supporting the learning process.

The importance of reducing the gender pay gap has been emphasized by the International Labour Organi-

zation (ILO). ILO asserts that social policies have an impact on the career choices of women and can facilitate opportunities for women to combine work and family responsibilities through flexible work arrangements and/or childcare. Policy may also moderate the gender division of labour with respect to care roles and influence the supply of labour and the value of time spent in unpaid care work. Therefore, social policies, such as parental leave, childcare, rights to flexible work arrangements and compensation in social protection for unpaid care work, have a direct impact on the motherhood pay gap. [1]

The Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, through its Division for Social Policy and Development, has continued its efforts to demonstrate and document the importance of a variety of family policies for the advancement of several Sustainable Development Goals and targets.

In 2017, focus was placed on the role of families in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The 2017 observance of the International Day of Families, on the theme 'Families, education and well-being', was organized in cooperation with the Outreach Division of the Department of Public Information of the Secretariat. The observance raised awareness of the vital role that families play in the educational attainment of their children. The panellists representing the United Nations Children's Fund, civil society, academia and the media emphasized the importance of early childhood education and the role of parents and caregivers in stimulating children's brain development. [2]

Several noteworthy side events of the fifty-fifth session of the Commission for Social Development were organized by the Division for Social Policy and Development, in cooperation with civil society. Some events were sponsored by interested Member States.

A panel discussion, organized in partnership with the International Federation for Family Development, focused on the topic 'Inclusive cities and sustainable families' and emphasized the importance of creating family-friendly cities that would fulfil the needs of all generations. The event raised awareness of the challenges in a rapidly urbanizing world that can be addressed through an intergenerational lens. [3]

Another event, organized by the Permanent Missions of Argentina and Austria to the United Nations, in cooperation with the Division for Social Policy and Development, focused on the topic 'Promoting intergenerational relations: age diversity and its effects on youth policy de-

velopment'. The event recognized the pivotal role of healthy intergenerational relations in societies, which are promoted by adequate policies focusing on youth development and intergenerational justice, addressing structural changes in the job market, securing pensions and care for older persons, and related issues. [4]

Many civil society organizations undertook initiatives at national and regional levels, contributing to the implementation of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year. For instance, in Nigeria, the Institute for Work and Family Integration, in partnership with the International Federation for Family Development and the Nigerian Association for Family Development, as well as the Federal Ministries of Education and of Women Affairs and Social Development, hosted an international conference on the family and sustainable development, focusing on achieving inclusive and quality education for all. The event emphasized that education was a fundamental human right, indispensable to sustainable development and the eradication of poverty.

Conclusions

The initiatives at the national level presented in the report demonstrate that Member States have made progress in their efforts to develop and implement family-oriented policies and programmes in line with the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes.

Many Member States acknowledge that the cross-sectoral nature of family policies requires that their development and implementation should be integrated into overall social policymaking. To achieve that, a strong institutional framework is indispensable. Accordingly, some Member States followed or introduced new national family-oriented strategies, policies and programmes to be implemented by national family policy institutions or integrated into the work of several entities, depending on national priorities.

Many Member States have expanded family policies in the areas of poverty reduction, work-family balance and social integration and intergenerational solidarity, as recommended by the framework of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year and consider them useful for the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals, namely Goals 1 to 5.

Conditional and universal cash transfers, often combined with child benefits, continue to form an important part of efforts to reduce poverty in many parts of the world and have been credited with an overall

reduction in poverty rates and improved health and education outcomes for children.

Improving work-family balance for families is high on the agenda of many countries. In some countries, more flexible working arrangements have been offered, including options to telecommute or work part-time. Paternity leave is also gaining more ground, as is the promotion of involved fatherhood. Nevertheless, paternity leave is mostly very short and not adequately addressed.

There is a growing recognition that policies and programmes to ensure work-family balance contribute to gender equality. They help empower women and increase their participation in the labour market, and contribute to the more equitable distribution of household responsibilities between men and women. Consequently, new flexible working arrangements have been gaining ground, especially in the public sector, and some positive evaluations indicate links between innovative working arrangements, such as telecommuting, and gains in productivity in the workplace.

Rapid demographic changes, including ageing and decreased fertility in some parts of the world, oblige governments to review their family policies and invest in in-

tergenerational policies and programmes. Such initiatives include investing in intergenerational facilities and supporting interactions among generations. In that context, some Member States have also invested in parenting education to improve the well-being of children. More evaluations are needed to ascertain the long-term impact and effectiveness of such programmes.

Further advancement of family policy in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development depends on how well issues of family policy are integrated into the overall development planning at national levels.

The effectiveness of family policies and programmes depends on their regular assessment. That is where qualitative and quantitative research on family structures, needs, challenges and changing intergenerational relations are needed. Such research needs to focus on emerging trends and evaluate the impact of implemented policy measures on families. In that context, family impact assessment studies, which seek to assess the impact of particular socioeconomic policies on families, are important. They have the potential to ensure that new policies effectively respond to the numerous challenges faced by families in a changing world.

Recommendations

Member States are encouraged to consider the following recommendations:

- (a) Continue their efforts to implement the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes;
- (b) Continue their efforts in the implementation of the objectives of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family in the areas of poverty, work-family balance and intergenerational issues;
- (c) Further recognize that family-oriented policies and programmes are integral to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly in support of ending poverty and hunger, promoting well-being for all at all ages, promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all and achieving gender equality;
- (d) Strengthen cooperation with civil society, academic institutions and the private sector in the implementation of relevant family policies and programmes;
- (e) Support family research and impact assessment studies to effectively respond to challenges faced by families;
- (f) Continue the sharing of good practices in family policymaking at national, regional and international levels.

[1] ILO, *Closing the Gender Pay Gap: A Review of the Issues, Policy Mechanisms and International Evidence* (Geneva, 2016).

Available from: www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms_540889.pdf.

[2] See www.un.org/development/desa/family/international-day-of-families/idf2017.html.

[3] See www.familyperspective.org/vid/vid-0173-en.php.

[4] See www.bemdmartin.eu/en/55th-session-of-the-commission-for-social-development-in-ny-2.