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INTRODUCTION

The bedrock of every society, the family is an ancient institution that remains at the crossroads of numerous social currents and human interactions. Despite the ongoing evolution of family, manifested in its changing size, composition and structure, the family has endured as a key institution vital for the sound development of society. Facing such major demographic developments as fertility decline and population ageing, along with changes brought about by socio-economic trends such as urbanization and migration, families demonstrate a remarkable adaptability to powerful forces of social change.

But this adaptability and resilience does not mean that society should be indifferent to families and ignore existing predicaments and family needs, which embrace all members of the family, including the younger and older generations, women and men, those who are working and those who are dependent on the support of family, kin or society at large. The State has numerous policy instruments at its disposal—from adopting specific laws to the provision of a range of social services—that can have a beneficial impact on the welfare of individuals and families. Understanding the multiple challenges that families are facing in the contemporary world can facilitate the adoption of better public policies, suited not only to the demands of today but also of tomorrow.

The importance of supporting and protecting families by society and the State has been widely recognized and is enshrined in the major international human rights documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The question is not only what forms this protection may assume, but also the ways and means of reducing the vulnerability of individuals and families more effectively, how to balance work responsibilities and family life, how to advance child- and gender-sensitive policies, and how to organize the provision of care for all members of the family who need it. These are major challenges that require the cooperation of all stakeholders, including the State, civil society and the private sector.

Social protection policies and family policies are in many ways interrelated. In this light, finding the best organizational structures that could be used by governments to implement such policies is of primary importance, particularly given the considerable economic resources allocated to social protection schemes and family policies. Identifying points of their confluence and interaction could facilitate the more effective functioning of national institutional mechanisms and improve priority setting, which would be beneficial for the implementation and outcome of both types of policies.

Societies have different traditions and views regarding those who need social protection and support. Important considerations in decision-making are the level of resources available to a society to spend on social protection programmes and the strength of the society's social solidarity. In some countries, the priority in social protection is accorded to families with children, in other cases it goes to the frail elderly or persons with disabilities. But the experience of many countries vividly demonstrates that the whole family gets better protection when programmes specifically geared at some target groups work effectively. For example, it is not only older persons who are beneficiaries of social pensions but also their grandchildren or their adult children may become better off because of the dynamics of interfamily income transfers.

The very definitions of social protection also differ from one country to another. In general, however, social protection embodies society's responses to levels of either risk or deprivation that are deemed unacceptable. Deep down, social protection schemes reflect shared fundamental values, manifesting themselves in public policies to implement transfer payments that provide relief and secure access to the means of meeting basic needs. Apart from protecting individuals, and by extension families, from such social risks as loss or reduction of income, ill health or disability, and therefore reducing the incidence of poverty, social protection systems are also geared at promoting economic growth and human development by securing access to health care, housing and other social services.

The existence of social protection schemes represents a major historical achievement³. Including a spectrum of policies, programmes and initiatives that can be implemented through public, private or combined partnerships, social protection embraces a whole network of formal and informal coverage schemes that protect and promote the attainment of human security. In this sense it represents an investment into the future of society, and is essential for promoting equitable economic development.

While the State has the primary responsibility for social protection, it cannot achieve all the goals of social protection alone. It must act in conjunction with families and communities, the private and not-for-profit sectors, micro-finance institutions and civil society organizations. Historically, kinship and family provided for the basic protection of its members but currently the State often assumes the role of being the key provider. In the face of rapid demographic and labour market changes, the demand for social protection schemes is increasing, and systems need to be flexible yet financially sustainable. This is why it is so important to conceptualize social protection strategies and schemes to take the family perspective into account and align family support policies and social protection systems, particularly in such area as health, education, housing, food security and the provision of retirement income support.

³ For more details, see 2001 Report on the World Social Situation, Chapter 14 "Enhancing social Protection"

Country-specific differences regarding which social groups require protection and how this protection should be implemented cannot obscure obvious common goals –family-sensitive programmes have universal significance and represent a part of social protection measures. Such measures include the prevention of domestic violence and the prohibition of harmful traditional practices, which are, unfortunately, quite widespread in some countries. Society at large must deal with these issues using various means, but the role of the State cannot be overestimated in this regard. The legal basis for protecting the vulnerable within the family needs to be strengthened with particular emphasis given to the implementation of laws which otherwise risk staying only on paper.

Holistic approaches to policies and programmes that confront child and family poverty, social exclusion and other social risks are essential to avoid duplication and ineffectiveness. If this holistic approach is applied to such areas as health care, education, food aid and social services, family policy becomes more concrete and better anchored to social development goals in general. Social benefits paid on a regular basis play a vital role in poverty reduction. For example, in the context of the Millennium Development Goals and beyond, the reduction of child poverty is of utmost importance. It can be better achieved if it is accomplished by specific targets and implementation mechanisms and carried out in a coherent way.

As the labor market participation of women has become a factor of modern life, balancing work and family life is very high on the agenda of many countries. This aspect also belongs to the social protection-family policy discourse. The increase in female participation in the labor market focuses attention on the gender division of labor within the household, accentuating roles of family members and the need to share family responsibilities. A family model where two parents are working can bring some benefits to the family but it is also prone to major challenges, such as child rearing, particularly when the children are young.

Finding solutions that are socially appropriate and would better balance work and family life has not only family-specific dimension, but also has a society-specific dimension in the adaptation to the new opportunities for women and the new family model of mothers participating in the labor force. At the same time many societies are grappling with very low fertility, and reconciling work and family responsibilities may be important from that standpoint as well. In some developed countries that have created an effective nation-wide network of facilities to combine work and childcare, women are able to both stay in the labor market and have children.

Gender concerns should be one of the priorities in the formulation of social policies. Quite often gender inequalities that exist in societies are reproduced at the national level through a variety of practices and institutions. Mainstreaming gender consideration into public policies therefore becomes essential. This goal could be hardly achieved without stronger links between economic

policy and gender equality. A reduction of government expenditure on publicly-provided social services—happening in many countries in the context of current economic and financial crisis—places a heavy burden on women who play a vital role in household management and carry the bulk of unpaid care work. Therefore, higher levels of budget spending on health care and education may facilitate greater access of women to labor market. Some studies demonstrate that there is also a need for higher government expenditure on mechanisms for social protection that also cover the female labor force.⁴

Apart from placing emphasis on the nexus between family policy and social protection, the submissions presented in this publication also address intergenerational solidarity. It is well known that intergenerational bonds manifest themselves particularly strongly at the family level. Within the family (and society at large) generations by-and-large co-exist and interact peacefully but they do have special needs and often play different roles. Support for the young and old is, of course, one of the key dimensions in the overall picture.

It is well recognized, however, that the picture is more complex and that intergenerational bonds can be exceptionally valuable for everyone in society: they promote social cohesion and facilitate the transmission of experience and multiple skills, facilitating the socialization of children. They are important for older and younger generations in emotional terms, enriching both old and young. In this sense, intergenerational solidarity could be justifiably put at the root of healthy social development. The demographical transition and increase in life span happening around the world mean that many adults live longer lives over which they can share knowledge and resources with younger generations. Greater longevity also implies that the number of years separating the young from the old is bound to expand, and strengthening solidarity through equity and reciprocity between generations becomes not only highly desirable but also vitally important.

Intergenerational solidarity is not a new notion: it existed through the ages, taking various forms, and it retains its key social significance today. It is all too easy to highlight and emphasize differences between younger and older generations—of course they do exist, and this phenomenon became known long ago.

In the world of today the situation is no less complex, and the challenges of adjusting to an ageing world are adding new dimensions. Age-related risks are well recognized in both younger and older cohorts. Rather than emphasizing the differences between the ages, it is imperative to recognize their synergies and growing interdependence and take them into account in public policy formulation and implementation. One obvious example is family care giving where caring responsibilities quite often assume an intergenerational dimension, with older persons caring for their grandchildren and adults providing long-term care for their elderly parents. In this sense, solidarity between generations represents a lynchpin in all social protection schemes, whether

⁴ See UNRISD study: Gender Equality. Striving for Justice in An Unequal World, Geneva, 2006

formal or informal.

Promoting intergenerational solidarity contributes to building trust in society. In many ways it fosters a sense of interdependence between people that springs from shared interests and is bound to create positive social outcomes. The young and old very often discover and recognize with pleasure that they can also learn a lot from each other.

Supporting families, securing social protection and promoting intergenerational solidarity are all important social objects. To achieve better outcomes they need to be firmly integrated within social policy and development strategies. It is hoped that the contributions in this publication will highlight important facets of family policy in our contemporary world.