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**Report of the Expert Consultation on the Family in Africa, organized by the African Union Commission in cooperation with the Focal Point on the Family, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Social Policy and Development, UN Secretariat, Jupiter Hotel, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 22-23 November 2013**

**Introduction**

Strengthening of the African family is one of the main priority areas of the Social Policy Framework for Africa, adopted in 2008. The achievement of this goal is closely linked to its other main priorities, namely: (1) Member States to provide for a variety of social protection measures closely tied to the needs of families and children (2) Member States to improve access to services for mothers and children (3) Member States to accelerate capacity building of their labour force and to promote its mobility on the continent.

As the meeting on the family took place on the eve of the 3<sup>rd</sup> AU Conference of Ministers of Social Development, the consultation has produced the African Common Position on the Family for the International Year of the Family + 20 which was later presented at the afore mentioned conference. The Consultation on the Family was also part of the preparations for the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family and explored the themes of the anniversary: family poverty, work-family balance and intergenerational issues in Africa.

**Content of the discussion**

**Poverty alleviation and access to basic services for African Families**

The first issue under consideration was 'poverty alleviation and access to basic services for African families'. In particular, the discussion focused on (a) socio-economic and demographic trends affecting African families and the need for policy response, (b) boosting social protection safety nets in addressing household poverty among vulnerable groups, and (c) gender inequality in families and society as an obstacle to poverty eradication.

Over the years, Africa has undergone fundamental demographic, economic and sociological changes that have stretched, and in some cases exhausted, the support mechanisms that were traditionally offered by the extended family. While trends vary by region and country, some of the salient transformations include: decreasing fertility rates; increased number of older persons; increased unemployment and underemployment; increased migration; changing marriage rates; increased proportion of female-headed households; and high levels of HIV and AIDS. Overall these transformations have contributed to family circumstances that are characterised by economic fragility, debilitating poverty and weakened family support for household chores and care-giving responsibilities. For example, while lower fertility enhances investments in children's health and education, it, at the same time, implies that family members have fewer people to rely on in times of need and crisis. In the context of inadequate or no social security programmes the increasing number of older persons in Africa presents challenges to service providers and families to meet the older persons' needs and demands.

Economically, the improved continent-wide growth rate seen over the last decade was not accompanied by growth in employment. In consequence much of the continent's labour force is employment in the informal sector, which is notorious for its precarious working conditions and low productivity. To this end much of the continent remains poverty-prone. Rural-urban migration also continues to be fuelled by perceived prospects in urban areas. Conversely the arrival of migrants often aggravates the already wide-spread African urban unemployment, leading to low-wage employment, unemployment, underemployment, and poverty. Migration also reduces household sizes and weakens the traditional family support for care roles and domestic tasks. The decreasing prevalence of marriage, on the other hand, can leave women and the families they take care of vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion, as in many societies marriage is still a crucial means through which women secure, inter alia, access to land, capital and housing. Similarly, the increasing proportions of female-headed households have implications for family poverty given that such households have been found to be generally disadvantaged in terms of access to land, livestock, credit, education, health care and extension services. With regard to HIV and AIDS, great strain on the care-related activities of families is one of the many impacts that the epidemic has had on the continent.

### Social protection for African Families

Against the above background the component of social protection that is most likely to ensure longer-term economic and social 'health' of the poorest families – in the context of changing nature of families in Africa – is cash transfers that offer predictable and regular income, and have demonstrable impact on family strengthening. To the extent that much of the evidence on the impact on cash transfers on families and their members comes largely from Latin America and, increasingly Asia, it is imperative for African governments to invest in, and fund, robust research to highlight context-specific policies, programmes and mechanisms

that could work best in the continent. With the rights based approach and the capabilities approach as cornerstones, such research needs to be informed by the family security approach which highlights the need for a mix of interventions given that “no single program is likely to be enough”.

The experts pointed out that the Plan of Action on the Family in Africa was a valuable instrument guiding African states on family policy development, but there are serious gaps in its implementation. It was also noted that two basic approaches were applicable in terms of poverty alleviation efforts in Africa (1) rights based approach and (2) capability approach.

Experts discussed the persisting high fertility rates in Africa pointing to the fact that a variety of risks make life very uncertain and leads to higher fertility. Another issue was the importance of social consequences of old-age pensions, such as greater respect and role of older persons in the family. In general, experts noted the need for more research on social consequences of policies and evidence-based policy making supported by research, which is still lacking in Africa.

On the issue of conditional and unconditional cash transfers a variety of opinions were expressed pointing to their pros and cons and their applicability in Africa. Evidence of the effects of cash transfers is very important for further social policy development while still many misconceptions continue. Among them, was the conviction that they may lead to dependency and lower labour participation despite the evidence pointing to the opposite. The very importance of conditionality was also questioned and experts also emphasized that conditional cash transfers work only when they are accompanied by access to basic services. It was also hoped that conditionality may force governments to increase access to services but it is also bound to increase the cost of their provision.

Several arguments pertaining to the issues of conceptual frameworks were raised in the context of conditional cash transfers. From the rights perspective if individuals have the right to social security, they should also have a duty to behave in a certain way. Moreover, although it would be good to move towards universality, limited budgets will not allow it.

### Strengthening of African families and intergenerational issues

Next topics under discussion were ‘strengthening of African families and intergenerational issues’ and ‘linking family strengthening and alternative care of children’.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) consider the family as the fundamental unit of society and a natural environment to support the development and well-being of children. In both the **International Policy Conference on the African Child** and the **Sub-Saharan Francophone Africa Conference on Family**

**Strengthening and Alternative Care supported by Save the Children**, it was clear just how important all types of families are in Africa. To support families, it is crucial that African governments set up systems that strengthen and support both biological and alternative care families.

Family strengthening and social protection programmes should be incorporated in national child protection systems and not be implemented in parallel. Components of national child protection systems crucial to strengthening families are; **Legal framework**: Guidelines on Alternative Care should be nationalized and should support a variety of family-based alternative care arrangements; **Local preventive and response services**: Local governments should hold the primary responsibility for ensuring that accessible, child-sensitive, prevention and response services are available; **Child participation**: Girls and boys should be directly involved in the design and implementation of policies and programs; **Public awareness**: The public should be aware of the benefits of family based care and of the dangers of large scale institutional care; **Committed workforce**: The state should invest in a workforce of police, teachers, social workers, and government staff that are committed to promoting and strengthening families; **Community based structures**: In many countries communities have developed their own indigenous structures to protect and care for children; these should be supported by governments and other actors when in the best interest of the child.

Studies need to fully document the “push and pull” factors that cause families to separate – in some countries this may be to access services (such as health and education) while in others this could be for reasons of social stigma (such as physical and mental disabilities). Understanding these factors will allow key actors to create programs that address the real needs of children and families. Protecting and preventing family separation is especially crucial in emergencies and should be a key aspect of disaster preparedness. Monitoring and evaluation can help to ensure that innovative country specific family based care models are piloted and tailored to the individual needs of children.

Experts also pointed out that it was difficult to look at family as a unit as it is composed of individuals with their own rights. Promoting skillful parenting and encouraging families to realize responsibilities towards children’s rights was crucial. More emphasis should also be placed on the preventive role of families in order to avoid placing children in institutionalized care. On the other hand, when necessary, proper assessment of placement was also required as currently there is a lack of regulation on how these institutions should operate. Adoption regulations are also weak in most African countries with many lagging behind in ratification of the Hague Convention on adoption. It was also important to understand why parents relinquish their children and avoid moral judgment on the issue as this is mostly due to the lack of support for families. Experts also noted changing family structures and special importance of child-headed households in Africa.

## Work-family balance

The experts further discussed the work-family relationships in Africa with special emphasis on trends impacting work-family balance, quality and affordable childcare, as well as types of policies and programmes supporting work-family balance.

It was pointed out that sometimes it has been argued that work-family relationship, referred to as work-family conflict is due to the very nature of African states, their mode of evolution, consolidation and government process.<sup>1</sup> The family in Africa is the basic social protection institution for its members and the conflict between work and family obligations is especially burdensome for the women. Researchers indicate that the demands of family and work pose critical challenges to individuals, organizations and governments.

Work-family balance is being impacted by a number of trends. Globally, there is a marked transition from extended to nuclear families. In Africa, the pace of this trend may be slower, but it is observable with the fertility transition clearly noted in sub-Saharan Africa since the early 1990s. At the same time the number of older persons in sub-Saharan Africa is growing with estimates indicating that their number will double from 35 million in 2006 to 69 million in 2030 and double again to 139 million by 2050. This trend will heavily impact on work-family balance as older people in Africa have virtually no social security and adult children (especially daughters) are expected to care for their ageing parents. <sup>2</sup>

There are increasing numbers of dual earner families with women entering the labour force in higher numbers. In sub-Saharan Africa, labour participation of women increased from 60 to 63 per cent between 1999 and 2009. The proportion of African women employed in the non-agricultural sector is to reach 33 per cent in 2015. These trends indicate that African women are working longer hours than men when both market and domestic activities are taken into account. Considering that women are still primarily responsible for household management, it is increasingly difficult for women to manage both home and work responsibilities.

For most women, informal employment provides them with enough flexibility, autonomy and proximity to home to combine wage employment with domestic responsibilities (84 per cent of women, compared to 63 percent of men are employed in the informal sector in Africa). Research in Angola, Zambia and Zimbabwe has found that women in the informal economy do so to have flexible working hours allowing them to fulfill their numerous obligations. Precarious

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<sup>1</sup> A.F. Chinwe, The character of the state and the pervasive nature of work-family-conflict (WFC) in Africa

<sup>2</sup> Z.Mokomane, "Work-family balance: overview of policies in developing countries", 2011

working conditions and low wages in the informal sector, however, further exacerbate the inability to adequately reconcile work and family responsibilities.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, competition for employment opportunities results in higher migration, including rural to urban migration, within countries and regional migration. Out of 150 million migrants worldwide, 50 million are in Africa. ILO estimates indicate that by 2025, one in ten Africans will live and work outside their country of origin. Migration results in physical separation of families, smaller household sizes, weakened kinship mode of residential settlement which all combined diminished the strength of traditional extended family networks. As a result, kinship obligations have become less urgent and traditional family support is less available. In sum, migration separates families and makes it difficult for mostly women left behind to care for both younger and older family members.

Other trends are an increasing number of single parent households, more births out of wedlock, more frequent divorce and separation and the fact that marriage is no longer universal which all result in higher number of single-headed households and increased feminization of poverty.

Moreover, the HIV/AIDS prevalence results in increased numbers of skipped generations households and child orphans. Many African governments shifted the burden of care from the state to families and communities through the home-based care model. However, most African households do not have a full time adult available to care for HIV affected family members. Challenges of caring for sick family members, children and working obligations weigh heavily on work-family balance.

On a positive note, some research in South Africa indicates that some men have moved towards greater equality of the marriage and more involvement in the family and domestic sphere. Policies supporting and encouraging men to be more involved at home would help with better work-family fit.<sup>4</sup>

Concerning the work place trends, research in Nigeria demonstrates that there are several obstacles to the adoption of work-family balance such as (1) managers' resistance to lose direct control over their subordinates and fear that employees will take advantage of special arrangements. (e.g. when they take flexible working hours) – this stems from a concept of 'management by sight' instead of 'management by objectives'; (2) inherent demands of the job; (3) under-stuffing to increase productivity and unrealistic targets setting by management. Organizational culture expressed in management practices and assumptions often constitutes a major obstacle to the adoption and take up of work-family policies. This is often exacerbated by the additional impact of social and environmental problems specific

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> R. Smit "The Changing role of the husband/father in the dual-earner family in South Africa"

to developing countries, such as poor infrastructure. Moreover, employees fail to voice their concerns for fear of losing their jobs.<sup>5</sup>

Another consideration for work-family balance is the availability of affordable quality childcare. It may well be that the preference for childcare in Africa is within the family, including extended family as well as community often regarded as the extension of the family. However, research indicates that the availability of next of kin to care for children is diminishing, even in traditional societies. This is due to the several factors noted above, such as the increase in dual earner families in Africa. As research indicates, mothers may have no choice but to leave children alone at home, often in unsafe conditions and sometimes confined to small places. Many children are also under the care of their older siblings, who jeopardize their own prospects in life. So far, childcare provision is very limited in Africa. Where it exists, it is mostly of insufficient quality. Moreover, childcare provision is more seen as contributing to child development rather than enhancing work-family balance.

The trends noted above indicate that work-family balance policies are growing in importance and have to be undertaken as a matter of priority. Such measures can be (1) statutory arrangements (2) flexible working arrangements (working hours, telecommuting, etc.) (3) support for child care.

Types of policies and programmes supporting work-family balance include:

- parental leaves (maternity and paternity leaves as well as parental leaves – to care for ill children)
- working arrangements : at home: sharing of household responsibilities between men and women, greater involvement of men in family responsibilities; outside work arrangements: flexible working arrangements, including working hours, option to work from home,
- early childhood education and care allowances
- support for preschool facilities

So far maternity leave is comprehensibly offered in African countries but its duration ranges from 60 days in 5 countries to 16 weeks in South Africa, with typical periods of leave from 1 to 14 weeks. Also maternity leave is considered a type of social safety net and not a universal right and it is only offered to women in formal employment. Moreover, limited compensation and increased job insecurity following maternity leave result in lower uptake of such leave. Paternity leave in some form is provided in 12 countries but only 3 recognize paternity leave as such (Mauritius, Uganda, Tanzania).

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<sup>5</sup> C. Epie, 'Africa-specific factors influencing the decision to adopt work-family policies: exploring the field in Nigeria

In conclusion, although we need to acknowledge that work-family balance policies in Africa compete with more immediate developmental concerns, such as poverty reduction and access to basic services, families are changing and need more support to be both good employees and good parents and caretakers for older family members. Governments should give due consideration to the provision of maternity leave on a universal basis; introduction of paternity leave (also to elicit greater involvement of men in the upbringing of their children); introduce flexible working arrangements and invest in affordable quality childcare.

In the discussion, the experts noted that if you neglect the work-family balance issues, children's development would be affected. Of special concern was the role of fathers in families and the need to change perceptions about their role in supporting child development and participate in household chores. Parents need time to communicate with their children as well.. Project Fatherhood was noted by Save the Children. It promoted positive masculinities and men's involvement in families. Ashoka Justice, part of Men Engage Alliance, was also promoting policies supporting the role of the father in the family and interventions having benefits for the whole society.

Experts furthermore noted the importance of the full ratification and implementation of the ILO conventions on maternity protection and on workers with family responsibilities.

A representative of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) noted the weak advocacy surrounding issues of the family in Africa with many missed opportunities. Now is the opportunity to include family in the post MDGs strategy. In this context, regrettably the lack of an agreement on the definition of the family was still a roadblock on the road to the integrating a family perspective in the overall policy making on the Continent. One strategy for lobbying would be to develop key messages of the role of families in development and persuade Governments to report on their activities in support of families.

#### The right to protection for African Families and their family members

Subsequently, the issues of the rights of protection for the family were emphasized. They refer to the right to social protection as well as to physical protection in armed conflict, protection from violence, also within a family. Family protection and reintegration include issues of refugees, child soldiers, reunification of family members following separation.

Other no less important legal issues of great concern to families are: registration of children at birth; child marriage, harmful traditional practices, including female genital mutilation; child labour; non-recruitment of children into armed forces, access to information and participation (access to information is highly regulated in many African countries); inheritance rights and custody rights.



In the area of rights and duties of families, the most important right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the right to social protection. This right has been often repeated in other instruments including the International Covenant on Social and Economic Rights and in commitments undertaken by international conferences. The right to social protection is being realized by several countries in Africa, and examples of such protection schemes include cash transfers for vulnerable families (especially those caring for disabled family members), in-kind assistance or work-programmes among others. However, the universal right of families to adequate nutrition and access to basic services such as education, health and sanitation, although often recognized as necessary in the context of fighting poverty, this right is not being fully realized.

Regrettably, families themselves may violate human rights of their members, for instance through the practice of certain traditional practices harmful to the children and young people. It should be kept in mind that this is done for a variety of reasons, including persistent poverty. Parents believe they act in the interest of their children. For instance, early marriage is promoted to ensure daughters have better chances in life – early marriage is seen as ensuring welfare of children later in life. Similarly female genital mutilation (FGM) is to ensure marriageability of girls.

Consequently, there is a need to educate parents of harm emanating from early marriage, female circumcision, and other harmful practices. First, health consequences should be emphasized. For instance child marriage leads to several negative health consequences for girls and young women, the risk of operative delivery, low weight and malnutrition resulting from frequent pregnancies and lactation when young mothers are still growing. Similarly, female genital mutilation leads to lifetime risk of maternal death ranging from 1 in 35 in Ghana, to one in 12 in Burkina Faso, and estimated perinatal mortality rates ranging from 44 per 1000 in Ghana to 8 per 1000 in Nigeria. In some countries FGM rates reach 95 per cent. In fact the percentage varies from 11-15 per cent in Niger and Cameroon to 95-99 per cent in Djibouti and Somalia. At least 28 African countries are affected by the practice.<sup>6</sup>

To fight these practices the mere ratification of relevant legal instruments is not sufficient (Convention on the Elimination of Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Fundamental rights of Women and Girls by OAU”). Education, information and sensitization at all levels are regarded as vital elements to stimulate social change. Working with religious leaders is also recommended as FGM is not prescribed by Islam or Christianity. The excisers of FGM often hold a high status in their communities. To stop the practice, they need to be offered alternative employments opportunities. It’s also imperative to empower women and youth through information and training. Involving men as allies in the battle against FGM is also important. More awareness raising activities are also necessary, such as a Zero

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<sup>6</sup> Berhane Ras-Work, 2006 “The impact of harmful traditional practices on the girl child” - EGM/DVGC/2006/EP.4

Tolerance International Day, as well as pressuring governments to ratify and implement the relevant legal instruments such as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's rights on the Rights of Women.

To conclude about FGM, as can be seen it is the girl child and women who are still discriminated against in most of the legal issues noted above, especially girls in child marriage and FGM and women in inheritance and custody rights. It is not surprising then that policy responses have mostly focused on women, girls and children. However, policies have to focus on family units and take into account that men and boys should be enlisted as partners in women's empowerment. Changing stereotypes, explaining the health hazards of some practices and sheer unfairness of the status quo has to be tackled.

### Conclusion

The experts concluded that social policy needs to focus on families as units and not on individuals alone in order to be more effective. More needs to be done to integrate family concerns into overall policy making in Africa. The issues of family poverty, work-family balance as well as intergenerational concerns deserve to be priority areas for Governments, the private sector, civil society and other stakeholders for the benefit of families in Africa.

In conclusion of the meeting, the experts elaborated on the African Common Position on the Family for the International Year of the Family + 20 which was later presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> AU Conference of Ministers for Social Development.