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A clear Call to Action

The significance of the Doha Conference outcome document

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As the year 2014 moves into the International Day of the Families (15 May), many initiatives have taken place along the world. There have been raise awareness meetings in more than a dozen countries and many other activities in different places, including radio and television programs, as well as some other academic activities, like conferences and Expert Group Meetings. Overall, it can be said by now that there has been a significant response of the civil society.¹

Two of these initiatives deserve a special consideration, because of their global scope and their potential influence for the future. First, the Declaration of the Civil Society promoted by IFFD and co-sponsored by hundreds of organizations, policy-makers, academics and NGO representatives worldwide.² Second, the Doha Conference to commemorate the 20th Anniversary of the International Year of the Family celebrated some weeks ago, a nongovernmental gathering to constitute a global platform for discussion and debate where policymakers, NGOs, experts, academics and other relevant stakeholders from all around the world have shared their views and experiences regarding the centrality of the family and its role in society.³

The outcome document of this Conference is a 'Call to Action' directly addressed to governments with very specific recommendations "to continue to make every possible effort to realize the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes and to integrate a family perspective into national policymaking,"⁴ as the UN General Assembly has urged all Member States. It is the best way to summarize the contents of the Declaration and the outputs of the Conference, showing that a worldwide consensus has been reached on the occasion of this 20th Anniversary of the International Year of the Family and making totally explicit what civil society demands from governments as a consequence of it.

We reproduce the contents of this 'Call to Action' below, adding for every recommendation some ideas exposed by some of the speakers in the Conference.

¹ Many of this initiatives are listed at www.family2014.org

² More information available at: <http://www.family2014.org/declaration.php>

³ More information available at: <http://www.difi.org.qa/events/event-detail/event?item=57>

⁴ Resolution of the UN General Assembly on 'Preparations for and observance of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family', 9 March 2012 (A/RES/66/126).

We, the representatives of civil society, academia, policy makers and individuals participating in the International Conference organized in Doha, Qatar on the 16-17 of April, 2014 by the Doha International Family Institute (DIFI), member of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family;

Having considered the conference theme "Empowering Families: A Pathway to Development,"

Reaffirming that the family is not only the fundamental group unit of society but is also the fundamental agent for sustainable, social, economic and cultural development,

Stressing the importance of designing, implementing and monitoring family-oriented policies, especially in the areas of poverty eradication, full employment and decent work, work family balance and social integration and intergenerational solidarity,

Emphasizing that the achievement of development goals especially those relating to the eradication of poverty, education of children, especially girls and reduction in maternal mortality depends, to a significant extent, on how families are empowered to fulfill their numerous functions,

Emphasizing further that strategic focus on families offers a comprehensive approach to solving some of the persistent development challenges such as inequality and social exclusion,

Call on governments to empower and enable families to contribute to development by taking the following actions:

1. Develop comprehensive and coherent policies, integrate cross sectorial approach to support family stability and establish/strengthen a national mechanism to develop family-oriented policies and programmes and allocate adequate human and financial resources to implement, monitor and evaluate them.

The family is the basic unit of society and as such it should be protected and nurtured. Yet family is not systematically placed at the center of policy and research. Stable and healthy families are the foundation of strong societies, when family breakdown, the costs are high, societies suffer and the role of government tends to expand. Although there is a universal recognition of the importance of the family there is no formal consensus on its definition which may impede the effective design and implementation of family policy. It is therefore more productive to focus on family functions and to assess the impact of policies from a family –focused perspective.⁵

2. Promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, reform discriminatory laws and policies, particularly family laws, and enact legislations to end child marriage and violence against women.

More equal societies do better socially and economically, because equality – oriented social policies, including family policies that promote gender equality and rights of the child, are drivers for ethically, socially and economically sustainable development – they support children's rights to development, enable mothers and fathers to participate in society and working life and child care and are strongly supported by fathers and mothers.⁶

3. Recognize the contribution and responsibility of men to families, develop policies to address the impact of the absence of males/fathers on family wellbeing and promote active fatherhood.

The more time fathers spend with their children, the greater their impact. It's called the 'dose effect', the more dads interact with their kids, the more of an influence they are. This 'dose effect' doesn't have to involve doing anything special, or expensive things. It's about hanging out, doing stuff together and chatting as the need arises. Just being there means you're passing on all sorts of things to your children. So you have to be very conscious of everything you say and do.⁷

⁵ Concept Note for the Doha International Conference on the Family, 16-17 April 2014.

Available at: <http://www.difi.org.qa/app/wa/ca.fusiondev.fdevent.FDEventDirectAction/viewEventDocument?docId=54>

⁶ Ronald Wiman, 'From Women's Rights to Gender Equality Policies'.

Available at: <http://www.difi.org.qa/app/wa/ca.fusiondev.fdevent.FDEventDirectAction/viewEventDocument?docId=53>

⁷ Adrienne Burgess, 'Fatherhood Reclaimed: The Making of the Modern Father' (Vermilion, 1997).

4. Focus poverty alleviation strategies on the family as a unit and acknowledge that family breakdown can be both a root cause and an effect of poverty and its prevention is a priority.

Overall as a functional unit, extended family plays major in poverty alleviation and economic empowerment of all members [...] To go forward, we need to focus on two assets of the family: family capital and family resilience, develop and effectively implement comprehensive social protection programmes that are family-focused, gender-sensitive, child-oriented, provide overall family-friendly policies for workers with child and other family-related care responsibilities and adopt the family lens in all policy development.⁸

5. Adopt policies to ensure work-family balance, so that the responsibilities of parenting and maintaining families do not fall primarily on women and collaborate with the private sector to protect and support workers with family responsibilities.

The two major objectives in this area are allowing more mothers to participate in the labour market and improve the work-life balance of mothers and fathers. Towards the first objective, policy measures are needed to address mothers who are temporarily outside the labour market because of child duties, as well as those who are unemployed or inactive because they have withdrawn from the labour market.

Policies that fostered education opportunities for both sexes; work opportunities in family-friendly workplaces; maternity and balanced parental leave for both parents; quality, convenient, and affordable childcare combined with social support were identified as the most effective.⁹

6. Value important contributions of all generations within the family, design and implement policies to strengthen intergenerational solidarity and partnerships and promote healthy intra-family relations.

Three fundamental notions about intergenerational relations offer useful principles as each sector of civil society examines the role it can play in supporting families. Firstly, intergenerational solidarity and exchange continue to be the primary foundation for personal and social security as well as human bonding. Secondly, social networks of care develop when policies and programmes reinforce the interconnectivity of the generations. Thirdly, societies need to facilitate human contact and interactions in order to expand intergenerational solidarity.¹⁰

7. Ensure the systematic collection of data and statistics on family wellbeing and collaborate on good practice exchange at national, regional and international levels.

Policymakers almost always ask what the economic impact of this policy decision is, but they seldom ask what the family impact of this policy decision is. Public policy decisions could be more effective if they were based on hard evidence drawn from rigorous research and dispassionate analysis, and if they leveraged the contributions that families make to society.¹¹

8. Develop and implement family focused policies and interventions to strengthen and support families in vulnerable situations (such as conflict, natural disasters and health epidemics including HIV / AIDS and malaria).

Providing care to a member who is suffering from HIV and AIDS places enormous pressure on a family's human and financial resources. Research on the age distribution of HIV incidence indicates that infected family members are likely to be prime-age adults (aged 15-45), and ill health within this economically productive group is often associated with a decrease in income. Individuals in this age bracket also play a major role in domestic

⁸ Zitha Mokomane, 'Confronting Family Poverty'.

Available at: <http://www.difi.org.qa/app/wa/ca.fusiondev.fdevent.FDEventDirectAction/viewEventDocument?docId=50>

⁹ Anne H. Gauthier, 'Improving the work-life balance', presentation at the The Fourth Demography Forum organized by the European Commission (Brussels, 6-7 May 2013).

Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=10198&langId=en>

¹⁰ Donna M. Butts, Leng Leng Thang and Alan Hatton Yeo, 'Policies and Programmes Supporting Intergenerational Relations', Background Paper for the Twentieth Anniversary of the International Year of the Family, 2014.

Available at: <http://undesadspd.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=VGkxt3WSyA%3D&tabid=1733>

¹¹ Karen Bogenschneider, 'Using Research and Analysis to Build Better Public Policy for Families'.

Available at: <http://www.difi.org.qa/app/wa/ca.fusiondev.fdevent.FDEventDirectAction/viewEventDocument?docId=39>

activities such as providing physical care for children and other dependants. Essentially, financial resources and the capacity to provide care may decline at a time when they are most needed within the family. The negative consequences of HIV and AIDS on the family may well be very different, depending on the circumstances of the family prior to the illness and what role the family member or members who became ill played prior to their illness.¹²

9. Create an enabling environment for a meaningful contribution of civil society organizations in the design, implementation and monitoring of family policies and programs and remove barriers to the establishment, work and funding of non-governmental organizations.

Family should be a meeting point and not a controversial issue. It is difficult to find a more universal topic (we all come from a family and most of us live in the context of a family) and a more necessary one (without families, the existence and personal development of individuals as well as social development becomes much harder). In front of this, all kind of differences and disagreements should give way to a common will of finding the common ground from which to build the basis for the protection families deserve. On the other side, international institutions and governments should have clear ways to promote that kind of consensus and to listen to it in an effective way.¹³

10. Acknowledge that families are at the center of sustainable development and ensure that families are an integral part of the post 2015 development agenda.

The twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, on the eve of the target year of the Millennium Development Goals, gives us an opportunity to refocus on the role of families in development [...] The Millennium Development targets, especially those relating to the reduction of poverty, education of children and reduction in maternal mortality, are difficult to attain unless the strategies to achieve them focus on the family [...] In effect, the very achievement of development goals depends on how well families are empowered to contribute to the achievement of those goals.¹⁴

The following words from the opening address by H. H. Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, Chairperson of the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, explain why “the family is not only the fundamental group unit of society but is also the fundamental agent for sustainable, social, economic and cultural development,” as the Call states. “We behold that the issues of men, women, youth and the child is a single issue: which is the issue of family with its own array of challenges and problems. An issue that starts with the development of minds and requires empowering all family members of their roles. Family empowerment in this sense is to create the conditions for the advancement of the roles in a coherent family that preserves and inherits the values of cohesion. However, the larger role falls on the state, through fixing policies and programs that work to save education and health care, addressing the causes of poverty, supporting the balance between life and work, and upholding the values of solidarity and communication between generations.”¹⁵

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¹² Chris Desmond and Victoria Hosegood, ‘Men in Families and Family Policy in a Changing World’ (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs - Division for Social Policy and Development, 2011).

¹³ Ignacio Socias, ‘Civil Society and the Family’.

Available at: <http://www.difi.org.qa/app/wa/ca.fusiondev.fdevent.FDEventDirectAction/viewEventDocument?docId=37>

¹⁴ ‘Follow-up to the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family and beyond’, Report of the United Nations Secretary-General, 29 November 2010 (A/66/62)

¹⁵ H. H. Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, Speech for the Opening of the Doha International Conference on the Family, 16-17 April 2014.