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Looking at the SDGs from a family lens

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Introduction

The following paper will focus on how to look at the Sustainable Development goals from a family lens and builds on the international work that has already taken place by an Expert Group who met at the Focal Point on the Family in the Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD) of UNDESA in May 2016. The regional meeting held in April 2016 by Population Europe, which focused on SDGs and gender equality and a dialogue between UN member states from Europe and Central Asia, about the leap from the Millenium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals, held in November 2016 will also be taken into account.

The paper will be divided into 4 sections. The first section will explore how to highlight the importance of the family and family policies at the center of sustainable development goals. It then moves on to explain how SDGs can be transformative for families. Aspects of family policies that can support 'win-wins' for family and sustainable development in the context of Agenda 2030 will be provided. The last section will focus on how best to work with youth within the context of family policies and how this may contribute to attaining the SDGs.

1. How to highlight the importance of the family and family policies at the center of sustainable development goals

The Sustainable Developmental Goals epitomise a commitment, which was made by 192 countries across the globe to create a more socially just world. Through a number of policy measures, they call for the establishment of fair and just relationships in our society. In this respect relationships must be highlighted as an important catalyst to reach the objectives that are being outlined in the SDGs.

The family, is the first natural group in which individuals live and relate to one another and with the people in the communities surrounding them. In this respect, families need to be at the centre from where sustainable goals are put into action. This section will put forward ideas on how to highlight the importance of the family in the realization of the sustainable development goals .

Provide a clear and strong rationale explaining the importance of family relationships and family policy at the center of sustainable goals

First and foremost, there needs to be a strong and clear rationale for addressing sustainable development from a family lens. The following arguments are put forward:

- a. The family is the building block of society. Wellbeing and sustainability (or hardship and adversity) are immediately experienced in this primary group. It therefore makes sense that sustainable development is perceived from this perspective and that families are supported.

b. Parents and other significant carers have an important role to play in fostering wellbeing and sustainability among its members. They are the architects of the family and therefore important designers and builders of society. Solidarity between family members and across generations often manifests itself spontaneously and gratuitously because of these resourceful members who in normal circumstances have strong attachment bonds with the other family members (Abela 2017). For this reason, the family is the best setting for the upbringing of our children. Family members also have a crucial role in providing assistance and emotional support for ill family members, those who are disabled, and the elderly. When a strong sense of community prevails, they also support people living in their vicinity. Taking into account their contribution and bringing them on board as partners is a productive and cost effective way of making headway with regards to the 2030 agenda for sustainable development.

c. Challenges do arise and sometimes when families are facing adversity, they may lose some of their important resources. It is because of such a risk that it would be unthinkable to imagine that our families can succeed without the support of the State. Given the fundamental importance of the family, “an important prerequisite for the elaboration of all national development policies and programs” is to see them through a family lens.

- d. Ultimately it is the lived experience within the family, which will serve as an indicator of whether the sustainable development goals are being taken on board and are bringing the desired changes to society at large. Moreover if family members do not endorse and see the value of these 17 goals by aspiring for them in their every day lives, the SDGs can never be truly implemented.

The above arguments will certainly serve to highlight the importance of the family and family policies at the center of sustainable goals. These arguments need to be directed and understood from a multi-level systemic perspective in order that they may reach the different policy actors that are involved in the implementation of such goals.

Incorporating the importance of the family in a theoretical framework

Recognising the importance of the family and family policies in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals calls for a theoretical framework, informing the policy actions that stem out of the Sustainable Development Goals.

In this respect, a **systemic theoretical framework** that takes into account not only the individuals in society but also important systems in their immediate environment would capture the interconnected way of working that is necessary

for the work to be fruitful and yield the expected results. Important systems would not only include the family but also other systems such as the school, health and social services, the Labour Office, Government, its modus operandi and the resources that it makes available as well as non governmental organizations who would be participating in such a process. **Brofenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory** would be a helpful theoretical model in this regard. Whilst being mindful of the socio cultural context in which one is operating and the changes that take place over time, this theoretical framework would help policy actors map out the synergy and influence that is exerted by them in the implementation of such a strategy.

Making use of the Media to highlight the importance of the family and family policies at the center of sustainable development goals

Different forms of media can be used to highlight the crucial role played by families and the value of family policies in the accomplishment of the sustainable development goals.

These may range from video clips that could be disseminated on the media and national television to support and educate with regards to the valuable work related to the SDGs that is carried out by and in partnership with families.

Policy makers at national, regional and international levels need to be able to communicate with journalists who are very good at highlighting the daily

experiences of families when presenting policies (see The Economist in Abela and Renoux 2014).

User friendly and accessible websites such as the one by UNDP need to give increased importance to relationships within the community and among family members when highlighting initiatives that are taking place in various parts of the world.

2. How can SDGs be transformative for families?

The 17 SDGs provide us with a vision of how we aspire to be in 2030. Each and every goal has a direct impact on family wellbeing.

If we had to focus on basic needs that most families in the world take for granted, such as the *elimination of poverty* (SDG1) and *hunger* (SDG2) and *access to clean water and sanitation* (SDG 6) statistics published by the United Nations report that 767 million people live below the international poverty line of \$1.90 a day. This translates into **just under 10% of the world's workers living with their families** on less than \$1.90 per person per day and **one in four children** under age five in the world having inadequate height for their age. Undoubtedly, achieving SDGs 1,2, 6,8 and 4 would be a transformative experience and a much needed one for families living in extreme poverty.

Improvement in one of the Sustainable Development Goals is linked to other improvements in other goals to the extent that there exists a chain reaction between one goal and another. Children and families will benefit immensely from the eradication of extreme poverty, which in turn will have a virtuous, circular and transformative effect on other areas of development for family members.

I will explain this process in some detail by highlighting the vicious circle poor people find themselves in. Poverty disrupts family life and extreme poverty does so in an extreme way. It is a traumatic experience for parents and for their offspring to suffer from hunger. Such an experience has a negative impact on physical and mental health. A limited access to education, social discrimination and exclusion leave no door ajar to those who have the strength to learn in spite of the adversity they find themselves in, which in turn is a big barrier to good employment and the ability to afford decent accommodation. Limited employability will lead to the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next.

SDGs can be transformative for families but they necessitate political will. The Centre for the Developing Child in Harvard (2016) highlight the pressing need for “science informed innovation at the neighbourhood systems and policy levels including investments in housing, income support and job training among other domains of influence on child well-being” (p.6.) in order for these families to get out of this vicious circle. This is in sync with SDG11 aiming to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Extreme poverty is

often concentrated in big cities. Safe and affordable housing, investment in public transport, creating green public spaces and improving city planning in a way that facilitates participation and inclusion at community level will provide a more humane quality of life especially for those poor families who at present live in slums and whose homes and surrounding areas are dilapidated, neglected and unsafe. It is equally important to reach rural areas, which may be isolated and poor, where families face limited job prospects and lack opportunities to develop further. Last but not least one must not forget that the majority of those living in extreme poverty are situated in Southern Asia and Sub Saharan Africa and are mostly to be found in conflict-affected countries. It is children and families who suffer most when there is war. Peace, justice and strong institutions are directly related to the wellbeing of families and have a transformative effect on their wellbeing.

In this respect, the implementation of the sustainable goals has a direct impact on the quality of life of family members. By protecting the human rights of children and families the sustainability of the family is guaranteed. Having an adequate income through decent work means that the family can afford to have food on the table and participate in social life in a dignified manner. It means less stress for parents and more hope in the future of their children. By investing more in their children's education, parents hope that their children will be able to find better paid jobs and be more innovative when they grow up. Families who eat well and who have access to better housing accommodation will in turn be healthier. Conditions such as growth stunting and pulmonary consumption have disappeared in countries where food is adequate and an improvement in housing

accommodation has been registered. Universal health coverage and access to quality essential health-care services increases wellbeing in families.

3. What aspects of family policies can support 'win-wins' for family and sustainable development in the context of Agenda 2030?

A cursory look at a report by the World Economic Forum, (2010) among top ten competitive economies in the Middle East and North Africa suggests that strong economies are characterised by a number of key measures. These include high government efficiency, deep public trust in politicians, macro economic stability, good infrastructure and innovation. Other measures can be related more easily to family policy such as investment in health and education and better labour regulation including reforms enabling the entry of women in the labour market among others.

First things first

We cannot pretend to create a just society for our families if our governments are not committed to it. Whilst there cannot be real prosperity with out macroeconomic stability; the SDGs can only be achieved if government policies target those families who are most in need with the surplus that is created. To give an example, while private investment is crucial, it is equally important that the rich and the very rich pay their taxes. In turn governments need to spend the money in a responsible manner whereas policy makers need to be competent to

advise government regarding policy decisions that are informed by rigorously established evidence.

In this respect I join other scholars in believing that poverty and social exclusion are the result of neglect by society towards more vulnerable groups. Society at large and especially those in power have a responsibility in protecting the human rights of all families but most of all of those families who find themselves in a vulnerable situation. The five social rights including the right to employment, housing, health, education and social protection must be respected.

This framework is extremely important. Otherwise we risk pathologising and medicalising poverty and other related phenomena such as racism (Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University 2016). No amount of medication and/or psychological intervention, will take the place of job training for those who want to increase their skills. Similarly family friendly measures for parents with caring responsibilities, good health care, innovation and the revival of a sense of community in our neighbourhoods and housing policies that create social cohesion rather than cluster vulnerable families together are but some of the initiatives that would have a direct influence on child and family wellbeing. Examples of policies start from having the basics right. It is only then that we can venture further.

What family policies?

The Report of the United Nations Expert Group meeting held in New York in May 2016 is very exhaustive and puts forward a whole array of family policies that would contribute to the achievement of many of the SDGs.

I will build on those policies by including aspects of the policies that were not highlighted, provide an understanding of how these policies need to be taken on board including the empirical research informing these policies and more in depth understanding of the processes involved.

I will highlight 4 areas of family policy that would undoubtedly contribute towards the achievement of the sustainable goals. These include a family focus on early intervention, the involvement of parents in the education of their children, preventive policies that eradicate violence in the family and labour policies that unlock female potential. My suggestions are by no means exhaustive but I have limited my choice of policies given that this is meant to be a brief paper.

A family focus on early intervention can support 'win-wins' for family and sustainable goals in the context of Agenda 2030

I would like to argue that a family focus in the early years can support the SDGs in a massive way. In terms of early intervention, in SDG 3, member states have committed themselves to safeguard healthy lives with a special emphasis on children and maternal mortality. Usually the infant mortality rate, which is the number of deaths per thousand of infants under one year, is an indicator of the

level of health in a country. The UN Expert report highlights the importance of ending preventable deaths and providing reproductive and health care services. Ensuring health visits, immunizations and proper treatment in times of illness are also highlighted. The parents are considered as the primary carers of their children and the experts argue (and rightly so) that their level of care will reflect the level of preventive care that the children receive. Though the prevention of maternal mortality is still considered central to maternal health indicator, I am in agreement with WHO who are giving increased importance to mental health “in the integrated delivery of services for maternal and child care”. The 2016 family expert group recommendations also highlight the importance of taking into account mental health care services for all ages. In the area of perinatal mental health, the WHO Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020 points out that the need to take care of the mental health of mothers and their infants in the perinatal period is also felt in low and middle income countries. According to WHO, the incidence of perinatal mental illness (usually depression) in the mother is about 10% during pregnancy and 13% for mothers who have just given birth. In developing countries the prevalence is higher; 15.6% during pregnancy and almost 20% after child birth. The mothers who are affected cannot function properly and as a result the baby’s development is affected as well. Suicide is an important serious consequence. Psychosis is much less common but can in rare cases lead to infanticide. The treating of depression in the mother leads to improved development in the baby and reduces the likelihood of diarrhea and malnutrition among them. Poverty, migration, domestic violence, war and conflict situations, natural disasters and low social support exacerbate the risks for mental disorders and professionals need to keep in mind the social

determinants of mental illness. In this respect, the implementation of the other SDGs if taking place in synergy, as they should, would maximize family well-being and good mental and physical health.

Antenatal services and the importance of screening

Antenatal services are a great opportunity for professionals such as the midwife and the obstetrician to connect with the expectant mother and father to be, who normally accompanies the mother to hospital.

This appointment presents a golden opportunity for routine screening related to the mental health of the expectant mother and any adverse situations in the home (such as poverty or the presence of violence). Such screening could be carried out as part of the first assessment. Specially trained midwives are ideally placed to carry out such work in a *non invasive* way. The importance of screening is reflected in one of the policy actions of a national strategic policy on positive parenting which we wrote (Abela and Lanfranco 2016) and which was published by the Maltese Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity.

The cost benefit analyses of proper screening and timely intervention are remarkable. If we had to simply focus on the mother's mental health, a study carried out in 2014 by the Centre of Mental Health and the LSE in the UK shows that when the mental health of the mother during the perinatal period is untreated, this would impose costs of around 10,000 sterling for every birth for society as a whole. Almost three quarters of the adverse impacts (72%) are

endured by the child! With a much smaller amount, calculated at 400 sterling per birth, mothers can recover from these illnesses (Centre for Mental Health and LSE October 2014).

Family Services in the Community

Screening presupposes that parents in need of support and follow up are referred to the appropriate service in the community. In this respect families cannot function if they do not live in sustainable communities (SDG 11). Perinatal services forming part of the health services in the community could be ideal in helping mothers and their families when the mother is facing mental health problems. Family resource Centres in the community are easy to reach and non stigmatizing and could be set up as one stop shops. WHO explain how maternal mental health programmes have also started in low and middle income countries by making use of low cost interventions with the involvement of non-specialised or community health providers.

With regards to the prevention of violence and promoting harmony and stability within the family, recruiting couples for relationship education during the transition to parenthood was considered better in terms of reaching new parents who are at risk for future relationship problems (Petch et al 2012). The authors noted that 30% of them had three or more risk factors, including inter-partner violence. Becoming parents made the couple more open to invest in their relationship. Courses which are preventative in nature enhance wellbeing not only for the couple but also for the children . In a context where 35% of women around the world experience physical and/or sexual abuse from a current or

previous partner and where as many as 35% of murders of women are committed by an intimate partner (WHO 2016), promoting harmonious and respectful relationships between parents is an excellent way how to achieve wellbeing (SDG 3) and gender equality(SDG 5) .

Moreover more than one billion children are victims of violence around the world. Most of these children witness incidents of violence in their own homes and/or are in turn abused by close family members. Within the context of the sustainable development agenda, families need to be the first cradle where a zero tolerance to violence is fostered, where children see parents who respect each other in the face of difference and who are able to manage conflict in a skillful manner and where resilience in the face of adversity is learnt and fostered. Solidarity and support from family services in the community will provide splendid opportunities for our families to stand up for what is right and just and to prevent and object to violence under any circumstance.

Relationship education between the couple needs to be complimented by positive parenting programmes where the children are witnessing and/or end up victims of abuse. Child abuse has very grave consequences and is even considered to be the gravest and most costly public health issue in the United States. It is for this reason that a preventive approach would be very cost effective and would support parents in creating the right environment for their children to grow harmoniously and develop to their full potential rather than live in fear, maltreatment and neglect which has a deleterious effect on their emotional and cognitive development. Furthermore the setting up of Domestic

Violence Services and a legal framework that protects our families and our communities from unsafe and difficult situations are a must if we wish to work towards building families free from violence (Sammut Scerri, Vetere, Abela & Cooper 2017). This augurs well for the future building of peace, justice and strong institutions.

Early childhood education in the context of early intervention

Parenting programmes and other opportunities for promoting early childhood education during the transition to parenthood and in the early years may be considered as a great opportunity for promoting quality education (SDG 4) to our children.

As a matter of fact the U.N dedicated this year's observance of the International Day of Families 2017 to families, education and wellbeing highlighting awareness on the role of families in promoting early childhood education. This is because as I have explained at length elsewhere (Abela 2017) the early years are critical years in the child's development. In the first years the human brain goes through the fastest developmental growth ever. 1.8 million new synapses per second are occurring between 2 months of gestation and two years after which pruning occurs. It then becomes more challenging to build more sophisticated cognitive, social and emotional skills when the foundation is not robust (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016). Parents and young children living in disadvantage and poverty experience multiple stressors. They get stressed, depressed, anxious and sometimes uncontained and babies and

infants are not immune to the emotional states of their parents. These emotional states disrupt the parenting behaviour (Conger, Reuter & Conger 2000). To grow infants need warm consistent and nurturing caregiving and the wellbeing of parents is considered as crucial for the baby's optimum development. Parents provide the facilitating environment for children to develop well through their attunement with their infants and the quality of interaction and stimulation which they provide. Vulnerable parents who are often living in disadvantaged backgrounds may need more financial, psychological and pedagogical support in the upbringing of their children. Home visits, parenting programmes in the community and the parents' involvement in the education of their children in child care centres (where these exist) may make a big difference in the child's emotional and cognitive development. Parents who are calm are more attuned with their children, keep them in mind and relate to them more easily. They are keen to invest in their children's learning. The more educated the parents are, the more they are keen to do so. The latter talk, sing and read more to their infants at a very early age. It is estimated that by the time children reach 3 years old, children living in disadvantage will have heard 30 million fewer words than their privileged peers. There is a whole body of research which shows that already by age two, there is a significant cognitive difference between children living in poverty and those who do not and this continues to be visible and even increases over the years. Recent research by psychologists from Stanford University reveals that 2 year-old children from lower-income families may already be six months behind in language development (Stanford Report Sept 25 2013). This further emphasises the point that inequality in the early stages of development will lead to disadvantage and it is only through early intervention

that SDGs 4 (Quality education) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities) can be truly achieved. Eventually a good education will have an impact on SDG 8 which is decent work and economic growth.

Parental involvement in the education of their children

The provision of quality education (SDG 4) also necessitates parental involvement not only in the early years but also throughout their education. This is because research shows that family variables such as the educational style of the parents, their level of acceptance of their children, parental involvement including participation in school activities, personal interest shown by parents towards their children and parental expectations have a significant influence on the children's performance (Casanova, Cruz García-Linares, de la Torre, & de la Villa Carpio, 2005). In this respect, schools must bring parents on board as important partners in their children's education. They would do so by building a collaborative relationships with parents especially with those whose children are at risk of disengaging from school.

Unlocking female potential in the world of work

Unlocking female potential and by so doing promoting gender equality (SDG 5) and reducing inequality (SDG10) has been and still is an uphill struggle. Very often it is the economy that propels governments (mostly composed of men) to promote family policies that would facilitate women's entry into the labour market. I have witnessed this happening in my country. Female employment has been vigorously promoted in order to sustain statutory pensions offered by the State. For this reason, the female employment rate has been steadily going up

between 2005 and 2015 from 31.6% in 2001 to 51.5% in 2015 (+19.9%) which makes it the largest and most rapid increase in Europe (European Commission 2016). Nevertheless Malta has the third lowest female employment rate in the EU 28. Malta also has the highest Glass Ceiling index at European Union (EU) level (European Commission, 2013) and the number of women in politics has gone down. It also ranks last among 28 member states regarding leadership roles in organisations (Gender Equality Index 2017). Malta is now considering positive discrimination to give women the opportunity to hold leadership roles in the country. Labour laws that are anti discriminatory and family friendly measures including adequate maternity and paternity leave, the introduction of free child care and measures that seek to create a balance between home and work are measures that have already been mentioned by the UN Nations Expert report as conducive to more gender equality between the sexes.

4. How to address Youth within the context of family policies to enhance the Demographic Dividend and its contribution to attending the SDGs?

One cannot address youth once the children grow up. As I have explained at length earlier on, one needs to invest in children from before birth. The gains are cumulative. It is very difficult for a child who has found it difficult to follow at school in the early years not to disengage from school early. The family can be of great support if the parents or main caregivers are involved as explained earlier on. Moreover the involvement of the father in the children's education is determinant to the child's educational achievement. Positive parenting mentioned earlier on will foster a relationship of trust between adolescents and

their parents. This type of relationship is very valuable for adolescents in this very delicate period of their development. It gives them the spaces to open up with their parents and discuss and seek help in areas where they feel vulnerable (Abela, Casha, Schembri, Galea and Farrugia 2013). Ultimately it is the investment that our children make in their education that will largely determine a better quality of life for them and their families and society as a whole. SDGs4, 8 and 10 are particularly highlighted throughout this process.

Conclusion

The family is like a golden thread that gives a sense of purpose for the SDGs to be achieved. Family members especially caregivers but also children also aspire to reach these goals such an achievement enhances their dignity and their sense of wellbeing. Ultimately however the family cannot function in isolation. The different actors involved need to come together and work collaboratively in the belief that we are capable of building a better world that is more just, democratic and humane. Without this capacity for joined up work, this important but ambitious strategy cannot be coordinated in a systemic way (Carey, Berquist, Dillon, Galanes 2004). Synergy and team work among the different actors including those focusing on and representing families is therefore crucial in the successful achievement of Agenda 2030.

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