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First Call for Children

The essential needs of children should be given priority in bad times as well as good — Plan of Action, World Summit for Children

Family connections



A Kurdish family in Erbil, northern Iraq. Families, the first line of defence for children, are under new stresses.

This year, as the world accelerates towards the widely endorsed mid-decade goals for children, it also commemorates the International Year of the Family. The convergence affords yet another avenue through which to channel the already strong efforts countries are making to reach the targets for 1995.

Progress towards the mid-decade goals occurs one child at a time and nowhere is a more reliable and resourceful ally in the process to be found than in the family. It is families who ensure their children are immunized, families who mix and give oral rehydration salts, who demand and use iodized salt. It is families who can see the goals most clearly — at the crucial point where they intersect, at the child.

This issue of *First Call for Children* marks the beginning of the Year of the Family by looking at some of the issues facing societies' basic unit in this age of challenge and transition. We also report on the growing proof of the good effects of vitamin A, the amazing coalition — Pact for Children — that is making such progress for children in Brazil, and the new collaboration between non-governmental organizations and the Committee on the Rights of the Child.



Today, one out of every three households in the world is headed by a woman. Here are two Guatemalan women with their children.

A year to renew the family

The family unit, buffeted by economic and social change, faces uncertainty and challenge. In recognition of both the power and needs of families, the United Nations General Assembly, has named 1994 the International Year of the Family (IYF).

Helping governments, policy makers and the public understand the role and strength of this unit, which has for so long been taken for granted, is an important goal of IYF, as it celebrates and supports "the smallest democracy at the heart of society."

Increasing poverty, urban migration, political transformation and social and technological change have all profoundly affected families around the world. In many instances, the pace of change is outstripping the capacity of families to adapt and to meet the basic needs of some of their members.

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Year of the Family

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A single, universal definition no longer fits, as family form and function evolve.

All families, however, share a role and responsibility to provide emotional and financial support to members, particularly infants and children. The family remains a primary source of nurture, as well as a conduit for values, culture and information. In a broader sense, the family strengthens individuals and acts as a vital resource for development.

"The family is the first line of defense for the child and a major factor in the survival, health, education, social development and protection of children," says Sreelakshmi Gururaja, Project Officer, Women's Development Programme at UNICEF. The love or fear, confidence or insecurity children experience while in their parents' care will inevitably colour their view of the world.

"We don't quite know how children will be affected by the transitions we see today, but we're now seeing the risks involved in transition," says Donald Wertlieb, Director of the Center for Applied Child Development at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts (US). "Without proper support and without replacement of the family's function, children grow up without their basic needs — shelter, food and security — met."

Unemployment's toll

Families are losing their ability to adapt to reversals in income. Social services budgets have been slashed because of faltering economies in the industrialized world and structural adjustment policies in developing countries. Unemployment rates are on the rise in many parts of the world, with young people particularly vulnerable.

In Poland, for instance, the youth unemployment rate is twice that of average. In Romania, one third of all registered unemployed are under 25 years of age; in Bulgaria, 43 per cent are under 30. Long-term unemployment is increasing and, since most unemployed youth are unskilled, hopes of reintegration are scant.

Families fall apart

Unemployment and the resulting loss of income can precipitate family break-ups; psychic and nervous strain, even suicide; homelessness; drug abuse and violence.

"It is very difficult to have loving, caring relationships when you have the emotions of hunger, anger and desperation," says M. Janice Hogan, Professor in the Department of Family Social Science at the College of Human Ecology at the University of Minnesota (USA).

In Chile, one out of every seven children is born of a teenage mother and domestic violence occurs in one out of every four households, according to the Minister in charge of the National Women's Service. Rapid changes in Chilean society — democratization, accelerated economic growth, urbanization, the entry of women into the workforce, greater mass media coverage emphasizing both consumerism and violence — have placed new demands on the family. Frustration, outbursts of brutality, individualism, solitude and family disintegration have all appeared.

According to a report released by the United Nations, women in Burundi, Rwanda and Zaire have been forced to play a greater role as providers, competing with men in the informal sector because of economic pressures. Children are leaving school earlier to contribute to the economic survival of the household and they are swelling the ranks of street children.

Participants at a meeting on the situ-

ation of families in Asia and the Pacific discussed the social changes the region was experiencing, leading to greater numbers of children in difficult circumstances, including those living or working on the street, and a higher incidence and severity of child abuse, juvenile crime and substance abuse.

"The problems of unmet needs of children stem from the poverty of families, the gender inequalities, the environmental deprivations in which they live and their lack of access to basic knowledge, skills and resources necessary for protection, survival and development," says Ms. Gururaja.

Women's changing roles

Perhaps the most significant impact of economic and demographic change has been on women. Today, in one out of every three households in the world, a woman is the sole breadwinner.

A number of factors are at play: Migration and economic recession have led more women to work outside the household, and more marriages now end in divorce.

Women's work inside the home doubles their burden. "Women are spending increasing time working both in and out of households, and receiving less recognition of their contributions," says Georgianne Baker, Associate Director of Women's Studies at Arizona State University at Tempe (US), who is leading a workshop on Families and Gender Equity Education, in Valletta (Malta) at the NGO Forum to launch IYF (28 Nov.-2 Dec.). "They need support from other members of the family."

Among the year's goals will be advocating for an expanded role for fathers, as nurturers, educators and sources of emotional support.

Support is needed

The retreat of governments from a leading role in providing social services may leave families, often only marginally prepared, to assume the responsibility.

The Human Development Report 1992, issued by the UN Development Programme, concludes that if developing countries are to trade on an equal basis with industrialized countries, they will need massive investments in people, enlarging their opportunities for education, health care, income and employment.

G. Andrea Cornia, Senior Project Officer at the UNICEF International Child Development Centre in Florence (Italy), agrees, emphasizing that economic factors influence families the same way they influence individuals. "If you want to help families, give them the same support you would give individuals," he says.

One solution that can ease the burden of mothers entering the workforce is providing subsidized day-care services, according to Samuel Kojo Andoh, Associate Professor of Economics at the Southern Connecticut State University (US), who stresses that such an investment could pay off significantly years later. "In the short term, countries are doing away with social services that may balance the budget, but deny the mother an opportunity to enter the labour force," says Mr. Andoh. "Sometimes we stress short-term objectives at the expense of long-term ones."

It has become clear that greater opportunities — and funding — are contingent on political will. "Policies and initiatives have to make living wages a reality," says Ms. Hogan. "The community has to find ways for people to get jobs, education and health care."

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