

GOVERNMENT POLICIES SUPPORTING FAMILY NETWORKS: BEST PRACTICES FROM THE POLICY AREA OF AGEING

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This presentation is focused on national policy and programmes on ageing that have the family in the centre of policy interventions. The main content of the presentation is a brief account of concrete national policies and programmes instituted in support of family networks. Most of the presented examples originated in the policy area of ageing and were obtained during the first global review and appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing in 2007-2008.

Family remains the major “sight” of individual development and inter-generational interactions in practically all the societies. As such, it could also be considered the principal sight of social policy action, including policy action on ageing.

Old age is associated with the increased probability of disease and disability. Demographic transition to an ageing society increases the absolute and relative numbers of older persons in society, hence the rising demand for care. Declining mortality and fertility – two major factors of demographic transition – are also behind the family transition from the extended family to the nuclear family. Migration from rural to urban areas has also been a contributing factor to shrinking the size of the family.

Family transition is leading to changes in living arrangements for older persons. While living arrangements for older persons vary greatly both among and within countries, in most countries there is a slow but increasing tendency towards solitary living. This pattern is more visible in developed countries: in the last decade of the previous century the proportion of older persons living alone was highest in Europe and North America, reaching about 16 percent for older males and 37 percent for older females. The lowest proportion of older persons living alone was noted in Asia: ranging between 3.2 percent for older males and 8.6 percent for older females.²

With the increasing prevalence of the nuclear family and the growing number of older persons living alone, older persons are less likely to obtain support from their kin in times of increasing need or a temporary crisis. Another compounding factor is the growing labour force participation of women – traditionally the major providers of informal care.

The widening gap in informal support and care has to be filled with formal social services – where these are available. In developing countries, their availability is problematic as many of these countries have traditionally relied on a social support system that provides support for older persons within the extended family. Compounding the problem is the “brain drain” of skilled health and social care professionals from developing to developed countries. The shortage of care

1 UN Programme on Ageing

2 Ibid

personal and the diminishing resources of community care lead to numerous cases of neglect or inappropriate care of older persons.

Provision of appropriate support and care to older persons has recently been in the centre of public debate. Meanwhile, older persons should not be seen only as dependent and passive care receivers of various types of support and care. They play an important role within their families and communities providing vital support, including financial support, and care to younger generations as well as other dependants, including other older persons. Older people continue to participate actively in family dynamics and in negotiating generational responsibility and support. Understanding these dynamics as well as the needs and resources of individuals, families and communities, is crucial for ageing policies that take an intergenerational dimension into account.³

The centrality of the family in addressing the needs and expectations of older persons was firmly established at the international policy level during the first World Assembly on Ageing in 1982, and nine years later, in 1991, in the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, which reaffirmed the recommendations of the Vienna Plan of Action through eighteen principles of the *independence, participation, care, self-fulfillment and dignity* of older persons.

In 2002, the Second World Assembly adopted the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing – a universal framework for policy action on ageing in the twenty-first century. One of the central themes of the Madrid Plan of Action underlines the need to recognize *the crucial importance of families, intergenerational interdependence, solidarity and reciprocity for social development*. The Madrid Plan of Action also contains numerous recommendations with reference to the family.

During the first five years (2002 – 2007) of the implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action, the focus of policy responses to the challenges and opportunities of ageing have been different in different parts of the world. The analysis of the findings of the first review and appraisal reveals that most of the family-centered policy interventions on ageing are focused on the following areas: income security (social protection); social care, particularly long-term care, social services; and health care. Very limited number of policies and programmes had “developmental” orientation aiming to identify and utilize the potential of older persons to contribute to societal development in various areas (e.g., economic, social, cultural, etc.) and at different levels (e.g., family, community, state, etc.).