Foreword

The professionalism of this book makes it fascinating reading. Perhaps as fascinating as the International Year of the Family itself. The unanimous proclamation by the General Assembly of the United Nations of 1994 as International Year of the Family (IYF) was proof of the global concern over the future of the family and the growing interest in family issues around the world. Although there had been a certain “fatigue” with events of this kind, an international year devoted to the family was thought to be the type of subject that lent itself to the setting and achieving of tangible objectives with a common unifying motif: to bring together threads of social life that until recently had been treated separately and disjointedly.

Similar events of the past had stressed a sectoral approach to social problems by concentrating on selected aspects of human development (such as gender equality, children, the elderly, disabled members of families, drug abuse, crime prevention, violence in the family, environmental issues). In contrast, the subject of families offered a much more comprehensive and, at the same time, synthesizing approach, since families represented the fullest reflection, at the grassroots level, of the social and developmental welfare environment. Families bring down several important social issues to a common denominator of action. This proved to be an extremely important function of IYF on the eve of the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen, Denmark, in March 1995, as well as in the light of a series of other global conferences of the 1990s, notably the World Summit for Children, United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, World Conference on Human Rights,
International Conference on Population and Development, and the Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development, and Peace. Thus, IYF was not an isolated project, one taking place in a vacuum. It had been conceived and pursued in full harmony with the overall development efforts of the international community. In fact, it constituted a major step toward human-centered sustainable development. This intimacy and essentiality of IYF to the global processes became all the more striking in the context of the definition of human development as “development of the people, for the people and by the people.”

The theme of IYF, “Family: resources and responsibilities in a changing world,” was pragmatic enough, with emphasis on increasing awareness of family issues among governments as well as in the private sector: to highlight the importance of families, encourage a better understanding of their functions and problems, promote knowledge of the economic, social, and demographic processes affecting families, and focus attention upon the rights and responsibilities of family members. Its motto, *Building the smallest democracy at the heart of society*, depicted the everlasting truth that democracy is a way of life that needs to be learned and practiced. Family, as the heart of society, is democracy’s fundamental learning place. Families founded on the principles of equality, the inviolability of the rights and responsibilities of the individual, mutual respect, love, and tolerance can be a natural cradle of democracy. Such families are the foundation for the well-being of individuals, societies, and nations. Efforts to build a civil society, based on the principles of human rights and democracy, can succeed only when these principles are learned, practiced, and respected in families. This is both a message and a challenge of a tall order: to work together toward a human society where children and adolescents feel that their voices are heard, and where men and women live in partnership, based on equality and mutual respect. Only then can there be a well-functioning two-way communication between the community at the grassroots level and society at large. Only then can children come to understand the underlying principles of democracy and how to integrate them in their own personalities and daily life.

The rationale behind IYF was loud and clear: families are, and have been, universally present and recognized in some form in all societies. In all cases, they have been fundamentally important to the structure and action of societies of which they are part. Families are basic, fundamental elements of the human experience and builders of social cohesion. They
offer an integrated approach to social progress and development, with a view to instituting family-sensitive policies in family-friendly societies.

In what we used to refer to as the “global village,” the notion of the family can have many meanings. The world has shrunk. The concept of the family has expanded: from blood relations and ties based on affection, to veritable community of interest, self-support, and mutual advantage. We can also observe this dynamic process in Europe and North America, where family issues remain a “hot topic.” In the overwhelming majority of cases, people would still be ready to paraphrase Winston Churchill: Right or wrong—my family; or reword another English saying: My family—my castle. Yet, it is equally true that too many women, men, and children cannot but conclude: My family—my drama, my tragedy. This is why it would be utterly wrong to either idealize or condemn the family institution.

War, violence, extreme poverty, social exclusion, substance abuse, hunger, gender discrimination, domestic violence, and disease are just a few of the numerous specters haunting families everywhere. The recent sociopolitical transitions in many countries have placed millions of families in totally alien situations, left to themselves without support to survive under the emerging mechanisms of market economies. The current number of refugee families is unprecedented in history. Many families, especially those headed by single-parent females, find the constant need to balance work and familial responsibilities to be among the most demanding aspects of daily life. With severe fiscal pressures, social services are cut back, reducing the safety net for the population at the very time when it is most needed.

Fundamental to the notion of family seems to be a dichotomy between the presence of the repressive, hierarchical structures of family life and the absence of a sense of moral obligation, awareness, and solidarity concerning others’ needs and rights; the dichotomy between power and control, on the one hand, and the equal and inalienable rights of all family members, on the other; the dichotomy between the major components of what the secretary-general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, defines as uncivil society and the makings of its civil antonym. When a family rests at, or descends to, the point where the basic human rights of individual members are endangered by others within the unit, the costs to the individual and the greater society cannot be measured in any currency. When poverty is allowed to become so extreme that parents mutilate their own children to make them more successful as beggars in the
street, we have all somehow failed. When a child takes his or her life in desperation and in fear, something important dies in all of us. Life in a repressive family, which has no respect for the rights of its members, can be an experience even harsher than functioning in a repressive society. Both are unacceptable. Societies cannot be healthy as long as families are haunted by the specter of disrespect for duly established international standards. The power of the family, therefore, must be limited by the basic human rights of its individual members.

When, in the late 1980s, in the United Nations, Poland first proposed the proclamation of an international year of the family, there were concerns that a focus on families would polarize debate on family issues and intensify existing controversies. There was also a concern that a focus on families might somehow detract from the positive developments for and by particular social groups, notably women and children.

Ultimately, what we experienced was quite the opposite because the International Year of the Family was built on convictions. It confirmed the centrality of families as the natural, primary, and fundamental group units of society. It firmly placed them on the social agenda and reaffirmed their central importance to understanding and addressing a wide array of social issues. Through a family focus, IYF has offered a powerful integrating factor to social development issues, underscored by the strong interdisciplinary and multisectoral preparations and observances in most countries of the world, involving various levels of society. It has given a renewed impetus to the concepts of empowerment and subsidiarity and thrown into sharp relief the need for international cooperation and exchange of experience through the United Nations system.

The book in your hands is an eloquent plea on behalf of the world’s families. It is an appeal for action to governments, international and non-governmental organizations, societies, and families themselves. Its authors have been consistent in writing it in a pro-family and UN-friendly language. Still, they readily concede that their “suggestions and recommendations should not be interpreted as rigid prescriptions,” since families, as the oldest and most enduring social institutions in every nation of the world, “vary across nations and cultures, and they have evolved over time.” By closely following the preparations to, and the observances of, the International Year of the Family, the authors have earned additional credentials to deal with what continues to be a sensitive subject of international discourse. Proceeding from the belief that the world’s families have more in common than not, they have advanced considerably
the search for a common denominator of approach. Their findings, too, sustain the conclusion that “the idea of family advocacy, as a key part of citizenship, is feasible and desirable.” The crux of the matter, however, is that “unless advocates and leaders recognize the diversity in each family system’s composition, goals, aspirations, and unique ways of knowing and acting, they will not be positioned to help these families.” This book is, therefore, a special attempt to understand the significance of families as a follow-up to IYF and tangible evidence that “they can no longer be taken for granted, ignored, and neglected.”

The International Year of the Family has made a clear mark on the international consciousness and moved families to the forefront of the debate. Although we have not yet reached our destination and a much longer distance remains to be covered, after 1994 the world is not the same on the subject of families. It remains to be hoped that IYF and its follow-up will have also firmly placed families as an essential focus of social policy action and a foundation upon which we can confidently look to the future we leave the generations to come.

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