

THE FAMILY: A SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Ahmed Mohamed Aref

Family Policy Specialist

Doha International Family Institute,

Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, Doha, Qatar.

Corresponding author: aaref@qf.org.qa

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Abstract: This brief paper is to draw special attention to the impact of the family -as a social capital- on sustainable development, and will highlight the importance of using a family approach in designing sustainable development policies and strategies, and how empowering the family is fundamental for the state and the society at large.

By reviewing the literature and empirical research, this paper will provide indicators to prove the positive impact of the family on sustainable development. The relationship between both variables will be examined through the following indicators; family capital and prevention of the intergenerational transmission of poverty, family stability and environmental sustainability, family capital and children development, family capital and intergenerational solidarity, and family wellbeing and socioeconomic development.

Keywords: Development, Family, Family Capital, Social Capital, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

As stated at the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 16 (3)* "The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State". However, in recent decades, the focus usually of international discussions when tackling human sustainable development is on individual approaches, - such as women empowerment, people with disabilities, ageing, youth empowerment and child rights- rather than focusing on the family as the basic unit and natural environment which includes men, women, youth, children and elderly. Adopting the family approach not only beneficial for individuals within the family, but also essential for the whole community.

There are two reasons behind neglecting the family approach in sustainable development; first, there is no international consensus on the definition of the family, as there are two different views, one affirms on the natural family which consists of legitimate married father and mother and their children, the other recognizes different types of families. Second reason is that the family has been usually seen as a subject to assistance and a recipient of development instead of being seen as a driver to development. So this paper presents an attempt to gather the indicators of the impact of the family as a social capital in sustainable development, and accordingly will answer the question; what is the importance of family approach in designing sustainable development policies and strategies?

Looking at the related literature, there is lack of contributions that link the family with explicitly sustainable development. One of these literature is "*Family, Economics, and Sustainable Development*" by Maria Sophia Aguirre who argued through evidence based research that the family is a resource for economic development and should be the point of reference to achieve sustainable development. There is more literature linking the family with development in general. For example "*The Family and the MDGs: Using Family Capital to Achieve the 8 Millennium Development Goals*", by Susan Roynance and other authors. The book shows how healthy and stable families contribute towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The concept of "family capital" in this book describes the resources the family unit can bring towards accomplishing important goals in society. Not only

academic literature, but also there are a lot of strong calls and declarations supporting the family from various regions all over the world. One of the most recent international contributions is the “2014 Doha Call to Action”, a result of the international conference organized by the Doha international Family Institute in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the International Year of the Family. The theme of the conference was “Empowering Families: A Pathway to Development”. The Doha Call to Action provides a set of actions aiming at empowering families to fulfill their numerous functions, and accordingly contribute to development.

Indicators to examine the impact of the family on sustainable development:

In order to understand the argument that the family is considered as a social capital and a key driver for sustainable development; the following indicators will highlight the interactive relationship between the family and sustainable development:

1. Family capital and prevention of the intergenerational transmission of poverty

When the international community set the MDGs, the first goal was to eradicate poverty as eradicating poverty among other factors assumes a critical role in human wellbeing and social development. The core issue when linking poverty with sustainable development is the intergenerational transmission of poverty. It is defined as the transfer of poverty from one generation to another, including the key deficits in assets and resources (Bird, 2007).

A study conducted by the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW Berlin) titled “*The Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty in Industrialized Countries*” highlighted the fact that the link between child poverty and later poverty in adult life has risen over time. The paper showed by empirical evidence that the poor children are more likely to be poor as adults compared to non-poor children (Jenkins and Siedler, 2007).

Recognizing the importance of the family as the starting point of prevention of the intergenerational transmission of poverty from the older generations to the younger ones, family oriented strategies has been increasingly gaining ground in development efforts around the world, particularly when designing social protection policies such as cash transfer programs targeting families living in poverty or at risk of poverty, family tax incentives and child support allowances (Royle, 2012). By such policies, the goal will be achieved to address child poverty and to break the intergenerational transfer of poverty.

Consequently, it is essential to use the family as a unit of analysis when developing poverty reduction policies within a sustainable development approach, as strengthening the family will prevent transmission of chronic poverty to next generations.

2. Family stability and environmental sustainability

Environment is the foremost cornerstone when tackling sustainable development. At the Rio+20 United Nations conference on sustainable development, countries agreed to establish an intergovernmental process to develop a set of "action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate" sustainable development goals (SDGs) to help drive the implementation of sustainable development, also, ensuring environmental sustainability is one of the MDGs.

To a huge extent, family stability has its direct and significant impact on environmental sustainability through the prevention of escalating resource use and environmental degradation, as married couple living in the same house consumes less resources; electricity, water, and oil than being divorced living in two separate households.

A research study conducted by the Center for Systems Integration and Sustainability, Michigan State University titled “*Environmental impacts of divorce*”; pointed out that in the United States of America in 2005, divorced households spent 46% and 56% more on electricity and water per person than married households. Divorced households could have saved more than 38 million rooms, 73 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity, and 627 billion gallons of water if their resource-use efficiency had been comparable to married households. Furthermore, United States households that experienced divorce used 42–61% more resources per person than before their dissolution (Yu and Liu, 2007).

3. Family capital and children development

Healthy families and stable childhoods are the foundation of strong society. Based on this fact, normal nurturing within a stable family is critical for the development and the wellbeing of a child. The parenting function within a stable family has its productive impact on children development compared to children raised outside families or within fragmented ones.

Findings from several research studies indicate that certain effects of divorce are quite persistent on the development of children educationally, physically, socially and emotionally. A study of 10 years follow-up on a sample of children of divorce found out the following effects on the children (Matthews, 1997):

- (a) A dominant feeling of sorrow about their parents' divorce still existed after 10 years.
- (b) Physically, the participants of the study reported poorer physical health than children from stable families.
- (c) Emotionally, they indicated persistent problems with the following:
 - Fears of betrayal, abandonment, loss, and rejection.
 - Rising anxiety in late teens and early 20s feelings and memories about their parents' divorce arise with new intensity as they enter adulthood.
 - Life-long vulnerability to the experience of loss.
 - Anger, resentment, and hostility.
 - A reduction in psychological well-being.
 - Depression in young adulthood.
 - Low life satisfaction.
- (d) Socially, the children's relationships in later life were affected as follows:
 - Divorcing parents apparently set the stage for children's poor relationships.
 - Reduction in the ability to develop and maintain supportive friendships and social relationships.
 - Children of divorce are more likely themselves to divorce as adults.
 - Earlier sexual intercourse.
 - Delinquent behaviors.
 - Daughters of divorce are more likely to marry and have children early, give birth before marriage, get divorce
 - Fear of repeating his or her parents' failure to maintain a loving relationship.
 - Fear of commitment and intimacy.
 - Less trust in future spouse.
 - Reduction of inhibitions toward divorce as a solution for marital difficulties.

Another study took place between 2003 and 2008 to examine the long-term effects of parental separation using survey covering 14 countries: Australia, Austria, France, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Hungary, Estonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Georgia, and Russia. The study found that parental breakdown is associated with negative long-term consequences for children's educational attainment. On average across countries, 83% of children within breakdown families are more likely to get lower educational attainment at the primary and secondary levels and accordingly less access to universities (Bernardi and Radl, 2014).

4. Family capital and intergenerational solidarity

Investing in new generations is a principal base of sustainable development. Family is the root environment to invest in new generations and at the same time to take care of the old generations. Solidarity between generations enriches the well-functioning of the family and accordingly it contributes to the community development. The variable of intergenerational solidarity affects sustainable development, as follows:

- (a) Culturally; enhancing intergenerational solidarity helps to protect cultural heritage, because the grandparents act as the repositories and transmitters of culture and values to the youth and children. (Callan, 2014).
- (b) Financially; the involvement of grandparents in family life as caregivers reduce the financial burden of childcare on the state level. For example, in the Unites States, 7.4 million children live in households headed by a grandparent or other relative, known as 'grand families'. These older caregivers provide an

incredible service for their families and their government by reducing the burden on both. It is estimated that grand families save United States taxpayers more than US \$ 6.5 billion a year by keeping children and youth out of the government-funded foster care system (Butts, 2014). Furthermore, caring for elderly within extended family reduces the governmental expenditure on elderly care systems.

- (c) Physically and emotionally; intergenerational solidarity provide mutual beneficial exchanges between generations, as studies showed that extended families have better physical health especially for members with disabilities than nuclear families. Emotionally, intergenerational ties provide emotional fulfillment for elderly by reducing their isolation, providing them the opportunity to learn new skills, as well as providing the new generations with a caring and loving environment which enhances the sense of carefulness and commitment (Pashollari, 2014).

5. Family wellbeing and socioeconomic development

Part of improving a state's welfare regime and getting more people's productivity is to have policies for improving family wellbeing including; improving income and living standards, providing parental protection policies, reducing family breakdown, enhancing family and work balance and developing childcare systems.

Here are two assumed examples to understand the relationship between family wellbeing and socioeconomic development. First, when providing a range of maternity and paternity leave policies, it is targeting the family explicitly, but it has implicitly its positive impact on the state's level as the working mother and father will give more time and care for the child to be in a better health, subsequently, that will reduce the burden on the state's childcare expenses, also the working mother or father will be more satisfied and more productive in work. Second example, when the state designs policies to reduce family breakdown, it is directed to family, but has its indirect positive impact on the society and the state, in terms of diminishing the expenses spent on divorce issues in judicial systems, and avoiding negative social implications of divorce.

A study titled "*Socioeconomic Status, Family Processes, and Individual Development*" found that in the United States, child poverty costs society up to \$500 billion annually (estimates range from one to four percent of GDP) in lost productivity and increased public spending, including child health care and the criminal justice system. The study also mentioned that the programs targeted at increasing parental income, including education and training programs and work supports, have demonstrated improvement in family wellbeing and state's economic development, for instance, when reducing the gap between higher and lower income students in terms of their access to and success in post-secondary education, that would generate more than \$250 billion in GDP and approximately \$85 billion in additional tax revenue (Center for the study of Social Policy, 2010).

Another empirical evidence research showed that greater income and financial resources -as indicator of socio economic development- are positively associated with marital stability. On the other hand, a number of reports have shown that low income, financial instability, or economic problems are associated with lower levels of marital stability (Conger and Martin, 2010).

Consequently, assigning policies for family wellbeing is critical not only for the family but also for the country's socioeconomic development.

Conclusion

Adopting a family approach in designing sustainable development policies and strategies is not only beneficial for the family, but also fundamental for the state and the society at large. By looking at the empirical evidence based research across countries; family perspective should be the premier cornerstone if sustainable development policies are to be achieved. Empowering the family and enhancing the family stability are crucial inputs in the sustainable development process. By doing so; the prevention of intergenerational transmission of poverty is ensured, the contribution to environmental sustainability is advanced, the children development is safeguarded, societal assets are generated by the family intergenerational solidarity, and the state's welfare and socioeconomic development are more progressed.

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