

# **Prevention of Family Breakdown due to Poverty**

Organized on the occasion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
of the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children  
and the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child  
27<sup>th</sup> Regular Session of the HRC  
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Sponsored by the Missions of Italy, Chile and France, and by UNICEF, ATD Fourth World, BICE, Hopes and Homes for Children, ISS, RELAF, SOS Children's Village International, and Wereldkinderen

## **Introduction**

**Mme Maria Luisa Escorel de Moraes**, Minister Counsellor of the Mission of Brazil, affirmed the importance of this issue to Brazil, whose Government is committed to creating a 'caring Brazil'. The Bolsa Familia programme is one of the many steps taken in this direction, reaching 12 million families (26% of the population), with positive results. But there is still much to be done to overcome the large disparities.

## **Words of welcome**

**Mr. Amedeo Trambajolo**, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Mission of Italy, emphasized that the worst nightmare for most children would be to be separated from their families. However, unfortunately, due to the fact that the percentage of the population in poverty is increasing in most countries, even the richest, the topic of this panel is particularly timely for the Human Rights Council.

## **Panel interventions**

**Maria Herczog**, Rapporteur of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child

Ms. Herczog opened by affirming the importance of the family, as stated in Articles 18, 19, and 20 of the CRC. She stressed:

- The need to recognize that there are several types of families and to ensure that children are not discriminated against because of their family configuration
- The many budget cuts in health, social services etc. in recent years, which have affected families and especially had a large impact on children
- The multifaceted nature of poverty; prevention programmes require political commitment and a long-term vision, with strategic, systemic, intersectoral and integrated programmes. Both financial as well as parenting support are needed.
- The fact that in many countries, although legislation prohibits the removal of children from their families for reasons of poverty, this often happens in reality, reflecting the lack of support for families and reintegration services.

A child-rights based approach is therefore needed. The Committee is encouraging Member States to realize their duties and responsibilities, but also the links between the different actions or lack thereof. It is particularly encouraging more child-budgeting exercises, along with a study of the cost-benefits of family support

programmes, and the calculation of their social return. The handbook on the Guidelines for Alternative Care of Children, '*Moving Forward*,' covers prevention as well as reintegration, which are important in the area of alternative care.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Good and promising practices***

- EU investment in children through support to child-related programmes
- Conditional Cash Transfer programmes in an increasing number of countries, such as the Bolsa Familia in Brazil, where children must be in school for families to receive the cash transfers. However, such programmes can work only if attention is paid to ensuring a child-friendly environment in school, which is not always the case, eg. Roma children in Hungary.
- De-institutionalization efforts, such as in Rwanda
- Increased efforts to empower and involve families and children, by helping them to mobilize their own resources.

Ms. Herczog recognized the importance of civil society actions in many areas – advocacy; organizations of children, parents or families; mediation; etc.

### **H. E. Sabine Böhlke-Möller, Ambassador/Permanent Representative of the Mission of Namibia**

Ms. Böhlke-Möller acknowledged that Namibia is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with a Gini coefficient of 0.6. Its objective is to reduce it to 0.3. She made the following points:

- Namibia is committed to supporting families who need care and wants to prevent the separation of children from families. The CRC has motivated the country to improve conditions for children.
- Namibia has developed a number of laws protecting children's right to have a relationship with both parents (Children's Status Act, Act 6 of 2006), and affirming the legal duty of parents to support their children (Maintenance Act, Act 9 of 2003). She raised the issue of neglect and abuse of children within their families and asked how this can be dealt with.
- Namibia has also put into place non-contributory social grants to vulnerable groups -people with disabilities, veterans, etc. – which is helping to reduce poverty. It is one of the few countries in Africa to do this.
- Through a Situation Analysis and review of the National Plan of Action for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (2006-2010), it became clear that Namibia needed to adopt a multi-sectoral approach to planning and implementation for a child-centred development, and that it needed to look more broadly at the concepts of vulnerability and inequity through the lens of a child's life cycle. Over 1/3 of children in Namibia live without a mother or father.
- Through a broad consultative process, including with the Children's Parliament, a National Agenda for Children was adopted for 2012-2016, based on CRC principles.

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<sup>1</sup> Copies were made available to participants in English, French and Spanish.

It is anchored on five pillars: health and nourishment; early childhood development and schooling; HIV prevention, treatment, care and support; adequate standard of living and legal identity; and protection against neglect and abuse. The agenda recognises the importance of the family and parental responsibilities.

- Implementation is key, and therefore the Cabinet introduced a permanent task force that meets four times a year, produces reports and shares them with all stakeholders.
- State Parties and their international partners need to continue to develop policies, guidelines and standards for child care and protection, but also continue to fight poverty.

### **Chanduong Chen, Counsellor of the Mission of China**

Mr. Chen stressed that in China, catering for 1.3 billion people including 220 million children under the age of 14 is very challenging. The numbers living in poverty have dropped from 250 million people in the 1970s to 32 million, with the numbers of children in poverty dropping from 683 million to 12 million. He cited a number of initiatives as well as remaining challenges:

- China has considerably raised its poverty line, and recognizes the disparities that still exist between rich and poor, and between rural and urban areas.
- How to target people living in poverty has been challenging. The Government is struggling with the question as to whether to target communities, regions or vulnerable groups. With such a large and varied population, it is difficult to have a well-targeted strategy.
- China has a social security system but because of the market economy, some social security programmes that used to ensure a basic level of income and access to services have now deteriorated. For example, in the past, through the 'barefoot doctor' programme health care workers with basic training provided free care in rural areas, but with the introduction of a market economy, this programme has disappeared, and rural areas now find themselves without an adequate health scheme.
- China has therefore put in place a number of social relief programmes. For example, it now has a low-income security system – which some might call a subsistence security system, as it only guarantees a subsistence level of income. Medical assistance is being provided to about 100 million people affected by disasters and emergencies. A nutrition programme has been put into place for children in poverty areas, and the vaccination rate is 90%. Special care is being provided to particularly vulnerable groups, such as orphans, the disabled, those with HIV, etc. The result has been a drop in the mortality rate for infants and children.
- An inter-ministerial development plan for 2001-2010 had four pillars: housing, education, legal protection, and an enabling environment. The aim is to have universal coverage by 2020.
- Now the country is trying to address the problem of children left behind in rural areas because of the large numbers of parents who go to work in urban

areas. These children are being looked after by grandparents and the elderly. The Government is encouraging parents to return to work closer to their home towns, and is supporting them through job-creation schemes and the provision of essential services in rural areas.

- A new programme has been put into place for 2010-2020, providing a legal framework for the protection of minors, equal opportunities for girls and boys, and the participation of children in policy-making.

**Jean-Claude Legrand**, Senior Regional Advisor in Child Protection, UNICEF Regional Office for CEE-CIS and Central Asia

Mr. Legrand reported that the recent UN Global Report on Violence against Children estimated that around 8 million children are currently living in various forms of residential care, whereas the CRC states that priority needs to be given to children to live in family environment. The financial crisis has severely hit Europe and Central Asia, increasing the number of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion by almost 1 million. Growing up in poverty can deprive children from access to education, healthcare, healthy diets, family support and protection from violence. He went on to make the following points about the region in which he works:

- Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia have the highest number in the world of children separated from their families: 1.4 million, out of which 650,000 are in residential care. Yet 90% of children in formal care have one or both parents alive.
- It was a common belief in this region that the State could easily substitute for families.
- In addition, stigma, discrimination against minorities and gender dynamics (stigma against single mothers and strong cultural norms of 'motherhood') combined with the lack of State support lead to baby abandonment.
- At least 200,000 of the children have disabilities and 30,000 are below the age of 3.
- UNICEF recognises the need for support to prevent families from placing children in institutional care: legislative reforms and policies that limit it to the last resort; provision of financial assistance to families (such as cash transfers and birth allowances); comprehensive package of education, health and social services, including appropriate training, etc.

***Positive practices:***

- Turkey has returned 50,000 children that were in care to their families.
- High-quality community-based services and family-based care options in Croatia have led to a decrease in the number of children in institutional care from 4,000 in 2010 to 2,500 in 2013, with only 300 additional children placed in care during the same period.
- Three reasons why this is the right thing to do:  
(1) Equity issue: separating children from their families deprives them of the chance to reach their full potential.

- (2) Good investment: family and community-based services are less expensive than residential care and are better for vulnerable children.
- (3) Child development: Every 3 months spent in institutions leads to 1 month of delayed development.
- The International Guidelines on Alternative Care represent an incredible leveraging tool for advocacy. There has been a 10% reduction in the number of children below 3 in institutional care in the region in two years.

**Martin Kalisa**, National Director, International Movement ATD Fourth World, United Kingdom

In England, poverty is one of the main reasons that lead to family breakdown. Too often, the social services take children away from their families when the parents are deemed unable to look after them. The children are either institutionalised or placed in foster families, which often leads to their stigmatization by other children. The current Government has greatly reduced local authority funding for family support services, and the discourse is more about child protection than family support, whereas the two are interlinked and both are needed. He stressed the following points:

- There are not necessarily only parents and children in a family; instead, the composition of families varies tremendously.
- There are currently 92,000 children in the UK, either in institutions or in foster families.
- Too often, the social services monitor the situation of children rather than supporting the families, which can lead to the children being removed from their families.
- The social services have the mission to support families, but the families are often afraid they will be judged and told what to do. Fathers often leave home because they feel powerless and mothers are often told that they would be better off on their own.
- When children are removed from their families, they lose their roots and most of the time do not bond with their foster family and are often stigmatised for having been in care. The result is an intergenerational cycle of poverty and social exclusion.
- A visit to one young offenders' institution revealed that over half of the children there had been taken into care, demonstrating that the removal of children from their families did not lead to the desired outcome. Millions of pounds are spent in those programmes, raising the question as to whether the funds would not be better spent on supporting the parents.
- There is evidence of increasing numbers of children and families experiencing poverty and deprivation, with the poorest children and families being more affected by the recession and the austerity measures. Four million children - one in three - currently live in poverty, one of the highest rates in industrialized countries.
- The relationship between poverty, parenting and child maltreatment is complex. Poverty impacts on parenting in a number of ways and makes parenting much harder.

### ***Positive practices***

- Team Around the Family: brings together all of the people the family identifies as important in their lives to work together to find solutions to their problems. The impact has been enormous, because the underlying causes of problems are identified and addressed.
- Training of social workers: ATD Fourth World has developed with a local university a training module where the students learn how to work with the most excluded and vulnerable people from the families themselves.

### **Questions/comments and answers:**

1) Representative of Brazil: Do you think poverty in Africa and in the UK has the same effect?

Response from M. Kalisa: Poverty in the EU causes a greater loss of self-esteem due to the stigmatization. Also, it leads to a greater loss of control over people's lives, since there is the risk of having children forcibly removed from their families.

2) Statement by Nigel Cantwell, one of the authors of the handbook, '*Moving Forward*': He praised the commitment of Brazil to the process of developing the Guidelines on Alternative Care. In the consultations over the Guidelines, it became clear that they needed to also focus on **preventing** alternative care. Not enough attention has been paid to kinship care, which would be better than trying to reinvent the family environment.

3) Representative of Latter-Day Saint Charities: In the US, religious organizations provide a lot of support to families in their communities. Is this also true in your countries?

Responses from C. Chen and J.-C. Legrand: Mr. Chen referred to the long-standing tradition of religious communities caring for orphans in China. Mr. Legrand emphasized the active role of religious communities in Africa in providing support to families, while indicating that there are variations between regions in the world.

### **Participants who signed the sign-up sheets:**

**Permanent Missions:** Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, France, Georgia, Greece, Indonesia, Italy, Namibia, Romania, Tuvalu, USA

**Intergovernmental organizations:** Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), International Committee of the Red Cross, UNOG NGO Unit, UNICEF, OHCHR, Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC)

**NGOs:** Child Rights Connect, International Social Service, Women's UN Report Network, Save the Children, Women's Federation for World Peace, Edmund Rice International, GEO/GEM, Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni 23, Sudwind, European Law Students Association (ELSA), OCAPROCE, Lutheran World Federation, Latter-Day Saint Charities.