

Strengthening Family as Part of the Sustainable Development Process

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New York, United States—The Ambassadors' Group of Friends of the Family (GoFF), a pro-family collaboration of missions to the UN, sponsored a side event during the 54th Session of the United Nations Commission on Social Development (CSocD) on February 10, 2016. The Permanent Mission of Belarus was the key organizer, along with the missions of Egypt and Qatar. This event, entitled "Social and Economic Cost of Exclusion of the Family from the Sustainable Development Process," was co-sponsored by UPF, the Alliance Defending Freedom International, C-Fam, Family Watch International and the Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society.

In the opening session, several ambassadors offered brief remarks on the need for a family-focused approach to achieving optimum social and economic development. H.E. Ms. Alya Ahmed Saif Al-Thani, ambassador of the Permanent Mission of Qatar, asserted that paying attention to the promotion of policies, strategies and programs that focus on the family is a priority issue for social development, as the family is the fundamental and natural unit of society. Ambassador Al-Thani referred to efforts of Qatar in the field of strengthening the institutional structure for social development, such as in the establishment of the Qatar Foundation for Social Action, which undertakes the supervision and observation of many institutions concerned with social development, such as the Doha International Conference on the Family in 2004, the Qatar Foundation for Protection and Social Rehabilitation, Family Consulting Center, Qatar Foundation for the Care of the Elderly, and the Shafallah Center for Children with Special Needs. These kinds of projects and partnerships are essential in the real work of strengthening social and economic development by strengthening the family, she said.

H.E. Mr. Vitaly I. Churkin, ambassador of the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation, expressed great disappointment that the family was not included in Agenda 2030, explaining that the family is an essential tool which empowers all citizens in a way that best ensures strong social development. Not utilizing the family will only weaken social development. He said clearly the role of the family should be reflected in the SDGs. Collaboration and partnerships, such as those that were present at this side event, are important for furthering the promotion of the family for economic and social development, he said.

H.E. Mrs. Aksoltan Ataeva, ambassador of the Permanent Mission of Turkmenistan, commented that her government is dedicated to moral and cultural values that are centered on the family, human rights and equality. Many programs in her country have strengthened the family so that the foundation of moral values are taught in the family. These values, integral to the culture, are the basis for a stable social environment and development, she said.

The first panelist, Mrs. Lola Velarde, director for UN Affairs at the Institute for Family Policy, opened by relating the natural laws of ecology to the natural laws of a family ecology. Just as disregarding ecological principles leads to destroying the environment, so too, ignoring the natural and fundamental social unit of a mother and father for procreating and caring for their children leads to societal breakdown, she said. Referring to a wealth of research, Mrs. Velarde presented the social and economic consequences of neglecting the needs and priorities of the family in achieving national and global Sustainable Development Goals. She further shared examples of policies that have been shown to strengthen the family, giving evidence for the family being a substantial contributor to social and economic development. Recommendations were made for possible methods of improving data collections and statistics as well as indicators to measure progress on relevant family-related SDG targets.

The next panelist was Mrs. Lynn Walsh, director of the Office of the Family, UPF. Basing many of her examples on the book *The Family and the MDGs*, to which she was a contributor, Mrs. Walsh described several best practices which were effective because they worked with the family unit. Family-oriented programs in some of the most disadvantaged areas in Africa successfully lifted families out of poverty and into productive self-reliance. She explained how basic education of the husband and/or extended family actually saved the lives of many mothers and their babies during childbirth. AIDS prevention programs for children that require the parents' involvement led to delayed sexual debut of youth and decrease in HIV infection. Mrs. Walsh referred to domestic violence prevention programs that led to increased violence when involving only the women, while other programs that engaged both men and women brought evidence of decreases in violence and discriminatory attitudes toward women and improved relationship satisfaction.

The final panelist, Dr. Pat Fagan, director of the Marriage and Religion Research Institute (MARRI), is known globally as an expert researcher and speaker on marriage, family and religion. Dr. Fagan presented slide after slide of research showing emotional, academic, behavioral and economic advantages of children raised by intact, married biological parents who regularly attended religious services. This was found to be evident regardless of race, income, locality or education. He pointed out the impact of stability in a co-parent relationship for the well-being of children and adults. Marital commitment clearly increases the chances of the relationship's endurance and satisfaction compared to cohabitation, he said. The most significant slide, according to Dr. Fagan, showed the correlation between an increase in the number of sexual partners prior to marriage and marital dissolution. At the end of his talk he welcomed the audience to take advantage of the website marrimedia.org, which provides a wealth of research related to family, religion, education, government and economy.

H.E. Andrei Dapkiunas, ambassador of the Mission of Belarus to the UN, gave stirring closing remarks that encouraged further collaboration of the GoFF to magnify the voice of the family. Even though there is insufficient knowledge within the UN and academia about the family's part in overcoming the most challenging problems addressed in the SDGs, the facts about the capacity of the family are irrefutable. H.E. Dapkiunas assured the audience that most important is our conviction about the family; he said we have every reason to be passionate and determined. Meetings like this should help compel us forward, he said. It is essential to promote new thinking on the global, regional and national mechanisms that support family-oriented policies and programs. We need greater recognition that the family is not only a beneficiary of social development but also a significant contributor. He recommended that more bold efforts should be made to draw attention to the family and suggested the GoFF have an event during the commemoration of International Day of Families on Monday, May 16, focusing on the family and the SDGs.

In closing, special gratitude was expressed toward Ms. Larysa Belskaya, counselor to the Permanent Mission of Belarus, for organizing this event. As she is about to end her four-year term in New York, praise also was given to her for her tireless and effective efforts to promote the family at the UN. She will be missed.