

Family-Centered Policy

Building Common Ground With Family-Focused and Research-Based Information

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[UN Photo / Jean-Marc Ferré]

I am honored to be here to discuss one thing we all agree on—the valuable contributions families make for the benefit of their members and the good of society. In the Resolution on Protection of the Family, I want to heartily endorse the recommendation to undertake concerted actions to strengthen family-centered policies and programs. This has been the focus of my work for over two decades. Today I will discuss briefly what we do, the best practices that contribute to our success, and implications for supporting and empowering families.

Since 1993, my colleagues and I have convened over 190 Family Impact Seminars for state policymakers in 25 states and the District of Columbia. The seminars are a series of presentations, briefing reports, and discussion sessions that communicate family-focused, research-based information to state policymakers on timely topics ranging from child care to elder care, from parenting to poverty, from youth crime to youth work-

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force success. These seminars are occurring in a political environment so divisive that studies show it is “mathematically impossible” for the U.S. Congress to get much more polarized (Haidt & Hetherington, 2012, p. 2).

Given this polarized environment, how much success would you expect the Family Impact Seminars to have? Not every seminar ends up influencing a policy decision, but some do. Policymakers report that the seminars influenced policy decisions that can help lift families out of



Prof. Bogenschneider during her speech. [UN Photo / Jean-Marc Ferré]

poverty by informing laws that ensured access to nutritious food and to health care. The seminars have influenced policies that can support work/family balance by informing laws on the funding of child care (Bogenschneider, 2014). The seminars have supported youth becoming productive workers by influencing policies that lowered rates of school dropout. The seminars have supported the elderly by influencing policies that help cover the costs of prescription drugs.

So we have been able to influence policymakers' decisions on a number of policies that protect family well-being and human rights. What best practices have contributed to our success? I have time to mention only four.

First, we provide objective information and a range of policy options that have earned us a solid, nonpartisan reputation. We believe this is essential. If we have a liberal reputation, the conservatives won't come to the seminars. If we have a conservative reputation, the liberals won't come. Fostering consensus among different perspectives is the only way to build policies that last, even if government regimes change (see Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010).

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Second, we pay careful attention to the issues we focus on. We do not focus on issues where policymakers have already made up their minds. For example, the liberal and conservative policymakers who attend our seminars could probably not agree on how to define family, so we don't focus on that. In our work for over

20 years in more than half the states in the USA, the issue of defining families is seldom raised. Instead, we focus on what we have found policymakers can agree on—how to support and empower families. Clearly, we focus on issues that are controversial, but they are issues where policymakers have not yet made up their minds and where they are open to compromise and common ground. For example, both conservative and liberal policymakers were concerned about inadequate preparation of youth for the workforce, so their minds were open to considering a range of research-based options presented at a seminar. Policymakers used this information to design a compromise law that provided alternative ways for high-risk kids to complete secondary school.

Third, we find another way to build consensus is by focusing on family well-being. In the USA, policymakers of vastly different political persuasions agree on the importance of supporting and empowering families. So we encourage policymakers to look at their decisions through the lens of family impact. Policymakers in the USA would not think of passing a law without asking, "What is the economic impact?" We encourage policymakers to routinely ask, "What is the family impact? How does the policy affect families and would it be more effective and efficient if families were involved in the response?" (Bogenschneider et al., 2012).

We have developed five family impact questions for policymakers that we call discussion starters. For example, how does the policy affect family members' ability to carry out their responsibilities to one another? How does it affect family stability? We joke that we would like to laser these family impact questions to policymakers' eyeballs. Instead, we print them on business cards for policymakers to keep in their wallets or portfolios. (For the *Policymakers' Guide, Rationale, Handbook, checklists, and toolkit*, go to www.familyimpactseminars.org in the family impact section.)

We use questions like these to analyze the family impact of policies, both positive and negative. In an analysis of a health care law, we found a mother and her child would be eligible for family health care coverage, but not the mother's unmarried partner. However, if the mother married the partner, the family would no longer be eligible because their combined income would be too high to qualify. In one program to help youth get jobs after high school, our analysis showed that it worked very well for boys, but not for girls. These were consequences that policymakers probably did not intend. To identify these consequences ahead of time, family impact analysis could be conducted on each of the 2015 sustainable development goals.

Finally, we find that policymakers want research on the effectiveness of various policy options so they can invest in policies that work and cut those that do not.

In sum, in a contentious political environment, we have been able to move beyond family rhetoric to enhancing the reality of families' lives by building better public policies. What relevance does our experience have for policies that protect family well-being and the human rights of its members?

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Among the over 60 statements introduced on September 15, there appeared to be one point of agreement—families are a fundamental building block of society. I was encouraged by the strong commitment to supporting and empowering families. Yet I was deeply troubled by the gravity of the circumstances many families are facing. The conundrum that remains is how to turn this family rhetoric into reality. I propose three considerations:

1. Will we make the most progress for families if we focus on those issues where the most consensus exists? The lively discussion around families reminded me that we are all part of the UN family. Like a family, we can discuss. We can engage in vigorous debate over vastly different views. But as happens in families, we can listen to each other, compromise, and find common ground.

2. Which approaches to the 2015 sustainable development goals will best support and empower families? The UN discussion yielded three alternatives. First, family well-being could be an explicit 2015 sustainable development goal stated broadly (e.g., supporting and empowering families) or stated narrowly (e.g., eradicating family poverty, strengthening parenting education, ending family violence). Second, family well-being could be implicit by requiring that each 2015 sustainable development goal be viewed through the lens of family impact. Conducting family impact analysis can detail how each goal affects families and specific ways it could be implemented more effectively and efficiently if families were involved in the response. Third, both explicit family goals and implicit family impact analysis could be considered for inclusion in the 2015 sustainable development goals.

3. What resources are available to support and empower families? We have a growing body of research evidence on the valuable role families play in promoting economic productivity, school success, social competence, and so forth (Bogensneider & Corbett, 2010). We know how to conduct family impact analysis

The preparations for and observance of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, as proclaimed by United Nations General Assembly resolution 44/82 of 9 December 1989, provide a useful opportunity to draw further attention to the objectives of the Year for increasing cooperation at all levels on family issues and for undertaking concerted actions to strengthen family-centered policies and programmes as part of an integrated comprehensive approach to human rights and development; take stock of recent trends in family policy development; share good practices in family policymaking; review challenges faced by families worldwide and recommend

The Human Rights Council in its resolution A/HRC/26/11, adopted on 26 June 2014, decided to convene a Panel Discussion on the Protection of the Family and its members to address the implementation of States' obligations under relevant provisions of international human rights law and discuss challenges and best practices in this regard.

The Panel was held on 15 September 2014 and was intended as a contribution to exploring the correlation between better levels of protection and support for the family and promoting and protecting human rights in areas including poverty eradication, eradication of violence against women, protecting the rights of the child, protection and promotion of human rights of all family members including women, older persons, and persons with disability, and improving access to right to education, and also allow for discussing fostering research and exchanging of good practices in the areas of family policy, work/family balance, family support programs, data collection and processing, and empowering intergenerational solidarity through strengthening of the family unit, as well as the key challenges facing States in fulfilling their international human rights obligations in this particular domain.

to critically examine the advertent and inadvertent effects of a policy, program, agency, or organization on family stability, family relationships, and family members' ability to carry out their responsibilities.

I am hopeful that we can put our differences behind us and reach consensus on specific ways we can work together to support and empower families. If we focus on issues with the most consensus, would this bring more countries to the table? With more countries, would there be more potential for strengthening family-centered policies and programs?



Expert presentations were followed by interactive discussion. [UN Photo / Jean-Marc Ferré]

I am not naïve about how hard this is going to be. However, just because it is hard does not mean that it is not worth doing. The well-being of families around

the world is worth it. Families, particularly those least able to speak on their own behalf, need a strong and unified voice in policymaking.

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