



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
20 December 2024

English only

Commission on Population and Development

Fifty-eighth session

7–11 April 2025

Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for
all at all ages

Statement submitted by Coordinadora Europea de Familias Numerosas - European Large Families Confederation (ELFAC), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The central role of families – and in particular large families – in promoting public health and wellbeing

The European Large Families Confederation (ELFAC) calls for an enhanced role and consideration for families in all health and wellbeing initiatives.

In line with Article 16.3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State”, ELFAC urges governments to protect families from all agents that negatively impact their health and wellbeing. These include factors such as pollution, malnutrition, stress, poor working conditions, inadequate healthcare, lack of social security, and insufficient access to clean water and sanitation. These factors are all taken into consideration in the 2030 Agenda, but very little is done to take into consideration their impact on families.

1. Family as a system

Current health programs and the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), largely focus on individuals, overlooking the broader context in which individuals live – the family system. According to Bowen Family Systems Theory, family members are interconnected and interdependent, and “family should be viewed as a system”.¹

By addressing factors such as mental health, malnutrition, and economic hardship at a family-level, we can better address root causes of diseases and implement preventive strategies.

Health promotion and prevention must begin at the family level too. Families are where good health habits are cultivated and passed on, ensuring the wellbeing of all generations. A healthy, functional family system is essential to preventing illness, fostering emotional support, and improving overall quality of life.

2. Family relationships and mental health

The quality of family relationships plays a significant role in mental and physical health. Studies consistently show that strong family bonds contribute to better health outcomes. According to recent studies, maternity and paternity lead to a better personal health and improve the sense of meaning and life in general; also the sense of future is enhanced, and it increases in old age.²

Research indicates that being married, particularly in a supportive, happy relationship, is linked to improved mental and physical health. The benefits of marriage extend to longevity, emotional well-being, and a greater sense of life satisfaction.³

¹ Haijing Zan, Zhixing Meng, Jing Li, Xinjian Zhang & Tao Liu , 2024 Factors associated with quality of life among elderly patients with type 2 diabetes mellitus: the role of family caregivers <https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-024-17917-z>).

² Institute for family and society studies, Poland, 2024.

³ Family Relationships and Well-Being, 2017, Patricia A Thomas, Hui Liu, Debra Umberson <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5954612/>.

The importance of family connections extends to children and adolescents: “higher levels of family connection are associated with a greater prevalence of flourishing in adolescence. Family connection may contribute to flourishing, not just the avoidance of negative outcomes”.⁴

Families that foster strong emotional connections contribute to better mental health and the overall development of their members.

3. Family caregivers and long-term care

Parents, grandparents, and siblings may serve as informal caregivers, essential yet invisible and undervalued (their work does not appear in the national GDP). Still, family caregivers “are recognised as the backbone of the health care system”,⁵ providing unpaid, often unrecognized, care to children, elderly and chronically ill relatives.

In the United States, there are an estimated 65.7 million family caregivers, and in the UK, approximately 6.5 million. The economic value of their labour is immense: The estimated economic value of their unpaid labour amounts to USD 470 billion and £119 billion respectively.

As population over 65 is projected to exceed 1.5 billion people in 2050 (it was around 703 million in 2019), the demand of domestic informal care will continue to rise. It is crucial that family caregivers are recognized and supported through family policies that reduce their burden, provide financial support, and offer access to resources such as respite care. These caregivers are critical to the well-being of children and older adults and should be given the attention, respect, and resources they deserve.

4. The family lens in health and demographic policy

States should adopt a “family impact lens”⁶ in their public health and demographic policies to better address the challenges posed by global population changes. Supporting families and empowering them to fulfil their roles will lead to better health outcomes and will contribute significantly to achieving the SDGs. Pollution, malnutrition, stress, poor working conditions, inadequate healthcare, lack of social security, and insufficient access to clean water and sanitation are all factors taken into consideration in the 2030 Agenda, but, without a “family impact lens”, very little attention is given to the impact they have on families.

Incorporating and involving the families into health promotion strategies is essential to creating a sustainable future.

The role of the family was particularly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when families were at the forefront of providing emotional and practical support.

Families must be recognized as central to achieving health equity and population goals. This recognition should be at the heart of public health initiatives, particularly in aging societies and in response to demographic shifts. At a population level, the

⁴ Robert C. Whitaker, MD, MPH; Tracy Dearth-Wesley, PhD, MPH; Allison N. Herman, MEd, MPH; Anne-Sophie N. van Wingerden, BA; Delaine W. Winn, BA, 2022, <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/149/6/e2021055263/188014/Family-Connection-and-Flourishing-Among>.

⁵ Exploring experiences of family caregivers for older adults with chronic illness: A scoping review, Barbara Member Jika BSc, MSc, Hafiz T.A. Khan PhD, FRSPH, CSTAT, Muili Lawal PhD, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0197457221003293#>.

⁶ Elisabetta Carra, 2020 <https://publires.unicatt.it/it/publications/il-family-impact-lens-framework-teorico-e-modello-operativo>.

family contribution to individual health status is measurable and substantial. The shared characteristics of income and health insurance account for only a modest portion of the effect. Health policy and interventions should place more emphasis on the family's role in health.⁷

5. Conclusion

ELFAC calls on governments, to recognize the central role of families – and in particular large families – in promoting public health and wellbeing, as they offer – due to their specific dynamics – valuable resources to communities, and their contributions should be acknowledged and supported through family-friendly policies.

Furthermore, we call on the United Nations to include the role of families in global health and population strategies. This should be done through family mainstreaming, ensuring that family dynamics, diversity, and caregiving burdens are considered in all population health discussions and policy initiatives. Article 16.3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights must be fully realized, ensuring that families are granted their rightful place in society.

We urge the UN to place greater emphasis on the role of families in the upcoming International Conference on Population and Development and to ensure that family policies are central to global, regional, and national development agendas.

By investing in families, supporting their functions, and recognizing their importance, states will foster a healthier, more sustainable future for people, communities, and the planet.

⁷ Families as a Cornerstone in 21st Century Public Health: Recommendations for Research, Education, Policy, and Practice Nomi S Weiss-Laxer 1, AliceAnn Crandall 2, Mary Elizabeth Hughes 3, Anne W Riley, 2020, 3 <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7530559/>.