



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
11 January 2023

English only

Commission on Population and Development

Fifty-sixth session

10–14 April 2023

Population, education and sustainable development

Statement submitted by ELFAC – Coordinadora Europea de Familias Numerosas (European Large Families Confederation) a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council¹

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.

¹ The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Large families for a sustainable world

Background: Global demography and large families

There is very little literature about large families, beginning with the lack of a specific, world recognised definition of what is a large family. According to the Spanish law, for the Protection of large families, art.2, n. 40/2003, November 18 a large family is a household with 3 or more children. Also the definition of “children” is not univocal, as children can be minors under the age of 18 (as in Spain or France) or any dependent child under 22 not being married yet as in Canada.

When the family size is taken into account, statistics often forget to record and analyse the number of children in a household. Even the very well done “Household Size and Composition 2022 database” of UNDESA only underlines the average number of members of a household and the presence of “at least one child” but not the number of children in the house.

What we know is that, according to Eurostat, households with children in Europe are 28 per cent of the 197 million households in Europe; families with 3 and more children represent 12 per cent of European families. One-third of all children are born in a large family.

In 2021, about 40 per cent of all (83.907.000) households in the United States had their own children under age 18 (they were 48 per cent in 2001); 29.368.000 children live in a large family, 43.201.000 with no or one sibling.

The decline of the number of large families is strictly linked with the decrease of natality (Bujard, 2020). Large parts of Southern and Eastern Europe are suffering from depopulation and aging. As population declines, services, transports and schools are cut down, which drives young people to leave their hometown (brain drain) and companies don’t find workers onsite. Without children and young people, without workforces and innovation, the economy of a country dies off.

In this picture, large families can represent a precious resource of human capital for both territories and companies, particularly in rural areas, providing a future for communities: the role of large families in the demographic sustainability of shrinking countries is fundamental and could mean the sustainability of the social and economic system. Although the relative share of households with large families is declining, a substantial number of children continue to grow up in large families (inter alia Curran 2019, Fahey 2017).

This is even more true in countries with higher fertility rates such as sub-Saharan African nations.

It is very difficult to have data on large families at a global level and therefore to advocate for evidence-based politics. It would be of the highest importance that Governments and demographic institutes would start to consider the existence of these families that today are almost “invisible”.

Poverty and large families

Poverty rate in large families is higher than in families with 1 or 2 children or no children at all.

In the UK, “in 2004/2005, 50 per cent of children in 4+-child families were poor compared with only 23 per cent in one-child families. Children in 4+-child families constitute 19 per cent of all poor children” (Child poverty in large families, by

Jonathan Bradshaw, Naomi Finch, Emese Mayhew, Veli-Matti Ritakallio and Christine Skinner, 2006).

According to Eurostat (2021), the risk of poverty is higher in households with three or more children. It affects about 32 per cent of large families. Poverty affects 17 per cent of households with 2 children and around 16 per cent of families with 1 child.

The risk of poverty is causing and perpetuating stigmatisation on large families, which are often associated with low income and low education. This prejudice is contradicted by recent studies in Germany (Elfac Papers, July 2020) where 73 per cent of mothers of large families born in 1965/69 have middle or high educational qualification.

The claim “large family equals poor and uneducated” is not always true.

Education for all

It is true though that it is more complicated and more expensive to raise more children and give them an adequate education as SDG 4 demands. According to the 2021 Report of *ONF- Osservatorio Nazionale Federconsumatori*, the average cost to raise a child in Italy from 0 to 18 is EUR 175,642.

Extracurricular activities such as sport activities, languages and art courses (which help achieving quality education SDG4) have a cost that has to be multiplied by at least 3, with little economy. In many cases housing poverty and overcrowded houses don't allow the necessary environment for studying. According to some research (Keister 2003), having siblings would lead to a decreased level of success at school.

During Covid, remote lessons were particularly difficult for those children sharing bedrooms and living spaces with more siblings and, maybe, working parents too. Also, the lack of individual personal devices has created many problems for children during the lockdown: it's not really common for a family to own 5, 6 or more tablets or PCs at home and many schools were not able to provide children with the necessary devices.

Without a proper education, the poverty circle can never be broken, but also the social stigma that is pending on large families.

Large families and sustainable development

One of the latest objections raised on the opportunity to have more than 2 children has to do with the fact that having children is a source of severe carbon emissions, worse than cars or factories. But the average carbon emissions in Qatar is 34.399 t/cap/year, in USA is 14.237 and in Niger is 0,099 (JCR, 2022): it is not the child in itself to have a big impact on the climate, nor the number of people living on Earth but how and how much they consume and waste. According to Oxfam, the richest 1 per cent of the world population emits twice as much as the 3.1 billion people who represent the poorest half of the global population.

A recent survey on Sustainability and families in Europe (Kincs Institute, Hungary, 2021) showed that large families are more concerned about the climate and the environment. Families with many children are used to saving, reducing consumption, reusing, and recycling. They collect waste selectively and consume less energy per capita, and self-production is widely spread.

As the Italian study “Horizontal education, the siblings' job in large families” (Belletti, Butturini, 2019), in a healthy large family, children develop a peer

(horizontal) to peer education among them, inspiring habits of team working, solidarity, sharing, brotherhood.

Large families ensure the continuity of the community, its culture and its values.

The lifestyle of large families provides a model of sustainable growth which meets SDG 12 (ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns) and SDG 16 (promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development for all).

Conclusions

Having a large family is a matter of personal free choice, but children are a “common good”: they represent the future of the community, the drivers of innovation, the workers, consumers, teachers, doctors of tomorrow, those who will sustain pension, health and welfare systems. Today’s children will take care of older generations and will transmit the culture and values of society to the generations to come.

The European Large Families Confederation ELFAC, giving voice to the millions of large families of the world, calls for:

- protection and support. The number of the members of a household should be always taken into account, in order to preserve each member and the whole family from poverty and social exclusion, without leaving no one behind;
- a proper environment fit for larger families and responsive to their needs;
- recognising the role of large families for the demographic balance of local territories and countries, as their children will balance the growing number of childless people and aging population;
- recognising the role of large families in promoting a sustainable lifestyle, providing pro-social and ecological skills in education from the earlier stages through the whole life.

The social stigma on large families should be tackled anywhere.

The world needs large families, to be a better and more sustainable place.
