

UNITED NATIONS



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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE ON THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF FAMILIES

15 May 2006

The theme for this year's International Day of Families, "Changing Families: Challenges and Opportunities", highlights the profound transformations which this basic unit of society has been undergoing in recent years. The average family size has decreased all over the world; young people are getting married at a later age; the average age of mothers at first birth has increased; infant mortality rates have declined; and couples are having fewer children. The traditional, extended family is being replaced by the nuclear family, even as grandparents are living longer and several family generations are living side by side. Alternative forms of union have grown more common, such as unmarried cohabitation, or marriages of migrant workers not living in the same city or country as their spouses. Divorce has increased, accompanied by remarriage, with more and more children living in a family with a step-parent. Significant numbers of both single-parent families and single-person households have emerged, including a rising number of older persons living alone. And the HIV/AIDS pandemic is wreaking havoc on families, often depriving children of their parents, leaving grandparents to care for children.

Many of these transformations call into question the structure of society as we know it. They require us to work together to adapt, to shape public policy in a way that addresses the needs of families, to ensure that basic services such as education and health are provided to all citizens -- especially children -- irrespective of their family situation.

Some of the changes in family structure have also brought new opportunities, such as new and wider options for girls and women. They have provided impetus for Governments to develop new policies in collaboration with civil society. And as countries work to integrate a family perspective into national policy-making, the United Nations system is striving to reflect this perspective in the global intergovernmental process.

During this time of ongoing change, we need to build an environment that sustains and supports families, while reinforcing the opportunities for fulfilment that a positive family life provides. On this International Day, let us rededicate ourselves to that mission.