

Family Council

Identification of Core Family Values

PURPOSE

At the first meeting of the Family Council, Members considered the identification of family core values a priority task of the Council, as these have an important impact on the future formulation of strategies and policies on family related matters.

2. This paper briefs Members on the past deliberations of the Steering Committee on Study of Family Commission (“the Steering Committee”) on the subject and suggests key elements of family values to suit the circumstances of Hong Kong.

BACKGROUND

3. In the context of public policies and for the purpose of determining the eligibility for various social benefits, the family is defined primarily with reference to relationships that pertain to or arise from marriage, reproduction or adoption, all of which are regulated by laws.

4. The traditional core family has come under increasing challenges. Over different cities of the world, new forms of family are on a rising trend: families of single parents, families of separated parents, families of parents at least one of whom is absent for a prolonged period of time, families of unwed parents, husbands and wives with no children by deliberate planning and unions of persons of the same sex. The call for family values is currently echoing throughout different cities and countries, as educators, parents and the community are concerned about a seemingly increasing lack of social cohesion, and a diminished respect for important customs, conventions, and traditions.

5. The concept of family values is rooted in individual culture. It emerges and varies over time in response to economic, social and political developments from country to country, and from generations to generations.

(A) Traditional Family Values in Asia

6. Given the historical background, a major founding stone of Asian cultures is the virtue of filial piety. This notion has an important impact on the patterns of individuals' behaviour and on social and family relationships.

7. Interdependency in the Asian family is valued and stems from the strong sense of obligation to the family. The family provides support and assistance for each member, and in turn, individual members provide support and assistance for the entire family. Such relationships, interactions, and obligations are usually taken to be life-long.

(B) Hong Kong experience

8. Despite the increasing diversity in the forms of families in Hong Kong (e.g. couples with children, single parents, extended families, blended families with step parents, unmarried parent families, etc.), some basic/core values are commonly shared by the society.

Family values behind the major public education programmes

9. The "Family at Heart Campaign" launched in 2006 by the then Health, Welfare and Food Bureau helped to promote core family values of "modeling" (身教), "harmony" (和諧), "love and care" (愛與關懷) and "commitment" (承擔) and aim to stimulate community reflection on how we could live up to these values in our daily lives.

Family values as enshrined in the 2006 Policy Address

10. In the 2006 Policy Address, the Chief Executive stated that it is necessary to, amongst other issues, **foster a sense of responsibility and obligation** in every family member, **nurture care and love**, and **develop a relationship of mutual support**. Our social welfare measures should strengthen, rather than detract from, the functions of a family.

Family values recommended by the Steering Committee

11. The former Steering Committee has deliberated on the subject and come up with the following values underpinning the family –

- (a) **Family autonomy** – The role of the society in relation to families should be to provide choices to enable individuals and families to make decisions that suit their circumstances. The community should intrude only if the family, when left on its own, becomes at risk or trapped in cycles of disadvantage detrimental to the well-being of its constituent members;
- (b) **Family responsibility** – Whatever form it takes, the family is the fundamental building block of society and carries with it the natural responsibility of care, protection and support for its members;
- (c) **Family harmony and cohesion** – It is the constant presence of positive and constructive communication based on mutual respect and commitment that matters;
- (d) **Family competence and resilience** – To cope with challenges from the wider community and from within the family, the family has to be competent to handle family situations.

12. The Steering Committee also recognized that individual families, employers, service sector, media, community and the Government all have important roles to play in –

- (a) upholding and shaping the family values of mutual obligation to nurture their young and care for their members;
- (b) putting families in the forefront of corporate cultures in the design of family-friendly working environments and practices to enable employees to balance their work productivities and family responsibilities;
- (c) building up social capital and community networks by increasing social connectedness across generations and across social strata in support of families;

(d) encouraging cross-sectoral joint efforts in adopting preventive and developmental strategies in support of families in their different developmental cycles; and

(e) strengthening institutional or structural support for families in times of needs.

13. A copy of the discussion paper on the above by the former Steering Committee is enclosed for Members' reference.

RECOMMENDATIONS

14. It is recommended that the family be promoted as the basic unit for community building in Hong Kong. The family is the starting point for the provision of cross-generation and cross-gender welfare, as well as for the development of the individual.

15. Building on the framework of core family values by the Steering Committee, it is recommended that the following be emphasized as key elements to a healthy family life –

(a) Love and Care (愛與關懷)

Love and care provide the strengths for one to strive for the betterment of the lives of one him/herself, the family and the society as a whole.

(b) Respect and Responsibility (責任與尊重)

Individuals are the cornerstone of a family and the society. The needs of individuals should be well-respected. A sense of respect and responsibility helps one to respect others' needs, resolve conflicts and strive to support each other to tide over crisis, rather than totally relying on support from outside the family.

(c) Communication and Harmony (溝通與和諧)

Harmony keeps a family united and resilient, and gives strengths to members to cope with different challenges. Open and honest

communication helps family members understand each other better and fosters trust. Happy and healthy families are also the foundation of a harmonious society.

ADVICE SOUGHT

16. Members are invited to give their views on the above recommendations, and consider the implication of such core values on public policy. Subject to Members' views, we would liaise with relevant bureaux/departments to launch a public education and publicity campaign to publicize the above core values, having regard to their existing promotion efforts.

Secretariat, Family Council
March 2008

Steering Committee on Study of Family Commission

Family Values and Roles of Key Players in Cherishing the Family

Purpose

When considering the Steering Committee's work plan, Members generally shared the view that the study on institutional arrangements should be premised on a common understanding of core family values applicable to present day Hong Kong. This paper :

- (a) explores the core values underpinning the family which could be adopted as the basis for the current Study on institutional arrangements; and
- (b) using such values as foundation, identifies the factors affecting family functioning and the roles of key players in cherishing the family.

Family Values

2. The term "family values" carries different meanings to different people. The traditional perspective, for instance, regards family values as the duties and obligations between genders and generations, emphasizing concepts like filial piety, paternal authority and hierarchical subordination, etc. These values underpinned the stable social order decades ago. But as Hong Kong becomes more modern and westernized, liberal values like gender equality, individual rights, freedom of choice, etc. also permeate, at different pace and to varying extent, different strata of our society. As a result, family and marital relationships, inter-generational bonds and communication, responsibilities and role organizations are all adapting to changing family values, demographic trends and socio-economic structures.

3. Notwithstanding the divergent views of family obligations versus individual freedom, a broad middle ground does exist on many family values among the populace at large. In predominantly Chinese societies like Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, traditional family ideals like filial and spousal obligations and mutual tolerance are still espoused by the majority and

generally cherished. For Members' reference, Singapore has identified five "commonly shared family values"¹, namely, Love, Care and Concern; Mutual Respect; Filial Responsibility; Commitment; and Communication, which have been strongly promoted as "Singapore Family Values" since 1994. "Responsibility to family" is also clearly stated as a desired outcome of the Singapore education system.²

4. In Hong Kong, no attempt has been made to codify family values but in the course of developing the primary and secondary school curricula and the themes for publicity campaigns to promote quality family life, a number of attributes have been identified to be important family values, some of which are set out as follows :

- care
- commitment
- mutual respect and tolerance
- shared responsibilities
- filial piety
- sharing in similar vision and passion

The list is not exhaustive and there is always room for additional attributes. These values are generally regarded as essential for the well-being of families and will continue to be upheld and inculcated among the populace through education and publicity.

5. The current study on institutional framework is not concerned with the identification of family values for promotion and publicity purposes. Instead, the aim should be to explore values which could form the social goals for macro-level family-related strategies.

Values Underpinning the Family

6. As an institution, the family has been commonly regarded as "an entity that is greater than the sum of its parts"³. It provides material, financial,

¹ From "Building A Cohesive and Resilient Society" by the Ministry of Community Development and Sports, January 2003 (<http://www.mcds.gov.sg>).

² From "Family Matters", a report of the Public Education Committee on Family, Singapore (January 2002).

³ From "Family Indicators", United Nations 2003.

social and emotional support and care for its members. In considering the value of the family to the wider society, it is helpful to draw on the concept of “social capital”. According to the leading proponent of this concept, Robert D. Putnam, “social capital” refers to “connections among individual — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them”.⁴ Family is the wellspring of social capital. It is the primary site in which children enjoy active and trusting connections with others who are intimately and affectively related to them, acquire norms of reciprocity and develop trusting and trustworthy character traits that will form the essential fabric of all social institutions.

7. In recognition of the intrinsic values of the family to individuals and the society, Article 10 of the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stipulates that “the widest possible protection and assistance should be accorded to the family, which is the natural and fundamental group unit of society, particularly for its establishment and while it is responsible for the care and education of dependent children.” The strength and well-being of the family is thus a legitimate concern of the Government and the community. For the purpose of forming a basis for Government and the community to work in concert to cherish the family, the following values underpinning the family have been identified in consultation with Members:

- (a) family autonomy;
- (b) family responsibility;
- (c) family harmony and cohesion; and
- (d) family competence and resilience.

(a) Family autonomy

8. Family matters like marriage, childbirth, parenting, living arrangements and kinship support, etc. are private issues involving largely personal choices. In a free and diverse society like Hong Kong, the family’s rights to make choices and decisions within legal bounds and social and moral norms should be respected. Flowing from this conviction, we should refrain from idealizing types of family forms and patterns. Instead, the society’s role in relation to families should be to provide choices to enable individuals and

⁴ Robert D. Putnam, (2000), *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster), p.19. Another definition is given by the World Bank (1999): “Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpins a society – it is the glue that holds them together”, from “What is Social Capital?”.
(<http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/whatsc.htm>)

families to make decisions that suit their circumstances. The community should intrude only if the family, when left on its own, becomes at risk or trapped in cycles of disadvantage detrimental to the well-being of its constituent members.

(b) Family responsibility

9. Whatever form it takes, the family is the fundamental building block of society and carries with it the natural responsibility of care, protection and support for its members, which, depending on its structure and make-up, may include the following:

- catering for the holistic needs of its members;
- procreating future generations;
- nurturing and inculcating positive values in the younger generation; and/or
- furnishing a conducive environment for individual members to develop to their full potential.

The family responsibilities enumerated above are for sheer analytical purpose. It is the spontaneous, holistic and persistent manner in which the family carries out these functions, changing and adapting along the way as members reach different stages of life, that makes the family irreplaceable. In healthy, functioning families, members espouse these responsibilities as an integral part of their life goals and work that showcase their personal development and achievements.

(c) Family harmony and cohesion

10. Harmonious and cohesive families contribute to healthy personal development and social harmony. Harmony and cohesion do not necessarily mean staying together. Rather it is the constant presence of positive and constructive communication based on mutual respect and commitment that is of core importance.

(d) Family competence and resilience

11. Families are constantly facing different challenges. Such challenges can come from the wider community which envelops the family and include changes in the socio-economic environment, employment situation, etc. They may also emerge from within the family and include factors like the relationships and patterns of interactions among family members, as well as the changing needs and aspirations of family members at different stages of their

life cycles. To cope with these challenges, the family has to be competent to handle family situations, stresses and conflicts as they arise and be resilient enough to tide over adversities and crises.

Factors Affecting Positive Family Functioning

12. The above outline four value dimensions that underpin positive family functioning. However, pressures on families are becoming more intensified. Socio-economic factors like shrinking household size, increase in dual-earner-dual-carer families, changing attitudes towards the family, weakening kinship and community networks, and growing workplace demands are stretching families' abilities to cope. The following factors may affect the positive functioning of families in terms of autonomy, responsibility, harmony and cohesion as well as competence and resilience :

- (a) the relationships and patterns of interactions among family members;
- (b) the resources available to individual families such as money, kinship ties and neighbourhood network, etc.;
- (c) the time, skills and environment for maintaining family harmony and cohesion;
- (d) the availability of community support to enable families to make their own choices and discharge their responsibilities effectively; and
- (e) the society's general attitudes towards the family.

These factors can conveniently be considered as possible points of intervention or reinforcement through public policy and community initiatives for any efforts to strengthen the family.

Role of Government and Other Key Players in Strengthening the Family

13. Family issues are all encompassing. Cherishing and strengthening the family require concerted efforts by different sectors of the community. The Government is often looked upon to play the following roles :

- (a) *Strategic* : The prominence the community assigns to family issues is to a certain extent determined by the place the family occupies on the public policy agenda. The Government is looked upon to take the lead in creating the conditions for

families to thrive. The strategic approaches could include increasing the community's awareness to family issues, promoting a family perspective in public policy formulation and mobilizing the community to work towards this cause.

- (b) *Supportive* : The Government, together with the community, provides tangible and intangible support to enable the family to function autonomously and effectively. Such support can take multifarious forms, such as economic incentives, care services, family-friendly workplace practices, promotional and educational initiatives, etc.
- (c) *Preventive* : breakdown of family functions underlies many social problems. The Government should play a proactive role in preventing family problems and dysfunction. Preventive initiatives can be universally targeted as well as selectively focused on families at risk through early identification and crisis prevention.
- (d) *Restorative* : The Government has the final responsibility to intervene if family functions fail so as to provide timely and effective assistance to families and individuals in need and in crisis.

14. Government is only one actor among many whose positive actions can help promote the well-being of families. Strengthening families is a question of shared responsibility among all stakeholders. Individual families, employers, the service sector, the media, the community and the Government all have important roles to play in :

- (a) upholding and shaping the family values of mutual obligation to nurture their young and care for their members;
- (b) putting families in the forefront of corporate cultures in the design of family-friendly working environments and practices to enable employees to balance their work productivities and family responsibilities;
- (c) building up social capital and community networks by increasing "social connectedness" across generations and across social strata in support of families;
- (d) encouraging cross-sectoral joint efforts in adopting preventive and developmental strategies in support of families in their different developmental cycles; and

- (e) strengthening institutional or structural support for families in times of needs.

Policies and initiatives to strengthen the family should aim at bringing together stakeholders to collaborate in these roles.

Advice Sought

15. Members are invited to comment on the roles and responsibilities of various key players in supporting the family in relation to the proposed family values outlined in the paper.

Secretariat
Steering Committee on Study of Family Commission
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
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