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“The Family: A Partner to Reckon with in National Development”

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1. Introduction

This paper works with a premise that states that one of the most overlooked institution in our society today is in actual fact the most influential and dependable institution that any nation could rely on in its developmental strategies. It is argued that while everything seem to be working against the family institution; Governments, NGOs, Faith-based Organizations (FBO) and the Church can still reckon with the family to recover from degradation and vices of human society. Social vices such as poverty, crime, abuse, racism, harassment, and corruption could well be addressed in an environment that provides supportive system to the family.

It is contended in this paper that **social developmental strategies** that will work in Africa, are those that reckon with the role that the family plays in such processes. In order to *implement, monitor* and *evaluate* any social development programmes that have

been put in place by various governments in Africa, there is a dire need to strategically plan for the involvement of families at all levels. Any meaningful research on how governments could combat crime, tackle the HIV/AIDS pandemic, create job opportunities and address prevalent socio-economic problems in Africa, will entail a deliberate plan on the part of those governments to engage the family as a **partner** in development. Thus the paper undertakes to work from a *partnership principle* rather than from a *liability principle*. The former pursues to promote interdependence and mutuality in development while the later has a tendency of promoting a dependence syndrome.

The paper wrestles with the practical implications of what it takes governments and other stake holders to engage the family as a partner in development. It is therefore argued that governments need to engage in the following dialogue when it comes to involving the family in development:

- (1) How much value have governments/NGOs put on the existence of the family in Africa?
- (2) How are governments/NGOs responding to various vices that threaten the establishment of the family in the African society?
- (3) What kind of instruments (e.g. the Law enforcement agencies) have governments put in place to protect the family?
- (4) What kind of “representative voice” have governments given to the family within its established structures, such as the Executive, legislative and Judiciary bodies?
- (5) What kind of policies that promote the well being of the family have been embraced by governments/NGOs in Africa?

This paper works from a faith-based organizational (FBO) perspective that propose that the preservation of the family lies in the moral and spiritual ethos of each nation. It is argued that any departure from the spiritual values and principles of our African society may lead not only to the down fall of the family structure, but also to negative impact on

a national development process. It is therefore proposed that governments should put in place **impact programmes** that will create conducive environments for families to practice their faith values with the view of making meaningful contribution to national development. These programmes should be worked out in partnership between government organs and family communities in the African society. The programmes should include the following:

- Educational programmes for children in schools.
- Social development programmes for both families in rural and urban settlements.
- Recreational programmes and life skills that encourage families to relax and deal with stress issues.
- Occupational programmes that help families to respect time management principles for the work environment and the home.

The underlying presupposition is that this paper will bring to the attention of government agencies, NGOs, Faith-based organizations and Church bodies the need to embrace the family as a trustworthy partner in national development.

2. The Family in Perspective

Firstly, I would presume that we all have an idea of what we mean by the term “family”. While that could be true, we also need to realize that our understanding and definition of what the family is all about, would very much influence the way we react to anything that comes in our way to negate that particular understanding. In other words if our understanding of the family is vague, then when it comes to defending the family – we shall usually use a vague approach that has no conviction and passion. However, if our understanding of the family is definitive, we shall then stand up against all odds that would want to distort that particular understanding. For this reason, I would suggest that we look at two influencing issues in defining the family, namely; **Context** and **Factors**.

2.1 Contextuality: A great Influence on the concept of the Family

It is very interesting to observe the way different context (s) influence the definition of the family. In one context, the family depicts a set of parents and children. In this case, members of a household living together, especially parents and their children. From a more traditional African context (s), a family may depict a gathering of interconnected people. The emphasis in this particular context falls more on the aspect of “Commonality” – togetherness than same blood relations.

For a modern and urban Africa, the family may mean a number of things to different people. For this paper, two particular emphases are underscored namely;

- A family could depict two parents or a single-parent living with their children. To be specific, a nuclear setting of the family.
- A number of relations (parents, children, grandparents and all relations) living together with a common lineage. This is what has come to be known as the extended family.

Whatever the case might be, it is a general consensus that the family depicts a group of persons having a common background and lineage. *And in the context of our discussion, the family will be discussed within the parameters of parents or single-parent together with their children and some relations.*

2.2 Factors influencing a Modern Family

In defining the family, one cannot overlook some determining factors that surround and influence its meaning and what it stands for in a modern African society. A number of factors could be spelt out that have in one way or the other , positively or negatively

contributed to the present positioning of the family in our societies. These could be named as follows:

- Economic factors: production and distribution /trade & sales.
- The electronic and print media: Television, Internet.
- Materialism: the pursuit for material objects at the expense of other things in life.
- Social factors: the changing of an Africa society and communities.
- Education: exposure to knowledge and change.
- technology

3. The Family as a Partner in Development: Towards a New Model

The prevailing model of development in our African society is pictured as a powerful agent helping out a weaker one while the weaker agent receives from the powerful one. In this case, a picture of governments and NGOs giving handouts to families, doing things for families, and also literally allowing families to depend on these institutional structures for survival. Unfortunately, this model has a lot of weaknesses because it creates a dependency syndrome. In which case the family usually finds itself to be on the receiving side. Hence my argument for a new model that will help governments, NGOs and FBOs not only to give and do things for families, but also tap into the potentials that families have. I would term this model, a *Partnership model*.

3.1 A Partnership Model

A partnership model entails that African governments, NGOs and FBOs must begin to recognize the potential that is in the family in achieving its goals for national development. African governments, NGOs and FBOs must begin to embrace a new understanding on what role families could play in national development – and such a role could give the family a new title – *companions* in development rather than recipients.

When we are talking about partnership, we are referring to that kind of partnership that is authentic, a partnership that requires a readiness to step into the shoes of another and, even more challenging, allow the other to step into our shoes (sandals). Subsequently, authentic partnership involves an accommodation and acceptance of the family as a major partner in development. This kind of defining partnership also entails that governments, NGOs and FBOs should extend an invitation to families to come on board and offer their best in developmental processes. It should be an invitation of trust, solidarity, intimacy and confidentiality in the significant other.

According to a partnership principle, I would suggest two undergirding principles which should always be a determining factor on whether African governments, NGOs and FBOs have embraced this new model or not. These two principles are *mutuality* and *interdependence*.

3.1.1 Partnership as Mutuality

The term mutuality implies an interplay, a kind of two-way traffic or reciprocation. Mutuality is the possibility to embrace others especially those who are disadvantaged by life and history, and to include them in one's personal and social concerns in order to support them (Nasimiyu-Wasike 2001:45). The primary purpose of mutuality is to be open to learn from the other in order to change and grow in the perception and understanding of present realities. To this effect each participant has to come to this "exchange" with complete honesty and sincerity of disposition. This becomes a great challenge on governments that have always perceived themselves to be on the giving side. At the same time it is also a challenge to families that have always been sidelined in national development consultations (*Indabas*).

Partnership as mutuality, then means that each of the partner must recognize that they have potential to give in as much as they can receive from the other. Thus mutuality cannot take place unless each partner is willing to confront the haunting economic and social misconceptions about the other. To argue further, trustworthy partnership rules

out all autonomy for itself. Trustworthy partnership becomes a visible sign that each listens to the other and will act together with the other. And in view of this discussion, it implies that within the context of partnership all the partners have bread to give and share.

3.1.2 Partnership as Interdependence

When we allow ourselves to look at partnership, we cannot help but embrace a spirit of interdependence. I want to contend that in as much as governments have convinced themselves as sole providers of services to the people, they cannot manage with this huge task without the support of the natural institution of life – the family. Interdependence as opposed to independence is a very important principle in natural development. It allows reciprocity on both sides of partners, the governments, NGOs, FBOs and the families. While governments and other stake holders will provide services, the delivery process will have to happen through happy and healthy families. When this process is not adhered to, it then becomes a one sided independent development that has no assurance of continuity. Have we wondered why a number of community development programmes have not taken off? Have governments and other stake holders in Africa wondered why meaningful projects of national development have failed along the line? Could it be that the family has been left out in all processes of consultation? Could it be that governments and other stake holders have been painting a picture of an independent as opposed to an interdependent (partnership) approach to national development?

4. Strategic Steps: Towards engaging the Family in National Development

In engaging the family in national development, I would propose that the following critical questions need to be put in place:

- (1) How much value have governments put on the existence of the family in Africa?
- (2) How are governments responding to various vices that threaten the establishment and stability of the family in Africa?
- (3) What kind of instruments (e.g. the Law enforcement agencies) have governments put in place to protect the family?
- (4) What kind of “representative voice” have governments (within established structures, such the executive, legislative, and the judiciary) given to the family?
- (5) What policies have governments put in place that promote the well being of the family?

I would therefore contend that for any government that is seriously considering to contribute to the social development of its society, the above mentioned questions will have to become determining factors of the extent of its involvement in such a process.

4.1 Two Important factors in the Strategic Steps

There are two important factors that governments need to seriously consider in engaging the family into any kind of national development. These are *recognition* and *protection*. When governments are seen to be putting these two factors in place as priority, then there is assurance on the part of the family to contribute to the national development processes. We shall briefly discuss these two factors to explain what we are getting at.

4.1.1 Recognition

First and foremost, it is important for governments to embrace the fact that the family is an institution that needs recognition as an entity on its own. The family existed before any government was put in place, and all those that form the government structures come from, and belong to a family. Thus recognizing the family as a major force and partner in national development is the best thing any government that is working on national

development should be doing. The kind of recognition we are talking about here is not a mere acknowledgment of the existence of the family, but practical steps to legislate the family as a major component in national development.

4.1.2 Protection

Secondly, the family as an institution needs protection. One expert on family therapy once argued: *“As we approach the close of the century, the most threatened institution in the life of human beings will be the family”*. This was said in the nineteenth century; and how much truer have these words become in our days? It is for this reason that governments need to put in place legislative laws that will protect the family from people and structures that aim at destroying families. This will include tougher laws on abusers of children, abusers of women, destroyers of marriages and those who disturb the harmony and peace in homes. When governments are seen to be taking these steps to protect the family, they will be sending signals of assurance and confidence in families – hence this will make families stronger, and stand with them as partners in national development.

4.2 Practical suggestions in the Strategic Steps

I wish to argue that social developmental strategies that will work in Africa, are those that reckon with the role the family plays in these processes. When governments and other stake holders in Africa embark of the process of social research, it would be ideal to have the family in mind as a meaningful partner. The question be may raised on the practicality of this argument. I would therefore make a few suggestions to verify my basic working presupposition.

4.2.1 Combating Crime

Crime is a social vice. It comes about due to many social factors, and included in this are broken homes, abused background of children, poverty, unemployment and child

delinquency. In order for governments to combat crime in any given society, research plans must involve families in communities. It could be that job creation for particular communities may lead to solving crime problems. In other communities, provision of food may be a solution to crime. While in some communities, governments will need to work closely with families to address the whole issue of child abuse. Again, these steps would be in accordance to the partnership principle earlier mentioned in this paper.

4.2.2 Addressing the HIV/AIDS Pandemic

HIV/AIDS has had devastating effects on the national development of any community in Africa. A lot of scientific and medical research is underway throughout the world to try and arrest this enormous threat to human life. The question that one asks is: How much of this research involves the family at grassroots? Is it not the family that is mostly affected by HIV/AIDS? How much is the family benefiting from the so called social research on HIV/AIDS? My argument is that unless steps are taken by governments and other stake holders in Africa to take the research processes to families and get them involved, such research will be meaningless and void.

The *partnership principle* of engaging the family in research should also apply when it comes to finding an answer to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Governments and other stake holders should resist doing things for the people, instead they should consult with the people on how best to tackle a prevailing problem such as HIV/AIDS. A top-down approach to social development has always proved a failure in many cases – why should governments think this will work in our days?

4.2.3 Job Creation

This is a daunting task of any given government – creating jobs for the masses. Again, this task can become easier when governments try to put in place programmes that involve the families in creating jobs for themselves within their given communities. Governments should play a facilitating role in helping families find solutions to their own

problems. This facilitating role could include provision of resources (agriculture tools, skills training programmes) that would **empower** families to begin to address the unemployment problem. Provision of trade schools and technical skills centers could in many ways help families stand on their own feet and create job opportunities for themselves.

4.3 Impact Programmes

I would propose that families would fulfill their role in national development through a creation of impact programmes. The impact programmes should include the following:

- Educational programmes for children in schools
- Social development programmes for both families in rural and urban settlements
- Recreational programmes that would encourage families to relax, socialize and deal with stressful problems in a more positive way. When developing an area within a given community, government planners should always think of space reserved for family recreation.
- Occupational programmes that would help families to respect time management principles for work and home environments.
- Transformational programmes that would concentrate on improving the living standards of each family.

5. The Spiritual Values of the Family

This paper works from a faith-based organizational perspective. Therefore, I wish to contend that **the preservation of the family lies in the moral and spiritual ethos of every nation**. Any departure from the spiritual values and principles of our African society could not only lead to the down fall of the family structure, but also could altogether have a negative impact on national development.

Using the *partnership principle*, governments and other stake holders ought to partner with families in creating conducive environments that will enable them to practice their faith values without intimidation. In partnership with governments, families should embark on creating environments that will impact younger generations on morals and values. Like one scholar by the name of Elizabeth O'Connor stated, "*Christian community probably comes closest to any community to the family of childhood, and all the assimilated hurts and resolved problems of that family come to light again in the context of the "family of faith"*".

And from a Christian faith perspective, we believe that while many contemporary social institutions hinder the development of quality family life to some degree, it is the Church that holds the most promise for fostering it. Charles M. Sell (1981:74), in his book, "*Family ministry – the enrichment of family*", argues: "*To what other place or meeting does the family regularly drive together? Important growth for all ages happens at church.*" In the context of the church, individuals of all stages of development find support and encouragement as, along with others, they endure and negotiate the stress involved in advancement from one stage to another.

The New Testament of the Christian Bible, places a great role on the nurture of families, which are usually termed as households. A regular catechesis existed setting forth the mutual duties of members of a Christian household: wives and husbands, children and fathers, servants and masters. In Jerusalem Church, households (families) were apparently instructed as units (Acts 5:42). You may also check the following references: Acts 20:20; Ephesians 5:22- 6:9; Colossians 3:18; 1Peter 2:18-3:7.

5.1 Practical Suggestions on how Governments, NGOs and FBOs could support the Spirituality of the Family

- (1) Creating conducive environment for community worship.
- (2) Investing in moral and value impact programmes for families.
- (3) Enforcing laws that protect religious rights of the family.
- (4) Seen to be addressing degenerating moral standards of the nation.
- (5) Investing in infrastructures that have the family on the center.
- (6) Supporting initiatives that enhances the spirituality of the family.

6. Reference

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