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TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FOR ALL”

Empowering mothers: a key strategy to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development for all

To eradicate poverty, it is essential to have a global and multidimensional approach, address the root causes of poverty, listen to the experience, needs and guidance of the people living in poverty and act together with them. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres highlighted this on the 2017 International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (1). Strategies must target all these aspects and empower people not only to help them out of poverty, but also to thrive.

As stated in the UN 2015 report *The World's Women, Trends and Statistics* (2), women and especially mothers are particularly concerned, being more likely to live in poverty than men. And among these, single mothers and older women living alone are among the most vulnerable to poverty.

And yet, mothers are key levers of change, an untapped resource to achieve sustainable development for all. Every mother cares about her children and her family. Tackling poverty issues is very much linked to the empowerment of women and mothers; it is about them getting the adequate support for health and education issues, also for the achievement of their economic autonomy, and thus helping them to make their family thrive.

Listening to what mothers have to say and ensuring their participation in policy making is therefore crucial. Policies designed for and with mothers, can have a double positive impact, for themselves and their children, and potentially break the inter-generational cycle of poverty.

Make the invisible poor visible

The latest October 2017 World Bank report on *new-poverty-lines-see-where-your-country-falls* notes significant progress in poverty reduction for the past 20 years: the number of people living in extreme poverty fell from 1,7 billion in 1999 to 767 million in 2013. However, people living in extreme poverty with less 1,9\$ a day still represent 10.7 % of the world population (3).

How does this approximate estimation in numbers of people living in poverty enable to reach out to them and develop appropriate policies? How can economic projections and strategies be devised by the states when part of this population is missing?

Indeed, the World Bank's "Identification for Development" (ID4D) program explains that an estimated 1.1 billion people worldwide cannot officially prove their identity, mostly in Asia and Africa. More than one third of them are children who are thus denied an identity. This implies that they can be denied access to education, health and other public services, that they are not taken into account in strategies and policies to eradicate poverty.

The European network on statelessness further points out that a baby is born stateless every ten minutes, a situation that leaves them stuck in poverty and insecurity. Not only they are left behind: they remain unaccounted for, excluded and invisible – most of the time in their own countries - to policy makers.

All the people living in poverty basically suffer from exclusion in one way or another. They are unviewed and unheard, especially in anonymous urban environments. They suffer from the lack of integration in communities and often have no family support or are homeless. Their reinsertion in society is vital. They need to be heard and helped to recover their dignity. Giving them a voice must be part of the solutions.

The multidimensional facets of poverty related to the role of mothers

UNDP and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative have developed the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) (6). This new measure allows each country to better understand how poverty affects their population and what can be done to reduce it. The MPI covers 3 dimensions, representing different facets of poverty:

- Health (nutrition, child mortality)
- Education (school attendance, years of schooling)
- Living standards (sanitation, drinking water, cooking fuel, electricity, floor, assets).

It is interesting to note that each of these facets relates to mothers' abilities of ensuring the basic health and education of their children, preliminary to escaping poverty. Living standards also relate to the time mothers spend on unpaid family care work, and their own economic empowerment.

Beyond the tools, which help countries to set their priorities and design adapted policies to eradicate chronic and intergenerational poverty, the participation of the people concerned by these policies including mothers is essential for their relevance and success.

Mother and child health to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty

Children need healthy parents to both survive and to thrive. Child mortality is strongly linked to maternal health. This point is well diagnosed by NGO We Care Solar among others, which provides "mothers and newborns with skilled health facilities and adequate lighting and power to save lives". More than half of child deaths occur within the first month of life and the vast majority within the first week of life. Providing skilled care to mothers during pregnancy and around childbirth is essential for child survival and wellbeing. Inclusion of the reduction of maternal mortality in addressing poverty alleviation is a major point; if a mother doesn't survive childbirth, her infant is less likely to survive the first year of life. Her children are more likely to be malnourished, less likely to be immunized, less likely to go to school. The family itself will be less likely to prosper. (7)

After a continuous decline over the past decade, world hunger has increased again: in 2016, 815 million people went to bed hungry compared to 777 million in 2015. Many studies have shown the dramatic impact of under-nutrition on brain development, and therefore on the future workforce. Breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty requires investing in the early years by answering mother and children nutrition and care needs.

Maternal mental health issues also affect child development, at least as much as malnutrition – as highlighted in recent studies on brain development. Virtually every mother can develop mental disorders during pregnancy and in the first year after delivery, but poverty, migration, extreme stress, exposure to violence (domestic, sexual and gender-based), emergency and conflict situations, natural disasters, and low social support generally increase risks for specific disorders. According to recent WHO figures, about 20 % of mothers in developing countries experience clinical depression after childbirth. This is much higher than previous prevalence figures which were mostly from high-income countries. (8)

Since a mother affected by mental illness cannot properly care for her children, this issue must be addressed as part of a strategy to eradicate poverty.

Mothers and their families are in particular profoundly affected by conflicts and natural disasters that not only generate fear and stress linked to insecurity, but also destroy subsistence means and jeopardize food security.

Mothers' economic empowerment

Ensuring that mothers can achieve some form of economic independence is also key for the eradication of poverty: we know that mothers – much more than men - invest their money and time in the welfare of their family, in the health and education of their children.

It is therefore essential to address the issue of the unequal distribution of unpaid family care work, which is at the root of inequality between men and women. In all countries, this essential work of caring for children and other dependent persons is mostly done by women, mothers in particular. In turn, it too often results in time poverty and it reduces opportunities for mothers to engage in income generating activities.

The discriminations that mothers face in the labor market also matter. For example, the Institute for Women Policy Research has found that paying working women the same as men in comparable situations – i.e. same age, same level of education, same number of hours, same urban/rural status - would reduce poverty among working women by more than half. (9)

Empowering mothers as a strategy to address poverty and break its intergenerational cycle – MMM recommendations:

- Address statelessness by, among others, allowing mothers to transfer their nationality to their children, and put in place birth registration systems that are accessible to them. This is a necessary step for identity, dignity and recognition of a child as a citizen, a first condition for not being left behind.
- Acknowledge the multiple dimensions of poverty by promoting the use of the Multidimensional Poverty Index worldwide to better understand the different needs of each country: each situation is different and must take in consideration culture, history and context. Climate change for instance is a recent but burning issue in many countries.
- Invest in maternal health and early child development: according to the World Bank, “Investing in the early years is one of the smartest things a country can do to eliminate extreme poverty, boost shared prosperity, and create the human capital needed for economies to diversify and grow. Early childhood experiences have a profound impact on brain development— affecting learning, health, behavior and ultimately, income. An increasingly digital economy places even greater premiums on the ability to reason, continually learn, effectively communicate and collaborate. Those who lack these skills will be left further behind.” (10)
- Integrate maternal mental health into general health care including women’s health, maternal and child health care, reproductive health care and other relevant services.
- Promote food and nutrition security interventions that aim to support gender equality and peace building, as well as building the resilience of populations to future economic or political shocks such as developed in the Food Administration Organization framework and directions about food security, sustainable peace and gender equality. (11)
- Promote mothers agency and economic empowerment by
 - a) Addressing the unequal distribution of unpaid family care work – and the underlying social and cultural norms - while recognizing its essential value and contribution to the economy and society
 - b) Promoting work and family balance policies for all
 - c) Addressing the discrimination that women, especially mothers, face in the labor market and in accessing economic resources.

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