



Centrality of the Family in the Pursuit of Sustainable Development

Albert Luswata^{1,*}

¹ Uganda Martyrs University

Abstract. The complex nature of the concept of sustainable development requires an integration of knowledge, other than basing on a particular science or model. This article widens the horizon by bringing onboard an approach based on the family. Contrary to the adversely and reductionist tendency that relegates it to a marginal role, this article argues that the family, understood in the normative sense and as the mediating institution between the individual and society, has a central role to play in the pursuit of sustainable development. It is the guarantee of the harmonious realization of the three interdependent pillars of sustainable development namely, the economic development, the social development and the environmental protection. Given the dialectical relationship between the family and society, the article not only implores society to put the family at the heart of public policy but also to follow the principle of *subsidiarity* while dealing with the family.

Keywords: Social subjectivity, Primary social capital, Holistic development

1 Introduction

At a point in time when the family seems not to enjoy popularity, as witnessed, firstly by the increasing tendency to equate or substitute it with other situations which are not family in the strict sense, for example cohabitations and homosexual unions, giving these last ones an institutional recognition by law, secondly by the diffusion of a divorce culture and diffidence in marriage (some even talk of post-marriage times, given the possibilities which science and technology give, such as procreation without sex!), the suggestion to put it at the centre of sustainable development, one of the unifying factors of our

* E-mail: aluswata@umu.ac.ug

contemporaries, may appear ridiculous. This is also because in these our post-modern times, characterized by, among others, a fragmentation of knowledge and exaltation of specialization, there is a belief in the absolute capability of science and technology, accompanied by economics and law, to find all solutions to everything including sustainable development (Sanna, 2001; Zuccaro, 2003). Thus, only solutions based on science and technology, supported by law and economics are considered sound – and thus sustainable.

And yet I will argue in this article that the family has a central architectonic role to play in sustainable development, both as a passive and active social subject, which needs valorisation. Ironically, it is the only guarantee of the harmonious realization of the three interdependent pillars of sustainable development namely, the economic development, the social development and the environmental protection. This is also because, as “the fundamental unit of every society,” it is “the condition for the physical, moral, social, and economic existence of human society” (Palazzini, 1962). In this sense, Marcus Tullio Cicero called it the “*Principium urbis et quasi seminarium rei publicae*” (*De officiis*, Chap. 1), which has the connotation of “cell of society”. Thus it has to be an inevitable protagonist if at all a sustainable development, in its tripartite dimensions, is to be met integrally.

In my view, little has been done, both at the theoretical and praxis levels, to try to exploit the family’s potential in regard to sustainable development. Although there has been a timid attempt by some authors to link the family with sustainable development, the tendency has been to limit it and its role to the only demographic question – i.e. with the need to control the population explosion within the family boundaries. This has been adopted by the international community and imposed on the States as witnessed by their population policies. While it is true, population explosion stands as one of the biggest challenges of sustainable development, and thus the family as a “sanctuary of life” has a special role to play in regard, this approach has been reductionist and misleading. By reducing the family’s role in sustainable development to the only demographic question, this approach is partial and impoverishing, given the family’s roles to both the individuals and society, based on its nature. And in practice, by basing on an exaggerated Malthusianism, this approach risks – and has already caused in some parts of the world – the opposite impact: from the fear of the “demographic boom” to that of the “demographic winter”, which too, by causing the problems of generational change and distorting the dependency ratio (Buttiglione, 2001; Gastion, 2007) (not forgetting the consequent imbalance in the sex ratio), is unsustainable. This is mainly due to the misleading massive campaign adopted especially from the neo-Malthusian ideology (Mattioli, 1984), which advocated for “any means” to reduce child births including a coercive sterilization, obligatory abortion, massive use of contraception, the famous one-child policy,

etc., thus creating a culture that hates having children and is detrimental to the same family institution, and thus to society. This calls in for an approach of obtaining a sustainable population, using means that are commensurate with the dignity of the person, and with the ethical, cultural and family values.

Without pretending to be exhaustive, this article comes in not only as an attempt to bridge up the above knowledge gap, concerning the connection between the family and sustainable development, and thus bringing on board those aspects that have been forgotten, but also to provoke more research on the same. This, of course, will not be an easy task here, given the space available – this being merely a journal article. I will attempt by developing my reflections in different moments. In the first moment, following some selected authors and international documents, and making my own inferences – but without entering deep into the merit of the question –, I will try to examine the concept of sustainable development. Here I will argue that the concept can better be understood beginning from its three pillars other than from its semantic meaning, and that the three pillars of sustainable development, in their dynamism, serve as the point of intersection between the family and sustainable development. I will then base on these three to show how sustainable development can be achieved integrally through the way of the family. Here I will follow a critical dialogue with some family scientists to elaborate the special role of the family for sustainable development. And lastly I will try to clarify on which family this article makes reference to, for a sustainable development. Given the nature of the issues in question – the family and sustainable development, which require an integration of knowledge (D'Agostino, 1991), contrary to making a particular science and its method absolute – I will adopt the same interdisciplinary approach, although an ethical outlook will be privileged as unifying the others.

2 Sustainable Development: between Definition and Contestation

Although it has become a unifying factor among our contemporaries (from governments to the international community, from environmental to developmental activists, from intellectuals to religious leaders, from development agencies to environmental agencies, from local government officials to planners and commercial developers, from civil servants to industrialists, from NGOs to human rights activists, etc.), the concept of sustainable development has been – and continues to be – problematic (Reid, 1999; Sharachchandra, 1991). A panoramic view of the literature reveals that its definition is not, to date, univocal, as different authors have used the term with a wide range of meanings, giving rise to various definitions of it (Pezzoli, 1997)

– the most popular of them being the Brundtland commission report, *Our Common Future's* definition and its derivatives, which emphasize the need to meet “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, (WCED, 1987). There are even others who suspect it to be a project of the North to arrest the development of the South. Thus the ideas which we have of it are far from being homogenous. The fact is that it refers to two etymologically contradictory notions: on the one hand, the notion of development, which has the connotation of undoing, on the other hand, the notion of sustenance, which has the connotation of maintaining. The famous contradiction between those developers who emphasize development for the sake of it and environmentalists who denounce all development is emblematic of this paradox. And yet sustainable development aims at exactly overcoming this.

Given the difficulty in defining this concept – and I believe it is impossible to find semantically an adequate definition of it, putting into consideration all its diverse dimensions – I will not begin the discourse on the relationship between the family and sustainable development from the definition, instead I will have the three pillars of sustainable development as my point of departure. Today there seems to be a wide consensus among theorists and politicians on the fact that sustainable development addresses three interdependent global challenges: the economic development, the social development and the environmental protection, thus forming the now famous triad (Giddings *et al.*, 2002; Elliot, 2006). It addresses the need for economic growth (and thus the need to fight and address the extreme poverty in the world today, as indicated by the rampant cases of malnutrition, disease, high infant mortality, low life expectancy, unemployment, lack of safe water and sanitation, lack of decent housing, etc.), but also ensuring the ecological health, and addresses the social challenges facing humanity today (these include among others, ignorance and illiteracy, violation of human rights, discrimination against women, violence against children, violent conflicts, lack of participation in societal activities by some, lack of basic freedom, poor services by the societal institutions, exclusion of poor nations in decisions on matters concerning them and from the global market, the threat to the foundations of global security, etc., NRC, 1999; *The Earth Charter*, 2000; UN, 2000). It thus overcomes the previous notion which measured development by the only economic growth based on GDP and GNP (Reid, 1999, Douthwaite, 1999). This was unbalanced since it not only ignored the environmental question but also did not put into consideration the well-being of each particular individual. Thus the concept of development was widened to embrace other social, cultural, political and environmental aspects.

A closer look at the nature of the rapport between the three pillars shows that it is not that of hierarchy – as though one is more important than the others –, nor that of chronology – such that one takes place in preceding moments before

the others –, not even that of exclusion – such that when one is present, the others have to be absent –, but, to use the words of Tolba (1984b), that of interdependence and mutual reinforcement. In fact, the three have an internal unity among them and condition each other, to the extent that the absence of one may hinder the realization of the others. This means that all the three have to be pursued harmoniously and each considered as an aspect of the other two. Economic development is necessary to meet the basic needs (food, energy, water, health, shelter, etc.) and to improve on people's standards of living and wellbeing, but this should not be achieved at the expense of the environment since the former relies on the latter for its activity. We are also aware how poverty can affect the environment since the poor largely depend on the environmental resources for their survival (Bartelmus, 1986; Elliot, 2006). They deplete forests to grow food, to get charcoal and for construction of their shelter, they overhunt animals to extinction. They also have a tendency to have a high number of children, whom they regard as an economic asset, thus increasing the population density. And yet they are the prime victims of the environmental degradation, given their quasi total dependence on it. At the same time, economic development requires peace, honesty, education, gender equality, good governance, participation, elimination of inequalities, strong involvement of civil society, respect of human rights, a fairer distribution of income, etc. Thus the three pillars should be realized in harmony in such a way that the realization of one does not hinder but fosters the realization of the other two. It is here that I would like to propose the family as the only guarantee for their harmonious realization. In this sense, the three pillars serve as the point of intersection between the family and sustainable development.

3 The Family and Sustainable Development

I will begin by arguing that, as the mediating institution between the individual and society, and as the cell of society, the family is that living space that can guarantee the harmonious realization of the three pillars of sustainable development. In fact, if sustainable development deals with the “total development of society” (Barbier, 1987), then the family is that institution that can guarantee its realization. Donati (2008) uses the expression which has origin in Marcel Mauss to refer to the family as a “total social phenomenon” which implies the biological, psychological, social, economic, juridical, political and religious dimensions of human existence. He also refers to it as a “primary social capital,” on which all the other forms of social capital depend (Donati, 2003). In this way, the family is an indispensable resource.

The centrality of the family for a sustainable development is connected to its role both as an active and passive social subject. In fact, there is a dialectical relationship between the family and society in which, on the one hand, society needs the family for its survival, on the other, the family needs society to be protected and promoted and thus to ensure the exercise of its subjectivity (Luswata, 2009). As an active subject, the family based on marriage not only promotes the personal and common good but is also a personal and common good itself. It contributes to the wellbeing of its individual members in various ways, meeting primary human needs, including ensuring a good environment to be born in; it ensures their integral education and upbringing; it protects the rights of its most vulnerable members; it provides for the economic, health and social needs of its members, and enables their self-realization as persons –here I think of the paradigmatic self-realization one gets by the fact of being married. But at the same, it contributes to the common good of the entire society. By this it guarantees the succession of generations; it educates and brings up the members of society and guarantees their safety within a family atmosphere; it also helps to harmonize the different rights of the members of society; it promotes cultural values and enhances relational virtues (love, peace, justice, solidarity, unity, sharing, participation, tolerance, patience, etc.). All these are indispensable for the very survival of society. This shows the non-substitutable role it plays for society and explains why the societies which attempted to abolish the family vanished (Gordon, 1972). In fact, society cannot replace adequately the family in the roles that naturally belong to it.

However, in order to practice and fulfil well its role in sustainable development (and its active subjectivity), the family needs to be sustained and strengthened (call it empowered) economically, socially, educationally, ethically, politically, culturally, spiritually and legally by society (passive subjectivity). Without such sustenance the family alone may not be able to meet sufficiently all the needs of its members including food, clothing, housing, medical care, education, security and other social services, but also the integral protection of their rights. Thus, for society, such an intervention for the family is not optional. In fact, if society is to resolve the problems of poverty, malnutrition, diseases, high infant mortality, illiteracy, low life expectancy, unemployment, lack of safe water and sanitation, lack of decent housing, discrimination against women, violence on children, etc., but also to ensure the ecological health, it cannot ignore the intermediary role of the family, this being the closest institution to the person. Although its intermediary role is not exclusive, the family has precedence over other societal institutions. Institutions such as schools, hospitals, centres for social services, etc. have a complementary role with respect to that of the family and should never pretend to substitute it. On the contrary, they should learn from the family to do their roles adequately.

4 The Family and Economic Development

The relationship between the family and economic development cannot be underestimated, given that the wellbeing of society will largely depend on that of the family, this being its nucleus. We also know that it is in the family that the essential needs for jobs, food, energy, water, sanitation, hygiene, housing, etc. are met. Even in the case when the State has to intervene in providing these, it cannot bypass the family, the closest institution to the person. The same elimination of the inequalities between the rich and the poor and the increase in the income per capita, have to be by strengthening the family economically.

But the family is also an economic resource in another sense: that of providing the “human capital” necessary for a sustainable economic development. This should not be understood in the only biological and demographic sense (by “producing” workers) but also in the pedagogical sense, in that it equips its members with those social virtues necessary for a successful economic activity: honesty, trustworthiness, hard work, punctuality, mutual respect, which entrepreneurs need from their employees. Here I will dwell on the former, since the latter will be dealt with in the section on the family and social development.

The debate on the connection between underdevelopment and overpopulation is not new, as the latter is accused to be the absolute cause of the former. Without denying the impact which overpopulation can have on development, I think the demographic question has to be handled in a more rational way. Any attempts to reduce child births using mere mechanical means (including a coercive sterilization, obligatory abortion, massive use of contraception) have proved to be unsustainable and have led to the new phenomenon of the “demographic winter”, thus affecting the economy. By affecting the dependency ratio, this phenomenon has led, in many countries, to the lack of workers in the sectors that raise the economies (and risks the overrun of such countries by foreign workers). Here I will argue that, if society is to ensure a sustainable level of population, it has to use the way of the family other than means that are detrimental to the same family institution (by creating a culture that hates having children in the name of the so-called “free-love”). This will require that spouses are taught a responsible parenthood, in which they themselves are prime protagonists in deciding on how many children they should have and using means that do not contradict their dignity and their ethical and cultural values (thus, without being coerced to use any undesirable means). The contrary would be morally unacceptable and unsustainable.

In the end, unlike those who measure development and quality of life basing on the only material wellbeing, I would like here to emphasize the importance

of the quality of interpersonal relationships on the human wellbeing. In fact, no one can do without them and survive (even if one owned the whole world!). And the most important of these (and as a paradigm of all the others) are those in the family. They should thus surface somewhere on the human development index.

5 The Family and Social Development

In the same way, the family is the guarantee for a sustainable social development. Authors and the international community often connect social development with issues relating to freedom, education, gender equality, good governance, participation, an efficient legal system, strong involvement of civil society, elimination of inequalities, cultural diversity, peace and human security, etc.

In the first place, the family is the guarantee for an integral education of children. However, although the importance of education for sustainable development seems to be obvious to most of our contemporaries, the central role of the family in education may not. And yet, if education is to be understood integrally, in the Franklian sense, as the search for the sense of life, then the family is the place for an authentic and integral education (Pesci, 2007). Here I am not merely referring to the participation of the parents in school education (so dear today to many researchers), but, first and foremost, to the family as a primary agent of education before any others (though not exclusive). The report of the Educational Policies Commission for the USA, *The Purposes of Education in American Democracy*, 1938, (cited by Pesci, 2007) mentions the realization of self, the development of human relations, economic efficiency, and civil responsibility as the objectives of education.

The family is qualified for its educational role by the nature of the interpersonal relationships within its boundaries, based on the reciprocal love of self-donation between parents and their children. This puts the parents in the best position for an integrated, personal and social education of the children (Wojtyla, 1993). In such a family atmosphere, each member is regarded and loved as a person with an appropriate value and in it there is trust for one another, esteem, respect and durability, factors which favour the family's capacity of socialization, control and responsibility (Donati, 2008). Thus each member takes an appropriate responsibility over the others. It is in the family that one learns to be a good citizen: in it one learns to obey laws, respect the others, respect cultural and moral values, respect of agreements, living well with others, sharing, hard work, honesty, trustworthiness, etc. In addition, in it the delicate theme of sex education is handled in an atmosphere of love, and

respecting the uniqueness of each child (in this, the elderly members of the family are experts) contrary to that in which children are just bombarded with sex information without filter. As a consequence, society needs to sustain the family in its educational role. And the other educational agents should not pretend to substitute it but to complement it, bringing on board their special competences.

The family is also the best place for the care of the most vulnerable members of society including the new and not yet born babies, children, the sick, the disabled and the elderly. This is also due to the type of interpersonal relationship in it, in which love and spontaneity prevail. Thus one does not need timetables, prescriptions or personal gains but acts spontaneously out of love and internal responsibility. At birth, the newborn baby is among the most vulnerable among all the born creatures (Lidz, 1968) and thus needs an environment in which it can be welcomed and protected in a human way. There is no better place than the family for this. The family also provides for the emotional needs of the adolescents and protects the young people against drug abuse and prostitution. In the same way, the family is that place in which the sick and disabled are taken good care of based on disinterested love. In addition it provides for that environment in which the elderly people are taken good care of, loved and respected. This is very important especially in the postmodern times in which old age is looked at with contempt. Although social, voluntary and welfare services or any forms of association can complement the family roles in the care of the vulnerable members of society, they cannot adequately substitute it, and, on the contrary, they depend on the family and on its paradigm for their services.

And, unlike the popular opinion that tends to present it as an obstacle to individual rights, the family is the condition and guarantee for their realization and exercise. In fact, if at all society is to ably defend the rights of its members then the first place to do this is none other than the domestic sphere. This is also because it is the closest environment of each person. In it the rights of different people including children, parents, men, women, the sick, the disabled and the old people are harmonized. In it each one is promoted as a person with an appropriate dignity and treated with love. His or her needs (physical, spiritual, psychological, affective, etc) are taken care of without discrimination.

Likewise, if peace is to be guaranteed in society, then it has to begin from the very cell of society. In fact, the family as the first place of humanization is also the first place to build peace which comes in it in a connatural way. As D'Agostino magisterially puts it, "in it one finds a natural place in which peace and fraternity [primordial human values] can really grow as natural modalities of coexistence and not by mere political agreements or by socio-economic equilibrium" (D'Agostino, 2008 pp. 31-32). In the family, through the education received from the parents and through the relationship with brothers

and sisters, one learns to be peaceful in the larger society. In it one learns the social and relational virtues such as patience, solidarity, justice, sharing, interpersonal exchange, self-sacrifice, love, faithfulness, tolerance, dialogue etc., which are inevitable for any possibility of peace. Such experiences which originate in the family are then spread to the wider society.

6 Family and Environmental Protection

In so far as the family has to provide its members with basic needs of food, shelter, energy, water, medicine, etc., it affects the environment enormously. Many poor families rely on the environment to provide for such essential needs. They practice subsistence farming to get food. This destroys the soils. They cut down forests to get energy from wood and charcoal, part of which they will sell off to meet other essential needs in the homesteads. The family also affects the environment by bringing new members on earth leading to population growth. This requires resources. Others build shelters in wetlands due to limited space. All this implies that if society is to adequately protect the environment, it has to begin by empowering the family, since this will lessen the encroachment on nature. If developmental projects do not aim at uplifting the economic wellbeing of families, these will definitely run to nature for survival, leading to its degradation.

At the same time, the family's role in protecting the environment cannot be limited to the only passive but also embraces an active subjectivity, making of it a prime protagonist. In fact, the family can adequately transmit environmental virtues to the larger society by inculcating them into its young members. In the family people learn to treat garbage and other wastes well, to use clean energy, to plant trees, to treat other beings well, to lessen consumerism, to lessen the use of polluters such as air conditioners and other household gadgets, to use adequate farming methods, to respect nature, etc.

7 Which Family for Sustainable Development?

The suggestion to put the family at the centre of sustainable development may not be a vendible idea among many of our contemporaries, who accuse it not only to be the source of injustices in society and of violation of human rights, but also as the main obstacle to development. And yet, whereas it is true that today many atrocities take place within its boundaries, it is erroneous to quickly conclude that the family is the source of them. In fact, other than being the source, the family is just a victim of the cultural revolution which has

negatively transformed the same family institution and threatens its existence. In reality, the causes of the limits within the family, both today and yesterday, are historical and not structural. This explains why I need to clarify on which family this article makes reference to. This is important given that today there is a tendency to refer to any forms of living together as family, whatever their intention, without considering the ontology of the family entity.

Here, I am not using the term in an analogical sense – as to include a complex of diverse realities that, in the common language, are usually accorded the same title –, but in the normative sense. Although the family, being both a natural and historical institution, is transformed by and understood in a given historical context, some interpretations which people make of it – as witnessed in some family models –, may not be adequate for a sustainable development. Thus, the family referred to here, will be taken in a restricted sense. This is none other than the community of persons founded on a stable union of marriage (whether religious, cultural or juridical) between one man and one woman and includes the children, a result of this marriage, and close relatives that derive from this. Only such an integral family is capable of realizing integrally and harmoniously the different dimensions of sustainable development. It thus consists of the universal and indispensable triad of the father, mother and children (Lévi-Strauss, 1956) and the other close blood relationships which are built on this. It is founded on a union of marriage which is durable (even when one believes it dissoluble), which is in turn specified by the sexual difference, and is structurally monogamous. Such a family is fertile both biologically and culturally: it generates and promotes life and values (Donati, 2008).

Using the scheme which has origin in Aristotle, Austin Fagothey (2000) affirms that an entity can be recognized as a family if it meets the following elements: the material cause of the family consists of the members constituting it: a man, a woman, and the children born from them; the formal cause is the moral bond between them; the final cause is the good of all parties concerned; and the efficient cause is the bond of marriage by which the family is brought to existence and maintained. Pierpaolo Donati (2008), renown relational sociologist, argues that the family is distinguished by the existence of the reciprocity between sexes and generations with all the expectations that derive from this, which include the capacity to sustain the mutual relationship between the partners and between generations, the capacity to generate life and the capacity to educate or socialize and take responsibility of the children. He therefore considers the following four elements to integrally confer to the family its specific identity *sui generis*: the gift, reciprocity, generative and sexuality. He refers to these four as the “family genome”.

As can be observed, what distinguishes and specifies the family entity from other realities is not merely functional – personal gain, social interests,

genealogical interests, accumulation of riches, social status –, but structural, or better anthropological in nature, based on the very essence of the person (D’Agostino, 2008). Thus, the same functions it does and its duties derive from its nature and not vice versa, as some today want us to believe.

As a consequence, for a sustainable development, I categorically exclude *De facto* unions or better known as cohabitations (which deliberately deny marriage), trial marriages, mono-parental families, singles, homosexual unions, the so-called “families without structure”, polygamous families and any other forms of para-conjugal relations. These have structural limits.

8 Conclusion and Recommendations

This article has investigated the family’s central role in sustainable development. It highlighted that the family’s role is connected to both its passive and active social subjectivity, and to its being the closest institution to the person, thus mediating between the individual and society. The originality of this article has been especially in systematically connecting the family’s role with the three interconnected and interdependent pillars of sustainable development, namely economic development, social development and environmental protection, as the guarantee for their harmonious realization. Here below are some few consequent recommendations.

8.1 Family: Heart of Public Policy

The dialectical relationship between the family and society means, public authority and all political systems need to put the family at the heart of public policy, both sustaining and strengthening it economically, socially, educationally, politically, culturally and legally (passive subjectivity) and making of it the main protagonist of societal activities (active subjectivity) for a sustainable development. As a consequence, society needs to protect and ensure the rights of its members within a family atmosphere including the right to food, clothing, housing, medical care, employment and social services; the right of the sick, the disabled, the elderly and other vulnerable members of the family and society to receive social security and the right of mothers and children to special care and assistance (Universal Declaration, arts. 16.3; 25). On the other hand, society should ensure the rights of the family as an entity such as the right to own property (Universal Declaration, art. 17), the right to work and to just and favourable remuneration ensuring one’s family an existence worthy of human dignity and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection (Universal Declaration, art. 23.3), the prior right of the parents to choose the kind of education given to their children (Universal Declaration,

Art. 26.3), the right and freedom from arbitrary interference with one's privacy, family, home or correspondence (Universal Declaration, art.12).

8.2 Principle of *Subsidiarity*

The nature of the relationship between society and the family, however, should not be that of subject-object, nor that of assistentialism (intervening only when the family has specific difficulties), but that of *subsidiarity* (Donati, 2000). This means, it should not take away the roles which the family can play on its own but should favour it to perform them well through adequate sanctions and policies. It should also not impose what the family has to do but intervene only when necessary. In this way it will freely perform its active subjectivity in sustainable development without coercion.

8.3 Family and Employment

If the family is a source of human capital, the employers have an obligation of reconciling the time of work with the time for the family of their employees. The tendency to suffocate family life by the unfavourable working conditions is economically unsustainable since from the family come not only the reliable workers but also the employers' customers/clients. The employers too should not to discriminate against mothers, especially those with young children, who are usually excluded from employment or denied the due time necessary to stay at home with their children.

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