



**International Day of Families
15 May 2005**

(For 2005, the theme is “HIV/AIDS and Family Well-being”)

Excellencies,
Distinguished Colleagues from the NGO Community,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The UN observes 56 International Days – starting with the International Mother Language Day on 21 February and ending with International Migrants Day on 18 December of every calendar year. Each day is special with the intention of promoting awareness and spurring action. On 20 September 1993, the General Assembly, in its resolution 47/237, proclaimed that the 15th of May of every year be observed as the International Day of Families. This Day reflects the importance the international community attaches to families as basic units of society as well as its concern regarding their situation around the world. The first observance was in 15 May 1994 during the International Year of the Family. Last year, 2004, marked the 10th year anniversary of the International Year of the Family.

The decision in 1993 to establish an International Day of Family enhances political attention and action. This Day provides an opportunity to promote awareness of issues relating to families as well as to promote appropriate action and provides an opportunity to increase knowledge of the economic, cultural, social and demographic processes affecting families. Through the observance of the International Day of Families since 1994, we have been able to highlight and discuss issues such as; how poverty and homelessness affects families, building families based on partnerships, families as the educators and providers of human rights, families as the agents and beneficiaries of development, recognizing the older person’s invaluable role in families and the community, and families as the builders of social cohesion.

Family day is a peoples’ event. Our agenda is to give a human face to family issues. **This year with the theme of “HIV/AIDS and Family Well-being”**, the focus is on the devastation that HIV/AIDS wrecks on the family and the challenges in effectively combating it.

When a member of the family suffers from HIV and/or AIDS, everyone suffers. When a family member gets sick, there is a rise in medical costs. If that member is a caretaker of the family, such as a parent, then the impact is even greater since the

breadwinner of the family can no longer provide income to support the family. Caring for the sick usually falls on the shoulders of the women in the family. Oftentimes, young girls are taken out of school to help care for ailing parents, look after siblings and to provide food for the family. With the death of the parents, we see the rise of skip-generation households, where the grandparents now take care of the orphaned children, and orphaned children headed households. These orphaned children are more at risk of suffering from malnutrition, becoming victims of violence and exploitative child labour and trafficking.

Chief among the disenfranchised are certainly the world's children. They are relatively powerless economically; there are only a few societies whose young people have discretionary incomes of any significance. Although practically every area of government policy affects children in some way, directly or indirectly, children do not have the vote, therefore specifically "child-centred" decision-making tends to be rare. Socially, children are totally dependant on the good sense, good will or good offices of adults. Biologically, children are the most vulnerable members of the population; their still developing minds and bodies are especially susceptible to environmental influences.

Threats to child health can range from exposure to airborne secondhand tobacco smoke to the practice of child marriage or exposure to direct or indirect mental or physical violence and abuse. Therefore, securing a safe, healthy environment for the young organism to develop must be an equally broad-based, multi-faceted effort calling for the active participation of every segment of the adult society.

The International Day of the Family is an occasion for us to recommit ourselves to the Millennium Development Goals and reflect on the progress so far achieved.

I would like to remind everyone that, five years ago, at the close of 20th century, the United Nations convened in September 2000, "The Millennium Summit". The Summit brought together world leaders to agree on an ambitious agenda for reducing poverty and improving peoples' lives. The Declaration of the Millennium Summit expresses the political will of all United Nations member states to achieve critical development objectives by 2015, in eight areas considered vital to the future well-being of human land. These objectives include to:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability and
8. Develop a global partnership for development.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as they are called, are all interconnected and are all related in fundamental ways to achieving the goal of

environmental sustainability. Your conference here is a clear demonstration of your commitment towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Governments have an obligation to honor the commitments they make at the United Nations. At the same time, the MDGS cannot be achieved without the involvement of governments and civil society and private sector working together in partnership. The role of NGOs has increased significantly over the last decade. At both national and international level it is clear that partnerships with civil society and all various stakeholders are essential for sound development.

Each of the 8 goals addresses the well being of the family, either by targeting the specific needs of the mother and children or the family as a whole. As the family still remains society's most fundamental institution in raising children, fostering commitment and responsibility, caring for the aged, and imparting values to each new generation, it is, therefore, imperative that the family, not only be considered as a side issue when devising the policies and strategies to address these problems for the new millennium, but rather, as the central focus of such planning. Families are a microcosm of society. Healthy families teach the values necessary to promote integration, social development and poverty eradication. Disintegration of the family, on the other hand, only exacerbates these problems. Therefore, strengthening the family must be adopted as a global priority in the coming century.

Families worldwide will face challenges in the new Millennium. The future is filled with boundless possibilities. Science and technology have opened up vast new worlds that are becoming ever more accessible to the lay person, and more and more people are becoming familiar and proficient with this new technology. In the enchantment with the notion of the global village however, it is all too easy to overlook those who have not access to it. A conscientious and concerted effort has to be made now, either to find the means to ensure that everyone has access, or to devise other ways to include those without input into this global dialogue. If indeed, the world is to become a global village, we must undertake ways of sharing technology with one another.

Families are also under siege from the global media. All over the world, people are bombarded by imported images that, by and large, do not accurately reflect the reality of their intended audience. This homogeneous packaged pseudo-culture is becoming increasingly influential, as more people around the world tune into the same television programmes, watch the same films, and receive the same commercial messages. Violence is glorified, conspicuous consumption is encouraged, social conscious is never addressed, women are objectified and values and morals are rarely, if ever, discussed. On the other hand, the media can be powerful tool for change in the new millennium. It can be used to highlight marginalized cultures, promote education, and transmit information. Unfortunately, it is currently being used, primarily as an economic force, rather than one that serves to educate, inform and strengthen the public. It will fall on the family to control the content and influence of these global messages on the society it is building.

Building coalitions and establishing networking systems will be, in fact, one of the major challenges for the family based organizations, as they seek to make a

meaningful contribution to the United Nations' efforts to establish a culture of peace. These NGOs, whose collective activities cover every aspect of social and economic development, now, include regional, sub-regional and even small national organizations – each with something of value to contribute. Given the reality of the historic and regional differences in family structure and needs, reaching agreement on common ground for action, will be the first challenge. Finding a common voice to send the message of peace through, and for the family, will be the second.

I am glad now to inform you about our informal NGO Regional Network, UN NGO IRENE, as it answers these two challenges.

The Non-Governmental Organizations Section of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs makes every effort to support the evolving relationship and an efficient implementation of the MDG 8 to move forward from consultation to effective cooperation and partnership between the United Nations and over 2600 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). In particular the Section seeks to contribute to the realization of the diverse, geographically balanced NGO involvement envisaged by the Council in its Resolution 1996/31. In light of the growing impact and influence of NGOs in the global arena, it is increasingly important that the concerns raised, the positions taken and the voices heard should be truly representative of NGOs worldwide and should effectively and efficiently contribute to a better world for all. In this regard, a UN-NGO-Informal Regional Network (UN-NGFO-IRENE) was launched by the NGO Section to strengthen the NGO capacity and enhance their concrete contribution to the ECOSOC work in implementing especially the internationally agreed MDGs and the major UN conferences' recommendations and action plans.

The overarching goal of UN-NGO-IRENE is to enhance the NGO contribution to the United Nations ECOSOC agenda and strengthen the sector from within by building parity among its organizations. Achievement of this goal is based on providing access to up-to-date information and the benefits of ongoing communications through a technology-based system designed to promote interactive exchange among NGOs and between NGOs and the United Nations.

In addition, under the Network's training component, capacity-building programs strengthen national and regional organizations as effective participants in economic and social development, both operationally and at the policy level.

The Economic and Social Council in July 2002 adopted decision E/2002/225 to establish a general trust fund in support of the UN-NGO-IRENE. This fund will focus on helping UN-NGO-IRENE to accomplish the following activities:

- a) Networking and exchange of information and experiences among NGOs
- b) Capacity building and training activities for NGOs in the relevant areas of the internationally agreed Millennium Development Goals and Millennium Declaration

c) Promotion of coordinated and integrated activities at all levels to generate partnership initiatives, projects and programmes between governments, civil society, the private sector, and the United Nations.

The NGO Informal Regional Network is an ideal vehicle for enhancing NGO participation in implementing programmes of action aimed at achieving the MDGs. This initiative, spearheaded by the NGO Section/DESA, is intended to lift some of the barriers to inclusive, effective NGO participation in the development activities of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies and the United Nations system. To date we have a coordinator for the NGO IRENE in each region, and for Western Europe I am pleased to acknowledge that World For World Organization is our UN NGO IRENE Coordinator.

In just over two years, World for World Organization has established itself as a groundbreaking non-governmental organization that tackles the multi-faceted task of promoting the Millennium Development Goals and disseminating the work of the United Nations, while addressing challenging cross-cutting issues, such as gender. With an emphasis on a development mindful of its impact on the environment and based on community participation, sustainability and sufficiency, WFWO deals with an extremely wide array of issues within the broad scope of the Millennium Development Goals. These issues are as fundamental and diverse as the improvement of food security, the development of rural financial services, capacity-building in support of decentralized decision-making process for participatory rural development, natural resources management and the environment, Public Awareness to support the MDGs, Communications Support Projects and portal facilities for the NGO network.

Involving all actors of the civil society, projects and programmes supported and initiated by WFWO run throughout the world in an all-encompassing effort to encourage a framework fostering community organization and participation. Deeply committed to the effective dissemination of the MDGs, WFWO strongly advocates for a human-centered development, with a fervent and active involvement of all peoples, at all levels of their communities.

On behalf of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations, I would like to thank the Authorities presents, the President of Associazioni Familiari and all the organizers of this international forum for having given me the opportunity to share with you the vision of partnership that the United Nations is seeking to forge with the civil society in order to implement the Millennium Development Goals. Each one of you has a critical role to play for the “well-being of Family” and prosperity for all.

In that spirit, I wish you a very successful forum.