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Unlocking the power and potential of family in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Africa's population will explode in the coming years, with predictions that 2.4 billion people will be living on the continent by 2050. Over 50% of people will be living in cities, many of them in extreme poverty and slums. These trends, coupled with pressures such as economic crises, migration, conflict, pornography, and the digital age increasingly put families under threat. The picture being painted is bleak, but it doesn't have to be that way. At Family Impact we are convinced that family comes from God and that God is for family. For this reason, family is not an endangered species and families transformed by God have the potential to bring shalom to individuals, communities and nations. Promoting shalom in family becomes an expression of integral mission when programs combine the provision of knowledge and skills with promoting the wholeness and fullness of life that is offered by God's plan for family. This paper reflects on these themes using examples from Family Impact's work in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Introduction

For Family Impact (FI), seeking *shalom* in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is about empowering families to be patterned after God's plan for family and relationships. God is for family, and FI desires to see people experience the fullness of life, freedom and wholeness—*shalom*—that comes from being part of a strong family. Furthermore, FI believes in the power and potential of families living by God's plan as a transformative agent on the continent of Africa. To this end, all of FI's work is centred on strengthening families. To seek shalom in families and unlock their transformative potential, it is necessary to understand the pressures facing families in SSA.

Challenges for family in Sub-Saharan Africa

Africa's cities and Africa's population will explode in the coming years, with predictions that 2.4 billion people will be living on the continent by 2050.¹ Over 50% of these people (as many as 1.26 billion) will be living in cities, many of them in extreme poverty and slums.² The population is also younger than in the rest of the world; an average of 43% of the population

in SSA countries is under 14 years.³ The share of the world's under-18 population in Africa will rise from 25% currently, to almost 50%, or 1.09 billion, by 2100.⁴

Technology and communications are also rapidly expanding. Africa had over 635 million mobile phone subscriptions at the end of 2014 and this is predicted to top 900 million by 2019.⁵ Over 300 million people in Africa are expected to own a smartphone by 2017⁶ and there are an estimated 80 million active social network users.⁷ In summary, the Africa of the future will be dominated by young people who live in cities, many of them in slums and informal settlements, not formally employed, accessing the internet and social media on their mobile phone, yet disconnected from the traditional forms of family and means of support.

These trends, coupled with pressures such as economic crises, migration and conflict, increasingly put the family as the core unit of society under threat. Families facing such pressures do not always provide ideal environments where children can mature, or couples can enjoy their marriages, and strong, functional family environments can thrive in which all family members can find love, acceptance and support. The resultant family breakdown is at the root of many social problems, with the spread of HIV being a pertinent example in Africa.

The picture being painted is often bleak, but at Family Impact we passionately believe that it doesn't have to be that way. We are working to prepare Africa for a future that does not line up with predictions, a future that defies the statistics and unlocks the transformative potential of family for individuals, communities and nations.

The potential of family

Family Impact is convinced families that are living out biblical family values have the power and potential to be the place from which change and transformation starts and flows out into communities and nations. This paper discusses these themes, using examples from Family Impact programs that empower people to experience shalom within their families, marriages and communities are shared.

Family in the global spotlight

Family Impact is not alone in its belief in the transformative potential of family. The role and significance of the family in building stable and productive societies has been increasingly acknowledged and supported by churches, governments, development agencies and businesses. Indeed, ‘religion’ aside, the power of strong, stable families for transformation is widely embraced.⁸

Family at the core

So central is family that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that it should be afforded protection as the “natural and fundamental group unit of society”.⁹ The strength of a building depends on the quality of the bricks. Good bricks will make a strong building, but if the bricks are weak and crumbling, the house will soon fall. In the same way, healthy families are necessary for a strong community or nation. Therefore, to transform communities, we must build and strengthen families.



Weddings and funerals often testify to the amazing strength of family life, as does the money sent home to family members in Africa from the diaspora. Many families have gladly accepted responsibility for widows and orphans, often at great cost and sacrifice. People from outside are constantly amazed at the way families in Africa care for their relatives. These are some of the ways families should and can work. One strong family experiencing shalom in this way may seem insignificant but a million such families would transform any nation in Africa. A United Nations (UN) study during the 1994 International Year of the Family “concluded that – even in situations of most dire poverty – the single most important factor influencing social outcomes for individuals is whether they are members of a strong, stable family.”¹⁰

The family and the gospel

At the unprecedented interfaith gathering on marriage and family hosted by the Vatican in November 2014, there was universal agreement on two things; 1) that all denominations are in favour of marriage and the family and 2) that the foundation of strong societies is strong families.¹¹

In discussions that have followed the November 2014 gathering, the Catholic Church has highlighted the foundational importance of families and marriages that are transformed by God to spreading the gospel and transforming society:

“Through sound family life, our society will be transformed,” he [Cardinal Burke] added. “Without a sound family life, it will never be transformed.” “At the same time, the marriages transformed by the Gospel are the first and most powerful agent of the transformation of society by the Gospel,” he added. “The witness of the family is, therefore, at the heart of the new evangelisation.”¹²

“I think (evangelisation and family life) goes hand in hand certainly, this whole idea that the family is not simply an object of our care. The family is what influences neighbours.” “Families have a powerful impact even on people who don’t belong to their family. I think the family is being called to be an instrument of the evangelisation to participate in that work,” he [Archbishop Joseph Kurtz] added.¹³

The family and development

For the past 20 years, the Millennium Development Goals have underpinned and guided poverty eradication and development efforts globally. The potential of family to help nations achieve these goals has been emphasised

... one of the most sure means to promote social development—and achieve the Millennium Development Goals—is to focus on policies, programs and initiatives that harness the unique strengths and contributions of the family.¹⁴

The family unit and family dynamics are core to achieving the development goals, as it is families that send their children (boys **and** girls) to school, it is in families that health information can be shared and safe hygiene and sexual practices adopted, family support is vital for women to access health care during pregnancy and give birth safely, and families can do more together to improve their livelihoods than individuals can alone. This potential of family has not always been fully harnessed, and according to

the UN, the 20th anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2014 provided an opportunity to

refocus on the role of families in development; take stock of recent trends in family policy development; share good practices in family policy making; review challenges faced by families worldwide and recommend solutions.¹⁵

Strong families will remain key to the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals proposed for adoption in 2016.¹⁶ In particular, goals 1-5 relating to poverty, food security, health and wellbeing, education and gender equality are often first achieved in and by families. In line with this view, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Social Policy and Development emphasised the contribution of family to development through a campaign for the 2015 International Day of Families.¹⁷

Family is *not* endangered

So, far from being an endangered species, families that are strong, whole and harmonious are a witness to the gospel and an agent for development and poverty eradication efforts. When families are strong within, they are able to extend this strength, wholeness and harmony to their communities, workplaces, churches and governments, which in turn facilitates positive behaviour change, community development, and stable, productive societies. This is not an unrealistic hope, and there are already healthy marriages and strong families present in every community in Africa. It is this power and potential of family that Family Impact seeks to unlock and release to transform Africa.

God's plan for family

We are confident that family comes from God (Genesis 1:1-2 & 26; Proverbs 8:22-31; John 1:1-2; John 17:24; Colossians 1:17; Jonathan Edwards wrote of 'the society or family of the three')¹⁸ and God is for family (Genesis 1:27-28 & 2:18-24; Exodus 20:12 & 14; Ephesians 5:31-32; Revelation 19:7).

At Family Impact we outline God's plan for family through five foundational, biblical family values that transcend culture and nationality.¹⁹ A brief summary follows:

Everyone in Family: The word ‘family’ in English versions of the Bible is used to translate the word ‘house’ (OT beth; NT oikos) where appropriate. Literally ‘house’ means a physical building and then refers to all the people in a ‘household’ (Exodus 20:10; Psalm 68:5-6; Psalm 127:1; Acts 10:2 and 16:32-34).

Committed Couples: Marriage is God’s idea. He created men and women equally in his image to be companions and to help each other. However, singleness can also be his good calling (Genesis 1:27-28 & 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6; Ephesians 5:21-33; 1Corinthians 7:7).

Valued Children: Children, both boys and girls, are a gift and blessing from God to any married couple. However, if a couple is not able to have children their marriage is complete in God’s sight and should be accepted as such in church and society (Psalm 127:3-5; Psalm 128:3-4; Matthew 19:13-14; Luke 1:6-7).

Sexual Purity: God made us men and women and said that all He had made was very good. Within marriage, sex is blessed by God who intends it to be a joy and delight to both partners. Jesus also made it clear that sexual purity extends to avoiding lustful thought and behaviour. The Bible shows that sex sin can be forgiven and God calls the church to keep a balance between His justice and His forgiveness (Genesis 2:24; Proverbs 5:15-23; Song of Songs 4:1-5:1; Song of Songs 8:8-9; Hebrews 13:4; Matthew 5:27-30; John 8:10-11).

Christ Centred: Christ centred families reflect the relationships of harmony and love within the Trinity. They welcome Jesus to share their everyday life and to take part in all they are and do. They are salt and light in their community. However, we can only know the peace of God in our families when we are living Christ centred lives ourselves (1 Corinthians 10:31; Joshua 24:15; Psalm 127:1; Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

We are on a journey with Jesus: As Christians, neither we nor our families are perfect but we press toward that goal with God’s help. Following the example of Jesus, the church invites all to join us on this journey and especially welcomes those whose family situation falls short of these Five Family Values. This will include divorced persons, single parents, children born outside marriage and many others. ‘Accept one another just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.’

(Romans 15:7; Matthew 9:10-13; 2 Samuel 12:13 with Acts 13:22; Luke 15:11-32; Galatians 6:1).

Therefore, strong families that are patterned after God's plan are a place where husbands and wives are committed to one another, where children are valued, where everyone is included (extended family, orphans, singles, widows, foreigners), where sexual purity is practised and taught and where Christ is at the centre. Families that hold these values serve Christ together, their door is open to those in need, they know Christ's joy and peace, they are salt and light to their community and they spread the gospel together.

It is with God's help that people are able to experience in a deep and true way this harmony and wholeness, or shalom, in their families. When families are renewed by God they offer a life, love and hope that will transform their communities, nations and the world.

Unlocking the potential of family in SSA

This belief in family means that the underlying theme in all Family Impact programs is the strengthening of family life for the transformation of communities. This is achieved through the development and delivery of materials and training programs that provide practical information and equip couples, men, women and children with the skills to strengthen all aspects of family life.

Many of our programs are designed to strengthen and equip the church and church leaders to build strong families that are able to support themselves and extend that support to their neighbours and communities. While we seek to work in and through the church as much as possible, FI also believes individuals and families can be reached and strengthened through programs that are designed to be delivered in communities, schools and businesses. To this end, Family Impact also implements programs that empower communities to combat the things that lead to family breakdown. These include HIV/AIDS, potentially harmful sexual and reproductive health practices, gender-based violence (GBV) and poor health and hygiene practices. Family Impact also works to empower and challenge government, businesses, church leaders and others on the importance of strong families living out biblical family values.

In and through all its work, it is Family Impact's heart to see strong, loving, well-functioning families, expressing and living by biblical family values that transcend culture and nationality. For FI, seeking this shalom in families becomes an expression of integral mission, when programs not only provide knowledge and skills, but bear witness to the way in which God's plan for family can transform marriages, parenting, and family relationships.

The following are specific examples of how FI promotes and encourages the incorporation of family strengthening into churches, development projects and businesses.

Foundations for Family

FI's experience is that people are hungry for ways to build family and marriage. For example, in SSA there are many organisations working with subsistence rural farmers, who are mostly in families, to improve and diversify their farming skills and market opportunities (for example Foundations for Farming).²⁰ Yet people have realised that for a small family farm to be truly successful, the family itself must be strong and function well. It was to fill this gap and meet the needs of the whole person that the Foundations for Family training program grew out of the Foundations for Farming program, and has since been used widely.

Foundations for Family teaches the five family values which set out God's plan for families in all cultures.²¹ It is not a one-off 'program', but equips churches to make the support of families within the church and the surrounding community a continuing part of church life. Foundations for Family provides church leaders with materials for a Five Family Values sermon series and a small group study guide, and encourages churches to appoint Family Champions. Church leaders are trained church leaders in the objectives and content of the program, supported as they make it a part of church life, and follow up on the impact of the program is undertaken.

In 2014, at the invitation of the VIVA network, pastors in Kisumu, Kenya, were trained in Foundations for Family through the Arise for Children Network (ARC). The ARC have identified many issues in the communities these churches serve that they believe can be addressed at family level:

Broken and dysfunctional families are at the root of many of the challenges to the welfare of children. For example, while there are

structures in place to work with children and families following the incidence of abuse, there is a lack of work on prevention and strengthening families and equipping caregivers with skills to positively parent children. In local communities there is also a lack of counselling and support for many families.

The ARC report concluded:

There is need for Christian teaching and training in the whole area of family, marriage and parenting. Churches can make a constructive contribution in teaching and supporting families.²²

Feedback from the training indicated that this was the first time many participants had understood God's plan for family and relationships in depth, and that the idea was encouraging and transforming: 'I had never understood God's plan for my family before'; 'I had no idea that the Bible spoke so openly and practically about sexuality and sex in marriage'; 'I now recognise the importance of family to God.'

One pastor shared on the applicability and practicality of the teaching:

The challenges that our families face are poverty and have led to high levels of immorality, family break ups which lead to single parenthood, child labour, prostitution and orphans. This gives pastors and caregivers a hard work because they are the ones who handle these situations and hence a need for training and empowering them. This training has come at such a right time to help us handle the families the bible way. [*sic*]

Women's health training

In partnership with TEAR Australia, a Women's Health Program has been delivered in rural areas outside Bulawayo, Zimbabwe since 2011. Utilising a Women's Health Manual, the program empowers women with knowledge about sexual and reproductive health, family strengthening, GBV and re-usable sanitary pad making. While the focus is on women, training in sexual reproductive health and GBV has also been conducted in schools and for men.

The program combines practical and in-depth information on sexual and reproductive health with teachings on communication, family and marriage relationships. When asked about the impact of the training on their lives, women often share that they have learnt to be more open with their husbands and children, particularly about sex, and that this has transformed their family relationships. They are also able to better care for their own

health and that of their families, which brings confidence and peace. Of 85 testimonies collected in 2014, 46% mentioned relationships as something they had learnt about in addition to various reproductive health topics.

This transformation does not end in families; the participants have begun to teach others what they have learnt, to care for their extended families, to take part in the development of their communities and to dig rubbish pits and build latrines. The following testimonies highlight the impact that combining health information with family strengthening has had in these communities.

I started attending the Community Health Project trainings in 2012. It was a milestone in my life and has brought about tremendous change in my family. For a long time I was not in good terms with my husband. I am an energetic woman, I love keeping busy with different household chores but I never cared for other people but myself. I would fight with my husband over issues to do with his relatives. I never wanted him to bring his relatives to our home, either to visit or to stay with us. I would beat him up and **there was no peace in the home**. When the project was implemented and we went for a camp, I was challenged and I realised I needed to change. My husband would have extra marital affairs during the times we fought. This was putting both our lives at risk of HIV, I made up my mind that I would change. After the camp, I was taught on how to keep my relationship safe. Now my relationship with my husband has improved. He has also opened up to me concerning our relationship and **there is love and peace in our home**. We are now taking care of our grandchildren together. Thank you Family Impact for changing my life and making my marriage better.

I started attending to the Family Impact meetings when they commenced last year [...] I also learnt that communication is very important in building marriages and families. Thus as women we were taught that communication within families is an effective family building tool. [...] Family Impact has brought so many different changes in my life and I think **it has brought unity and peace to my family**.

Freedom Unlimited

The role of men in families is of paramount importance for the well-being of children, women, and of men themselves if the family unit is to be strengthened. Men's involvement in the 'private sphere' of the household and family life is as crucial to economic and social development as the

involvement of women in the 'public sphere' of income-generation and community decision-making.

Freedom Unlimited (FU), strengthens and equips families to face the challenges posed by HIV/AIDS as a unit; sharing information and providing support for each other. FU is a life skills and HIV awareness program that targets men and is focused on bringing about long-term behaviour change. It deals with family life, self-esteem, communication, sexuality and HIV education and information. The FU program was design to reach men in workplaces, where they are often easier to reach. The main strategy of FU is to approach HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention from a gender perspective, based on the cultural roles of men in SSA who are often breadwinners and decision makers in their households.

The program emphasises men's shared responsibility for the family and also promotes their active involvement in responsible parenthood, sexual and reproductive behaviour, including prevention of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, prevention of unwanted pregnancies, shared control and contribution to family income, children's education, health and nutrition. By targeting and winning the approval of the people who are the source of power, FU makes it easy for other family members to be involved in HIV/AIDS prevention.

Feedback from participants included:

Because of the program, I am now aware of the need to strengthen families in the fight against HIV. I am now able to discuss openly on issues to do with sex and HIV in the family.

The training enhanced my knowledge on HIV issues and gave me courage to speak about these issues to my family and friends. It also challenged me to be a man of integrity and encourage people to find out their HIV status.

This program changed my life, I am now faithful to my wife and have even shared information about HIV issues with my eight children. My plea is that this program be not only for workplaces... may it also be done in beer halls.

Reflections

The approach of providing training to organisations, churches and communities, while often very impactful for the individual or couple who

attends, does have some limitations and challenges. The first is provision of ongoing follow up and encouragement. As a training and knowledge dissemination organisation, Family Impact is often limited in the extent of follow up that is able to be offered following a training program, unless specifically provided for in the funding available for a program. This includes limitations to the ability to monitor and evaluate the impact of the training. Secondly, if the individual or couple who attends the program is not supported by their church, organisation or community leader and/or are not in a position to take the knowledge and resources received into their organisation or community, the impact outside of those trained can be limited. In short, while Family Impact can provide the knowledge, resources, skills and generate excitement and passion for family strengthening, for long term impact to really be seen, leadership commitment is required.

One broad solution to these limitations is to ensure that church pastors and leaders, community leaders and company management are on board and excited about family strengthening in their context. This is key to ensuring there is the impetus and commitment to see the information and resources provided by FI in their training used and passed on to others. For example, if a church nominates a couple to be trained in the Foundations for Family program simply because it is an opportunity to be trained, it is unlikely the learning will be used within the church and community to strengthen other families. However, if the church leadership are passionate about family strengthening, provide support to the couple and send a couple who are also passionate and willing to take what they learn back to the church and community, the impact is much greater.

A second area that FI is looking to pursue further is partnerships with national and continental denominational church organisations and encourage and advocate for family strengthening to become mainstream in their denominations and congregations. FI sees such partnerships as an opportunity to garner leadership support for family strengthening and has resources and programs to assist in this.

Looking to the future

Examples of family transformation presented here are encouraging, inspiring and impactful. Yet in many ways, we have only begun to scratch

the surface of the potential that family has for the transformation of SSA. God's plan for family is transformative and resonates with people in all sectors of society. What remains now is to broaden the reach and deepen the impact. Africa is changing rapidly—it is becoming younger, more urban and more connected. With these changes come new, exciting opportunities to reach people with the good news of God's transforming plan for family. For example, although mobile phones and internet access bring threats to families in terms of reduced face-to-face interaction and instant access to pornography, they also bring opportunities for downloadable resources, training and applications. SSA is positioned to take off in this area and FI is keen to lead the way.

There is also a call for the growing 'Third Church' or majority world church, to play a significant role in shaping and seeking the shalom of the rapidly developing African cities.²³ FI is positioned to play a key role in mobilising and equipping the church to share God's plan for family and bring shalom to the neighbourhoods and communities of Africa.

Conclusion

For Family Impact, seeing shalom in sub-Saharan Africa means seeing families transformed by understanding and experiencing God's plan for family, parenting and marriage as revealed in the Bible. Such families are whole, harmonious, supportive and loving and they are a source of strength and transformation for their community, workplaces, churches and governments.

We are working to prepare Africa for a future that defies the often overwhelmingly negative statistics by unlocking the transformative potential of family for individuals, communities and nations. But we cannot achieve this alone, nor can any one church or organisation do it by themselves. So our call is for everyone to challenge their organisations, churches and communities to find ways to strengthen families and change the predicted future of Africa. We know it is possible and we have a mandate, so let's work together to see families transform Africa.

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