

# A timely forum on families in the East Asia region

In April 2004, the Australian Institute of Family Studies was invited to attend the East Asia Ministerial Forum on Families. The forum was co-hosted by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services and the Vietnam Commission for Population, Family and Children.

The relevant Ministers of both countries, *Senator the Hon Kay Patterson*, and *Madam Le Thi Thu*, played central roles in running the forum and in outlining the circumstances and challenges that face families in Australia and Vietnam. They were also responsible for achieving commitment between participating countries to cooperate on policies to strengthen and support families and children.

*Ann Sanson* (Acting Director) and *Ruth Weston* (Principal Research Fellow) represented the Australian Institute of Family Studies at the forum.

It is now ten years since the United Nations *International Year of the Family (IYF)* – that special year when families were celebrated, when their importance across all layers of society received widespread recognition, when the need for families being at the heart of policy was emphasised and family services scrutinised, and when new international collaborations in support of families were established.

The ripple effects of the IYF have continued, and work is now under way to reinforce these effects during this, the tenth Anniversary year (see the United States website: [IYFAnniversary.org](http://IYFAnniversary.org)).

The holding of the first-ever *East Asia Ministerial Forum on Families* in April 2004 was thus very timely. The forum provided an excellent avenue for learning about the challenges facing families in participating countries and the various approaches adopted by governments to support families. It reaffirmed two issues: the crucial roles of families in all countries, regardless of their cultures and stages of economic development; and the fact that these roles that can only be fulfilled when families receive protection and assistance. (See accompanying Box for details of participating countries.)

In line with these two complementary understandings of the family, the forum threw light on similarities and differences between the participating countries regarding the various forms and functions of families, the current challenges faced by families in each country (particularly those linked with modernisation processes), and policies and programs established in each country to protect, support and thus strengthen its families. Furthermore, in keeping with a key IYF objective – the stimulation of cooperative action between countries regarding family issues – the forum culminated in the *Hanoi Statement for Regional Cooperation on the Family*.

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How, then, do the different participating governments understand the roles and responsibilities of, and challenges experienced by, their country's families? What policies and programs have they formulated to help families fulfill their responsibilities?

The following discussion provides a synthesis of the various country statements on these issues, and outlines the nature of cooperative activities to which participating governments committed themselves in signing the "Statement". Being brief, the country statements represent only a select sample of family-related challenges, policies and programs. Thus, those matters emphasised in some statements may well have been important to other countries, but not necessarily mentioned in their statements.

### *The importance of families*

During the International Year of the Family, much attention was given to the fact that, being the basic unit of society, family wellbeing is of crucial importance not only for the wellbeing of family members, but also for the wellbeing of communities, nations, regions, and the world at large. This issue was re-emphasised in virtually all the country statements – thereby highlighting just how crucial is the need for all families to receive the protection and necessary assistance required to fulfill such key, primary functions.

The family's responsibilities to members of all ages were highlighted, with a great deal of attention given to the pivotal role families play in raising healthy and well-adjusted children to become responsible, caring, and contributing members of society. In addition, much recognition was given to the role of families in providing care for older family members. For instance, Brunei placed particular emphasis on the need to preserve the extended family and thereby provide everyday care for



Hoan Kiem Lake, in the heart of Hanoi, is a favourite, serene site for citizens to meet, walk the circumference at different paces, exercise in situ, or meditate.

vulnerable family members including the elderly, sick and disabled. Likewise, Malaysia drew attention to the fact that emotional, financial and material support systems within the family are prerequisites for the healthy development of all family members, including the elderly, disabled and sick.

While some countries emphasised the need to preserve the extended family, the process of modernisation was often seen to involve a decline in the extended family form and an increase in nuclear and other family types, including, sole-parent families, stepfamilies and couple-only families, both married and unmarried.

### ***Family values in a changing world***

A great deal of attention was given to the crucial role families play – most particularly parents and extended family members – in instilling in children socially desirable values. A variety of values was focused upon, reflecting similarities and differences in the cultural perspectives of the participating countries, for example: being loving and caring, respectful, patient, thrifty and industrious, self-resilient and independent, holding spiritual values, and possessing a strong sense of filial piety, honour, and patriotism or national pride. In some countries (for example, Singapore), the expression of loving and caring values entailed an explicit expectation that adult children would provide financial as well as emotional support to their elderly parents.

Nevertheless, changing values were often seen as a by-product of modernisation. Malaysia referred to changing priorities and expectations in marriage, a growing emphasis on individual fulfillment and personal growth, a redefinition of gender roles, changing approaches to parenting, a decline in “human values” and an associated increase in moral degradation, as reflected, for example in

increases in crime. The Philippines noted that patterns of authority within the family have shifted: while the father as the head of the family is still recognised, decisions increasingly represent compromises based on consensus.

Concerted efforts were thus under way in some countries to promote their traditional family values. For instance, fostering patriotism represents one of Myanmar’s four key social development objectives, the others being fostering morale and morality, preserving cultural heritage and national character, and improving levels of health, fitness and education. Brunei, has introduced a *Happy Family Campaign* to reinforce the important role parents play in imparting appropriate social values to their children. Likewise, the Ministry of Women and Family Development in Malaysia is launching a special campaign to promote and strengthen family values during 2004. Such values are also being reinforced through activities of other Ministries in Malaysia, including those of Education and Youth, to coincide with the IYF’s tenth anniversary.

### ***Population, economics, employment and environmental sustainability***

While much attention was given to the crucial importance of families as the basic unit of society, emphasis was also given to the fact that family well-being is strongly influenced by wider forces. These forces include a nation’s environmental resources and economic development, and its population size, structure, and geographic concentration – forces that also help shape a country’s ability to protect and support its families.

For Australia and Singapore, low fertility rates and associated ageing populations were seen as significant problems. While both countries emphasised the importance of personal choice, both had

established policies to help families wanting to have a first or additional child to achieve this aim. For Singapore, this extended to helping individuals find a life-long partner.

By contrast, some of the least developed countries with large populations, or with populations that relied on limited natural resources, referred to high rates of poverty and associated problems, such as high maternal and infant mortality rates, and land degradation and depletion of other natural resources. Cambodia and Laos, for instance, have developed population policies to achieve sustainable development, reduce poverty and improve quality of life generally, with Laos promoting population considerations in all policies and programs. The latter country thus embraced both research goals and hands-on strategies to handle these problems. Research goals focused on population trends and development issues, while specific strategies included the development programs to help individuals and couples avoid unwanted pregnancies and achieve the number and spacing of children desired (for example, by increasing knowledge of and access to family planning measures).

China has developed relief measures for impoverished families in urban and rural poor areas. For the urban poor, these measures include the provision of retirement pensions, unemployment and medical insurance, a subsistence security system, educational assistance, and legal aid. In rural areas, relief systems cover both impoverished families and disaster victims.

Worsening poverty was experienced by several countries, with the 1997 economic crisis being an obvious set-back for many countries in Asia. Thailand considered that its performance relating to its 8th National Economic and Social Development Plan was unsatisfactory as a result of the 1997 economic crisis, and Indonesia noted that the crisis impoverished many families and curtailed social services and family policies. However, Indonesia also noted that significant progress has since been made as a result of bilateral and multilateral programs and international support. Empowering poor families is now the government's priority, and various measures have been developed to achieve this aim. For example, programs have been established to assist and stimulate income generation and self-reliance, improve access to education, health care, social security/insurance, banking, and other social services, provide skills training, and enhance self-confidence.



During the Forum, many of the delegates enjoyed a day trip to the famous Ha Long Bay, located more than 150 km east of Hanoi. The bay, which was listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 1994, is dotted with thousands of limestone islands that rise sharply and dramatically from the calm ocean. It is also the home for many families who live in floating villages and rely on fishing for their livelihood.

Pictured (from left) are: Mr Li Xueju (Minister for Civil Affairs, China); Ms Khemphet Pholsena (Vice President, Lao Women's Union and Head of the Laotian delegation); Senator the Hon Kay Patterson (Australian Minister for Family and Community Services); Madam Le Thi Thu (Minister, Chair of the Vietnam Commission for Population, Family and Children); and Ms Linda Powell (Head of the International Branch of the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services).

On the other hand, Vietnam has recorded a reduction in poverty since 1995. This was attributed to its National Target Program on Poverty Reduction. Vietnam has initiated plans and programs to support families in poor localities – for example, the provision of loans for housing construction for the poor in the Mekong Delta.

While recognising that some families experienced considerable socio-economic disadvantage, Australia emphasised its sound economic management and associated job creation that assisted families to meet their material needs. Likewise, Brunei emphasised its success in the area of economic growth and productivity. This country had implemented three National Development Plans over the last 20 years which, among other things, aimed to make the best economic use of its natural resources, develop non-oil industries, accelerate human capital development, and maintain full employment while increasing productivity.

### ***Women and children and vulnerable families***

For developing countries with high rates of poverty, the implementation of programs directed towards helping women control their fertility were seen as important avenues for tackling one of the central issues raised in various country statements: protection of the rights and interests of children and women. To achieve such protection, less developed countries also tended to have a strong focus on reducing their high maternal, infant and early childhood morbidity and mortality rates.

Other policies mentioned by various countries included improving women's access to education,

Pictured at a Forum lunch (from left): Ann Sanson (Australian Institute of Family Studies) with Dr Pham Nguyen Bang (National Project Professional Personnel, the United Nations Population Fund Country Office, Hanoi).



Pictured during day two of the Forum are (from left): Ruth Weston, Madam Le Thi Thu, Associate Professor Ann Sanson, and Dr Tran Van Chien of the Scientific Institute for Population, Family and Children, Hanoi. This Institute, which has been operating for about 18 months, was modelled on the Australian Institute of Family Studies – a decision that was sparked by the visit to Melbourne in October 2002 of a delegation from the Commission for Population, Family and Children, Hanoi.

employment and general health services, protecting women and children from domestic violence, and preventing involuntary marriage. For example, attention was given to the importance attached to marriage being voluntary and involving equity between spouses in Vietnam's 1992 Constitution, in China's Marriage Law, and Laos's Family Law (1990). Laos had also made concerted efforts to publicise the United Nations mandate on human rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and other relevant treaties. Brunei has introduced measures to protect the welfare of women, children and families not covered by the Islamic Family Law.

Promotion of gender equity in general was a common theme. China, for instance, emphasised that women have equal rights to men regarding employment, wages, and participation in state affairs administration.

Both Laos and the Philippines highlighted the importance of protecting mothers and children in separated families. For the Philippines, migration and displacement arising from globalisation, armed conflict and natural disasters were seen as key factors contributing to increases in the number of lone and absentee parents. The Philippines has introduced a Solo Parents Welfare Act that "provides

benefits and privileges to solo parents and their children", and the Anti-Violence Against Women and Children Act, to protect women and children from domestic violence.

Malaysia had also experienced an increase in family diversity. In line with its emphasis on the rights of all social groups, Malaysia had developed policies and programs to address the needs of all forms of marginalised families, including families with lone parents or step-parents, or households headed by women.

Likewise, families in Australia have become increasingly complex and diverse. Lone parents, in particular, represent the majority of "jobless families". Australia has thus developed a number of programs and policies to help lone-parent families, including retraining and other measures to assist these parents find jobs.

While Brunei emphasised the pivotal role of mothers in families, it also stressed women's right to pursue tertiary education and paid work, and acknowledged the importance of such participation for the country's socio-economic development. Thus, like Australia, Brunei has developed programs and policies to help women balance work and family life, an issue outlined later in this report.

Several countries have established specific organisations to promote women's rights. Cambodia had elevated the status of the former State Secretariat of Women's Affairs by transforming it into the Ministry of Women's and Veteran's Affairs. Laos has created a Women's Union that represents women's rights and interests throughout the nation, while Thailand has established an Office of Women's Affairs and Family Development. Malaysia has a Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (created in 2001 under a different name). Finally, Myanmar has set up various organisations to protect women (and children), including Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs, Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation, and the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association.

All countries emphasised the needs of children, with some countries (including Australia and China) explicitly highlighting the importance of children to the nation's future. Objectives directed towards protecting children's rights to survival, to be safeguarded from abuse and exploitation, to reach their potential, and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life were often mentioned.

Several countries indicated that they had become signatories the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (for example, Brunei and Myanmar), and some mentioned bodies set up specifically to protect children's interests – for example, the National Children's Council (Brunei), the Cambodian National Council for Children, and the National Committee on the Rights of the Child (Myanmar).

Australia has developed a National Agenda for Early Childhood which emphasises the importance of children having the "best start to life", and thus the importance of children being exposed to "nurturing developmental and educational experiences".

Brunei outlined similar aims. China holds a “children first” policy which gives priority to children’s rights in areas of health, education, legal protection, and their environment. Because educational policies formed a key specific focus in several of the country statements, these policies are outlined separately (below).

Most countries have set up policies directed to protect children “at risk”, with the categories of risk varying, and some overlapping. Examples include abandoned or orphaned children, “street children”, children with disabilities, and children exposed to poverty, domestic violence, neglect or abuse (physical, emotional or sexual, or enforced work). China has established collective care, foster care and adoption models to ensure the healthy development of orphaned children.

Despite its relative wealth, Australia recognised that some Australian children are in vulnerable situations. Policies directed towards the detection of risk and early intervention are thus central to its National Agenda for Early Childhood. Indigenous children, in particular, were noted as vulnerable to the experience poverty, abuse, neglect and family violence. The Australian Government has thus developed policies that involve working with communities in tackling these problems. As mentioned above, countries with high rates of child poverty and infant and early childhood mortality talked of policies aimed at tackling these problems.

Various countries also mentioned policies directed towards minorities, including ethnic minorities and those living in remote areas. For example, as noted above, Vietnam has implemented policies to meet the material needs of families in remote areas. Laos is attempting to increase the ethnic population’s access to basic services, including education and health, and to information on family planning. The Women’s Union in Laos represents the rights and interests of women across all circumstances including ethnic status.

### Fathers

Policies outlined in the country statements tended to focus far less on fathers than on mothers. Brunei, for instance, stressed the importance of women “as mothers and wives in strengthening the family system for achievement of harmony in the family, society and nation”. Nevertheless, reference to promoting fathering was made in some country statements.

For instance, Malaysia has increased paternity leave for civil servants (from three to seven days), and the Philippines has established the *Paternity Leave Act*, which grants seven days of leave to all married fathers working in private and public sectors for their wife’s first four deliveries. In addition, the Philippines has adopted measures to help men understand and cope with the demands they face in their roles as husbands, fathers, sons, and members of the community. Vietnam has used the role of fathers in the family as a central theme for one of its annual “Family Days”.

Forum hosts, Madam Le Thi Thu and Senator Kay Patterson, at the Forum’s closing dinner and concert.



During an overnight stay at Ha Long Town, Senator Kay Patterson receives a lesson in how to play a traditional musical instrument.

### The aged

Support for the elderly formed a common theme. Countries with a strong tradition of extended families tended to refer to the need for younger family members to respect and care for elderly parents or grandparents and the important role of grandparents in imparting traditional family values to the young. In such countries, preservation of the extended family system tended to be treated as an important means of ensuring mutual support between the generations, along with support for the disabled and others with special needs.

Nevertheless, several countries were experiencing a shift towards diverse family structures and changing values that threatened the availability of care across the generations. Thailand, for instance, noted that urbanisation meant that elderly parents in rural areas were often separated from their working children.

Some countries indicated that they encouraged both strong family ties across the generations and a level of independence among the elderly. In Singapore, where single nuclear families predominated although most elderly people lived with family members, programs had been established not only to strengthen bonds between the generations and to support families in caring for their elderly members, but also to encourage the elderly to “age actively” and to assume greater personal financial responsibility than in the past. These issues were



A busy street in Hanoi Old Town.

among those targeted in Singapore's annual awareness campaigns, such as the National Family Week. In addition, Singapore has developed Family Service Centres that are staffed by social workers who advise families on various issues or problems, including the care elderly family members.

China also emphasised its policies to help families care for their older members, to provide direct assistance to the elderly, and to encourage the elderly to participate actively in society. The government has established collective and decentralised care facilities for elderly people who are widowed, and social welfare institutions have been developed in almost all cities and towns and in some villages to provide health services, general care, and entertainment for China's elderly citizens.

### **Couple relationships and family functioning**

Many of the measures outlined in the various country statements should, if they achieved their aims, either directly or indirectly enhance relationships within the family and family functioning. Those that focused directly on couple relationships and family functioning include the establishment of relationship education, counselling services, parenting services, financial assistance to meet the costs of raising children, and helping parents balance work and family life. Australia mentioned all these strategies.

Brunei offers pre-marriage courses and family counselling through its *Family Counseling Unit*, located in the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This Unit also provides talks and sermons directed towards strengthening families and sustaining family values. A committee has also been recently established to develop pre- and post-marriage courses for Muslims and non-Muslims covering various aspects of life

including parenting skills and family values.

Thailand has introduced a *Community-based Family Development Center* that provides counselling and other services. Indonesia has introduced parenting skills (to achieve "smart and caring families") and continuing education programs. And Malaysia has prepared a package of reference material for those embarking on marriage (covering preparation for marriage, communication within the family, health and parenting). In addition, the Malaysian Government has approved the establishment of "one-stop" centres that provide family planning, family counselling, and parenting education services. It has also developed training material, based on the life course, for

educators from government agencies, non-government organisations and the private sector. The Government is also forging partnerships with non-government organisations and community leaders to expand programs on marriage enrichment and parenting education.

Likewise, a network of community-based *Family Care Services* has been established in Singapore. These centres are staffed by social workers and provide counselling and family life education, including parenting education, and referrals. Voluntary welfare organisations also provide family life education programs. The Government supports such programs through direct financial input, the provision of resource materials, and the recruitment and training of educators. China has also introduced centres that provide services for families. These are now located in every large and medium size city, and are staffed by social workers and volunteers.

Brunei and Vietnam mentioned the setting aside of a special day to highlight the importance of families or to strengthen families. The annual *Vietnamese Family Day* carries a different theme each year.

One commonly mentioned set of measures directed towards strengthening families focused on helping parents combine work and family life constructively. Different countries emphasised different combinations of strategies covering access to part-time work, flexible work arrangements, high quality formal child and elder care services, along with access to informal care through the extended family system.

In Australia, managing these dual responsibilities is assisted by the prevalence of part-time work and affordable, quality child care. The Australian Government is also encouraging employers and their workers to negotiate flexible work hours that suit the needs of both parties. Nevertheless, the

Australian Government also emphasises the importance of personal choice regarding work and family roles and is thus considering the means by which choices relating to work and family roles can be enhanced, particularly after childbearing.

Like Australia, Malaysia encourages the introduction of flexible working arrangements, and Singapore has introduced subsidised child care centres and early childhood education programs, along with out-of-school-hours care for school children. Malaysia also acknowledges the need to explore “new approaches” in the areas of work arrangements, child care, care for the elderly, and other support systems. In 2002, the Malaysian Government launched a campaign entitled *Family First: Bring Your Heart Home* at the national and state levels to highlight the importance of marriage and the family.

As noted above, Brunei places emphasis on strengthening women’s roles as wives, mothers and income earners. The extended family system is seen as an important means of enabling mothers to work and thus contribute to the country’s economic development. In addition, the Government is considering increasing the number of child care centres.

Various other measures to support the family in fulfilling its multiple roles were mentioned. For instance, the Philippines has developed strategies to “mainstream” and integrate family-related policies and plans at national, local and sectoral levels. This country has also introduced the *National Council for the Filipino Family*, which is replicated at 16 sub-national levels. The Council has formulated policies and implemented strategies for a national program on the family and for coordinated family-related celebrations such as Fathers Day, Mothers Day and Grandparents Day. In addition, the Philippines maintains a system of monitoring family needs and evaluating programs and services for families in order to improve program effectiveness and address emerging family concerns.

### **Health and education**

In some country statements, health or education policies were selected as separate topics, while in others, they were incorporated into discussions of policies directed towards related issues, such as managing population trends or protecting women and children.

Not surprisingly, poorer countries tended to focus on improving access to reproductive health services, reducing maternal and child morbidity and mortality rates, and improving nutrition, while wealthier countries focused on policies directed towards maximising personal health. Immunisation programs were often mentioned by poorer and wealthier countries alike.

Brunei provides free, high quality health care services to all residents. Services are directed towards the prevention, early detection and treatment of problems, provision of support services, and health promotion (for example, pre- and post-natal care, routine health surveillance of infants, and services

for children with special needs to help them reach their potential). Brunei considers the health of its citizens, along with its health care services, to be among the best in Asia.

The spread of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases was often seen as one of the major downsides of modernisation and globalisation. Measures to prevent or curtail these health problems thus formed a common theme. For example, the *Action Plan* developed for the *National Population and Development Policy* in Laos includes strategies to prevent the spread of these diseases, while Cambodia has established a *National AIDS Authority* to coordinate its response to this epidemic.

In relation to education, Australia places emphasis on early learning, quality of schooling, and post-school education. Like Australia, Brunei indicated that it aims to help all children reach their potential. It provides free schooling to citizens and hopes to retain all children at school for 12 years. Various measures have been set up to achieve this aim, including the provision of a monthly allowance for eligible children, a *Sponsorship Fund for School Children*, an *Orphanage Fund*, and a *National Welfare Fund*.

In China, considerable effort has been made to increase school admission rates and to promote compulsory education of nine years. China also emphasises pre-school education.

Myanmar has implemented a *National Education for All* program that aims to provide universal access to primary education. The Myanmar Government also emphasises the need for creating an education system that can help its citizens handle the challenges of the Knowledge Age. It sees education as a life-long holistic process encompassing attitudes and values, along with knowledge and skills, and has established education promotion programs, and education plans spanning four years and 30 years. Myanmar also provides women with training in such skills as cooking, sewing, and weaving.

Thus, where mentioned, goals regarding children’s years of education varied, with Myanmar implementing programs to enable universal access to primary education, China aiming for nine years of compulsory education, and Brunei aiming for at least 12 years.

### **Housing, neighbourhoods and communities**

Housing forms a key policy area in Brunei’s *National Development Plan (2001-2005)*. Brunei focuses on providing families, particularly low income families, with “adequate, affordable, and comfortable” housing, and holds a long-term goal of achieving universal home ownership. With its emphasis on the extended family and close neighbourhood interaction, the Government also attempts to ensure that relatives live near each other in houses without fences. Little if any attention was given to housing policies in the other country statements, although as noted above, Vietnam provides loans for housing construction for the poor in the Mekong Delta.

## ATTENDEES AT THE EAST ASIA MINISTERIAL FORUM ON FAMILIES

The East Asia Ministerial Forum on Families was co-hosted by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services and the Vietnam Commission for Population, Family and Children.

The forum was attended by Ministers responsible for family affairs and related senior officials from ten ASEAN countries – Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam – as well as China and Australia.

Representatives from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and from several international and non-government organisations also attended, including: AusAID, the Asian Development Bank, Family Health International, Plan International, the Population Council in Vietnam, the Save the Children Fund, the United Nations Development Program, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Population Fund, and the Vietnam Family Planning Association.

Some countries indicated that they had developed programs to improve the physical environment and thereby promote family wellbeing. For example, China mentioned that it has established cultural, sporting and science activities, landscaped neighbourhoods, and increased community security, while Brunei noted that it works towards ensuring that families live in “clean and healthy environments”.

While family wellbeing was seen as central to community wellbeing, the importance of community wellbeing for family wellbeing was also acknowledged or implied in various discussions of policy development. Some countries (such as Australia and Thailand) also mentioned working with communities to improve family wellbeing. For example, one objective of Thailand's above-mentioned *Community-based Family Development Center* is to strengthen communities by preventing and resolving community-level problems.

### **The importance of research**

To be effective, policy development needs to be based on accurate knowledge and thus rigorous research. That is, it is only through such research that governments can gain an adequate understanding of those issues raised at the forum, including changes in family structure, lifestyle, values and needs, along with factors affecting marital and family health and stability.

It is not surprising, then, that the importance of research was at least implicit in all statements linking social trends with policies and programs. Australia, for instance, discussed changing social attitudes regarding women's role in society and attainment of material wealth and leisure; women's increased labour force participation; increased secondary school retention rates and post-secondary education and training; increased difficulties in moving from education to work; delays in partnership formation and increased instability of relationships; declines in fertility; and the vulnerability of Indigenous children in particular to abuse, neglect and exposure to family violence.

Laos mentioned the need for research on population trends and development issues, and the Philippines indicated that it monitored family needs and reviewed programs and services directed towards families. In addition, Singapore noted that it had stepped up its research activities regarding family-related issues. This process includes the organisation of a *Regional Family Conference* to be held in November this year.

### **The “Hanoi Statement”**

Given the above noted importance of research for policy development, it is not surprising that participating countries agreed to develop national indicators and to strengthen mechanisms for monitoring the wellbeing of families and for evaluating the progress of governments in the area of “family development”. This agreement formed part of the *Hanoi Statement for Regional Cooperation on the Family*, agreed by Ministers of all participating countries.

The Hanoi Statement committed all participating governments to working more closely with each other, not only in the areas of family-related research, but also in the formulation and implementation of family-related policies and programs. In providing an avenue for sharing information on these matters and for developing networks within the region, the forum itself represented a first step in the realisation of these goals. The Hanoi Statement also committed the countries to holding a similar forum every two years, with the next one being held in Singapore.

To arrive at such an agreement is indeed a fitting means of celebrating tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family. In another ten years, we can hopefully look back with much satisfaction on the way these new partnerships have contributed to a strengthening of family and community life in the region.

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