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**A NATION'S SEARCH OF SHARED FAMILY VALUES :
IMPLICATIONS FOR WELFARE POLICY AND COUNSELLING**

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A NATION'S SEARCH OF SHARED FAMILY VALUES : IMPLICATIONS FOR WELFARE POLICY AND COUNSELING

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Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed 1994 as the International Year of the Family (IYF). The aim is to promote the awareness of the importance of the family. All nations in the world are encouraged to commemorate and observe the year. To Singaporeans, any issue concerning the family is a subject matter that is very close to our hearts. Being an Asian society comprising mainly citizens of Chinese, Malay and Indian ethnic origin, consolidation of the family unit and respect for elders are important goals in life. In 1990, a National Advisory Council on the Family and the Aged (NACFA) was set up to advise the government on policies for the family and the aged. One year later in 1991, the Government issued a white paper identifying five national shared values as the common basis to foster a Singaporean identity : -

Five Shared National Values

1. *Nation before community and society above self*

Putting the interests of society ahead of the individual's is seen as a major factor in Singapore's success. This principle applies not just in weighing the nation's interests against that of any individual, but in putting the nation before any sub-group within it.

2. *Family as the basic unit of society*

Singaporeans believe that the family is the best way to provide children with a secure and conducive environment to grow and to look after the elderly. The family is the heart of the nation. Strong family ties foster a shared identity and happy, healthy families make for a cohesive, stable and dynamic nation.

3. *Regard and community support for the individual*

The government recognizes that the individual has rights which should be respected and not encroached upon. Thus, there should be a balance between community and the individual, not promoting one to the exclusion of the other.

4. *Consensus instead of contention*

The government believes that consensus rather than contention should be a way of resolving issues. This complements the idea of putting society above self. A consensus with majority support should be the aim and would promote national unity.

5. *Racial and religious harmony*

Racial and religious harmony is fundamental to the well-being of Singapore. Since ours is a multi-racial and multi-cultural society with four official languages and several major religions, it is important that different communities live together harmoniously.

To commemorate the International Year of the Family and to reaffirm Singaporeans' belief in the importance of the family, the Committee on the Family, which is a subcommittee of the National Advisory Council on the Family and the Aged decided to produce a simple, popular document which expands on the national shared value on the family as a basic unit of society.

The Search of Shared Family Values

While expanding on our national shared value "family as the basic unit of society", the document on family values also serves as a reminder and reinforcement of the family values upheld by Singaporeans. Since this is to be a document for all Singaporeans, the Committee felt that its formulation should be a national effort. Thus as far back as one year ago, the Committee on the Family appealed to the public and various community and grassroots organisations to suggest ideas for the proposed document. To our delightful surprise, the public responded enthusiastically and more than one hundred contributions in four languages were received from schools, tertiary institutions, welfare, community and grassroots organisations, civic, religious and professional groups as well as interested individuals.

After examining all the contributions carefully, the Committee identified five commonly shared values and compiled a draft document describing them : -

1. Love, Care and Concern
2. Mutual Respect
3. Filial Piety
4. Commitment
5. Responsibility

This was only the first step. To gather feedback on the draft document, the identified values were announced through the media and a series of bilingual (English and Chinese, English and Malay, English and Tamil), public forums were held. Again, the response from the public was very positive and enthusiastic. Hundreds showed up at these public forums, some representing organisations and groups but many expressing their personal opinions. Still others responded by writing in.

The Shared Family Values of Singaporeans

After careful scrutiny of feedback from the public, it became clear to the Committee that changes needed to be made to the draft document, to the extent of replacing one and rewording another. In its final form, the official document includes these five shared family values.

1. *Love, Care and Concern*

Family love provides comfort and security. It makes a person feel appreciated and valued. Family members are encouraged to cherish one another, to show mutual affection and to support one another.

2. *Mutual Respect*

This implies positive regard and consideration for each other in the family. In practice it means recognition and tolerance of differences and adopting a give-and-take attitude. Mutual respect allows for forgiveness and acceptance and contributes to family harmony.

3. *Commitment*

Commitment refers to the willingness among family members to stand by one another through life's ups and downs. It is seen as "the glue that makes the family stick".

4. *Filial Responsibility*

Filial piety has been reworded Filial Responsibility because many have pointed out at the feedback forum that the term "Filial Piety" is very much a Confucian concept and therefore may not go down well with other ethnic groups. To some it also connotes religious and ancestral worship and blind obedience. However, all agreed that filial responsibility is more than a duty or an obligation. Ideally it should be a natural fruit of the love, care and concern which parents bestow on their children. The practice of filial responsibility is best taught by example.

5. *Communication*

The committee added "Communication" because many people, responding to the draft document, felt that it is important enough to be stated explicitly. In fact, the importance of communication as a family value was reiterated in all the public forums. This value refers to open, two-way communication between family members, listening to each other and giving due consideration to each other's views. Communication is seen as an effective way of strengthening family ties as well as a constructive way of resolving family conflicts when these arise.

To further elaborate on these five shared family values, the document also spells out ways and means how these values can be "lived" through family relationships such as "Husband and wife", "Parent and Child", "Grandparent and Grandchild", as well as "Sibling" and "In-law" relationships.

The promotion of the shared values is seen as a responsibility by all, starting in the family. Many realise that teaching family values are essentially the responsibility of parents and that the best way to teach these is by precept. However, schools and community organisations can complement the role of parents by further promoting these values.

The first national event to promote these values was an exhibition on family values held at the National Family Day Carnival on June 19. On that day, the Ministry of Community Development which was responsible for organising the National Family Day distributed free book marks with the family values printed in the four official languages. Also a coloured, illustrated booklet on the document is being planned. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education is working on including these shared family values in the civic and moral education text books being revised for use in schools.

Implications for Welfare Policy and Counseling

For many years the Singapore government has been looking into ways and means of strengthening the family unit and promoting family life through formal legislations as well as the social and welfare policies. For example, the government is making efforts to raise the percentage of home ownership from the present 90% to 95%. To achieve this the government housing authority is planning to buy three-room flats in the open market and then sell them at subsidized rates to low-income families. They have also been building "granny flats" and "multi-generation units" to encourage members of the extended family to live under the same roof or near each other.

The Ministry of Community Development which looks after the implementation of welfare policies has encouraged the setting up of Family Service Agencies through the award of grants and subsidies. To qualify as family service centres, such existing social service centres, which are run autonomously by various social welfare bodies, must provide the following four core services (a) a counselling programme, (b) information and outreach services for families in need, (c) preventive and developmental education programmes to enhance family living and (d) volunteer development to foster neighbourhood involvement in their programmes. Presently there are 18 Family Service Centres in the island state. The government's plan is to increase the number to 24, or one for every 100,000 Singaporeans by 1999.

For many years it has been the government's practice to give income tax relief to individuals who either live with or financially support their aged parents. Presently, the parliament is debating a new Bill known as "The Maintenance of Parents Bill" which seeks to legislate a parent's right to be provided financially by his children. The right of parents to be maintained by their children was already part of Singapore law through England's Poor Law Act of 1601 but there is no mechanism for enforcing that right at the moment. This Bill allows a parent unable to support himself adequately to go to the courts to claim maintenance from one or more of his children, including step-children or adopted children. A family member, relative or caregiver can also apply for the order on the parent's behalf, provided the latter gives consent. The child being sued for maintenance can name others, such as siblings, who are also liable to support the parent. Those who ignore a court maintenance order face a fine of up to \$1,000 or a jail term of up to a year, or both - the same penalties for ignoring a wife and children under the Women's Charter.

In deciding if it is "just and equitable" to order the child to support the parent, the court may look at the parent's financial needs, income, earning capacity or financial resources as well as his physical and mental health. It will also look at the financial position of the child being sued for maintenance, such as his income and how much he spends on supporting his spouse and children. If more than one child is liable, the court may divide the allowance up according to the personal circumstances of each child.

The introduction of this Bill in parliament has created much controversy. A recent straw poll by a local newspaper found that many children continue the practice of giving their parents part of their monthly salary, while a growing number of parents said they did not wish to be dependent on their children in their old age. While those who are for the Bill argue that the proposed Act is only meant as a last-resort measure, others are troubled by the belief that underlies the Bill - that social ills can be put right with a legislative fix. Meanwhile, the debate goes on.

Conclusion

Singapore's search of shared family values took almost two years and involved the effort of many. The revised document is now considered an official document, endorsed by government leaders as well as ordinary citizens. The next important step is to see to the promotion of these shared family values at various levels so that as many families as possible will appreciate and practise them. Some say the schools should do it through family life education. Others declare that grassroot organisations should be fostering family values through educational, recreational and parent education programmes. Still others highlight the influence of the media in promoting family values. The majority, however, recognize the role of the family in transmitting these values. As parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, all have the responsibility to promote the shared family values amongst our young and the best way is to teach by example.

In the final analysis, it is up to the people of Singapore to ensure that the document will be a living, relevant guide to family life, and not a mere collection of statements left to gather dust on the shelf.