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## IS THERE FAMILY POLICY?

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Family policy is often equated with welfare programs or problems of female-headed families. Steiner even suggests that:

family policy has to do with mechanisms for identifying family dysfunction, and with the organization of responsibility in public support systems: decisions about when public programs will take up the slack and the conditions under which they will do so.

It is also sometimes identified with groups at the extreme ends of the political or religious spectrum. This may be one of the reasons that groups such as the extension service have difficulty recognizing its importance. But is family policy limited only to families in trouble?

### *What Is Family Policy*

Family policy has become a popular issue that takes on a variety of meanings depending on the individual or group using the term. Every political candidate advocates strengthening and supporting the family, but the same position is often used to support opposing points of view. For example, both child care advocates and groups wanting mothers to remain at home with their children claim their position strengthens the family.

Family policy would imply that there are specific goals the country wants to reach and maintain. In order to achieve these goals, laws and regulations are enacted. One example given by Spakes is Hungary. In an effort to increase the birth rate, keep families together and encourage women to participate in the labor force, the Hungarian government has established several policies. All families are

given a cash bonus upon the birth of a baby and mothers are given maternity leave at full pay for twenty weeks after childbirth. An additional cash allowance is paid to the mother if she chooses to stay home with the child for the first thirty-one months. Both benefits carry a guarantee that her job will be available when she returns to the labor force (Spakes).

It can be argued that in the United States today there are policies affecting families rather than a family policy. Several factors contribute to this situation.

First, what is a family? In order to design a family policy there has to be some agreement on what defines a family. The traditional view is a mother, preferably at home, a father and their children; yet today more than one-fifth of all families with children are headed by females (Edelman). Half of all married mothers with infants under age one are in the workforce (U.S. House of Representatives). By 1995, two-thirds of all preschool children and four out of five children between the ages of seven and eighteen are expected to have working mothers (U.S. House of Representatives). Do we support families as they exist or as we want them to be? Who decides what should be the "desired" situation?

Defining the family has taken on partisan political overtones. According to Nierman (p. 3), "The Republicans have initiated policies that attempt to strengthen the traditional family. Democrats have responded with policies that attempt to meet the new family portrait. This portrait has become one that includes working mothers, divorced parents, single parents and at-risk children."

Second, families are composed of individuals. When there is a problem within the family, whose rights should prevail? Is the health of a baby more important than the health of the mother? Do mother's rights supercede those of the father? Do grandparents have any rights at all? Should children be encouraged to turn in their parents for inappropriate activities or should the privacy of the home prevail?

Third, what are family issues? University of Maine Cooperative Extension Service agents and specialists identified several issues that are high priority in their state.<sup>1</sup> Child care, paternity leave,

<sup>1</sup>Prior to the 1987 National Public Policy Education Conference, input was sought from the Maine Cooperative Extension Service staff on issues that needed addressing. The following concerns were submitted by county extension agents Eileen Conlon and Louise Kirkland and by specialists Torry Dickinson and Sheila Urban:

*Child Care for Working Parent.* It is clear that balancing the responsibilities of paid employment and caring for children is an issue that must be addressed. By 1990 . . . estimates are that more than 57 percent of all mothers with children under six years of age will be employed and that 67 percent of all two-parent families will have both parents in the labor force. Child care—more, affordable, quality—child care, is badly needed.

Yet the issue of child care cannot be separated from the overall issue of blending work and family responsibilities and child care benefits. How do we care for sick children, for example? We can set up sick child care centers, we can allow parents of sick children to take a day of leave, or we can fund a system of child care providers that can go to the home of the sick child. If we look at these questions too narrowly, we will not find the answers. The

health care and welfare programs are often identified as family issues. But what about environmental hazards that affect the health of family members or unborn children? What about tax codes? What about funding for education, police and fire protection or city parks and recreation programs? What about the quality of the drinking water or use of the land? These issues all affect the family.

Fourth, what should be the role of government in family matters? And what level of government should be involved? Do laws such as no fault divorce actually create more problems than they solve? Do regulations designed to aid specific family members, i.e., Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), actually encourage the breakup of intact families? Do tax codes or Social Security regulations penalize certain family forms? Robert Nisbet is quoted in a recent book as saying that, "The more that is done by government to 'save the family,' the more the family becomes imperiled" (Peden and Glahe, p. 36).

### **What Shapes Family Policy?**

Many *family* policy issues affect the family indirectly and therefore are debated and resolved with only limited interest by the general public. Many more citizens, however, see themselves as affected by family-related issues. In this country there has been a strong belief that family matters are private. At the same time, there is a concern for the health and welfare of individuals. If a family is not able to care for itself then society has an obligation to assist the family until it can. Such a concept is easy to accept and implement at a personal level—such as assisting local disaster victims, working at the food bank, etc. It becomes much more complicated on a broader scale. When does the assistance start dictating the situation instead of relieving it?

Many issues are also directly affected by personal values. In a country without an official religion and with a heterogeneous culture,

overriding issues deal with who cares for the children when, and the availability of choices, particularly through workplace supports.

*Youth Sexuality and Adolescent Pregnancy.* Adolescent females in the United States have a higher birth rate than adolescent females in other industrialized countries. In the United States, 30 percent of all female teenagers become pregnant during their teens. Sixty percent of teen mothers who deliver before age seventeen are pregnant again by age nineteen.

The social consequences of giving birth during adolescence may be severe. Sixty percent of teen brides are divorced by the time the oldest child is in the first grade. Nine percent of teenage mothers attempt suicide, a rate that is seven times the national rate of all teenage girls.

Who should be involved in making decisions about how adolescent pregnancy is addressed? Parents? Teens? Educational institutions? Religious organizations? Nonprofits? State agencies? Legislature? Federal government?

What is the critical group to work with? Teenage girls? Teenage boys? Families? Communities?

For pregnant teens and young fathers, which social realm should be emphasized? Medical assistance and health? Social relations? Education? Economic opportunities?

When should intervention take place? In the preteen years? In the early teen years? In the late teen years? After a female gets pregnant? After she gives birth? When a female gives birth, should the hospital encourage the father to stay involved? Should agencies help the father acquire new job skills and earn income to support the baby after birth?

there is a wide variety of value systems. Infringement on personal values is often a major part of the debate on family issues and often causes the debate to become emotional. Value and emotional aspects are much more difficult to contend with since they cannot be quantified or easily researched. Although there are many types of studies relating to family issues, it is almost impossible to demonstrate cause and effect with any certainty.

For comparison purposes, *agricultural* policy is often treated as if it were a fairly cohesive plan when in reality there are many points of contention. Commodity groups may be competing with each other for programs. Policies often do not affect farms of different sizes in the same way. Environmental and conservation programs may be in conflict with production oriented goals. However, these problems are usually resolved within the agricultural community. The general public has tended not to get involved until recently, even though the outcome may affect the cost, quantity or quality of food and fiber to the consumer. Current involvement results from concern about the social aspects of the agricultural industry rather than the economic aspects.

One of the theories frequently used to explain the development of public policy is that of "power clusters" as presented by Dan Ogden (House). It is helpful to use that framework to examine the situation as related to shaping family policy, again using agricultural policy as a basis of comparison. The primary components of the power cluster theory include administrative agencies, legislative committees, interest groups, professionals, volunteers, an attentive public and the latent public.

At either the state or federal level, the primary administrative agency for agricultural policy is the department of agriculture . . . with involvement from departments such as commerce, natural resources, etc. In terms of family policy, the focus is much less specific. Departments that may play important roles include health and human services and education, but agriculture deals with food, nutrition and consumer issues; commerce with economic issues; natural resources with the quality of the air and water, etc. As with administrative agencies, the array of possibilities for legislative committees that deal with public policies affecting families is far more diverse than with agriculture.

Because family policy is less defined than agricultural policy, the attendant interest groups tend to be more specialized, i.e., children, welfare, nutrition, senior citizens or health care. Coalition activity is seen occasionally, but the conditions of funding, the value-laden nature of the issues and the piecemeal development of policies all tend to inhibit the type of joint efforts present with the cyclical development of the farm bill (obviously not without its problems, but undertaken anyway).

The array of agencies, committees and interest groups also affects the nature of the professional role in shaping family policy. The interrelationships present in agriculture (e.g., the agricultural "fraternity" linked to certain land grant institutions) is not as visible in family policy. The role of consultants and the academic community appears to be less defined and less developed. It is more difficult to observe examples of the type of "rotation" between sectors, such as a faculty member that heads an agency for a time, that one sees frequently in agriculture.

The nature of family policy affects the relationship of "volunteers" and of the public in shaping policy. Because the linkages of families and many policy issues are seen only indirectly, the commitment tends to be less focused. The identity of being part of a family lacks the special status of being part of a more unique group such as farmers or doctors. A subjective observation would be that the classification of an "attentive public" is far less relevant in dealing with family issues than with other policy areas such as agriculture. There appears to be a stronger tendency not to be at all involved in policies related to families until an issue arises of specific personal concern. For example, parental reaction to local school closings.

It would appear that many aspects of family policy may come to the public agenda by far different routes than is the case with agricultural policy. Lacking the cohesiveness of the power cluster, it seems that more extraordinary influences bring family issues to public attention. The media seems to play an exceedingly important role in publicizing problems related to family policies. In much the same way, special legislative committees play an investigative and publicity role.

There is also a defined piece of legislation referred to as the farm bill that defines most of the agricultural policy. Obviously other legislation such as tax law also affects agriculture, but most of the specifics are contained within the farm bill itself. The bill has a specific time frame and most of the actors are fairly well-defined.

In contrast, determining family policy involves a very diverse group of actors who may be unknown to each other. There are individuals and groups working primarily on specific children's issues such as abuse, others working with teen pregnancy, others working on paternity leave, the list is almost endless. The actors are very heterogeneous, coming from many academic disciplines and social groups. Although there are many different commodity groups within agriculture, most of the actors will have a similar academic background and are known to each other at least by position if not personally. Because the group is much smaller than the group working on family policy, it is easier for key players to maintain contact. There are also government agencies at the federal and, in most cases, the state level, that coordinate agricultural issues. Although not every-

one may agree with the agencies' activities, they do serve as a focal point.

There currently is no specific piece of legislation known as the family bill. Legislation is considered piece by piece rather than as a whole. This approach also makes a difference in funding. A common argument is that it is cheaper to fund a preventive program than to pay the costs later. However, since programs are included in separate pieces of legislation and often under the jurisdiction of different committees, it is difficult to take funds from a specific program to fund another. For example, it costs \$68 to provide family planning services to a sexually active teen versus \$3,000 for prenatal care and delivery costs under Medicaid (Edelman). However, each of these programs requires separate spending authorizations.

In contrast, programs within the farm bill can be interchanged or tied together. Less money may be allocated for one program so that another can be emphasized. Compliance with one provision is sometimes required for participation in another as is the case with the conservation reserve program. Farmers using marginal lands will not receive support payments for crops produced from that land.

Another problem with separate pieces of legislation is that there may be conflicting goals that create conflicting requirements for recipients.

An alternative to comprehensive legislation is the concept of impact analysis for all proposed legislation. This procedure has been used with environmental issues. However, impact analysis still requires that some decisions be made about what is desirable. Without that, there can be no standards for evaluating proposed legislation. Proponents of impact analysis argue that it would prevent the conflicts that occur even within the same legislation. AFDC has a work requirement but does not provide for adequate day care for children of mothers required to work. In effect, one part of the program cancels out the benefits of the other.

### **Extension's Role in Family Policy Education**

Extension has a vested interest in the farm bill both because of the funding provisions for the organization and the effects on its primary audience. Extension's role in family-related policy issues is less clear-cut. Although our audience is families, the diversity of values and goals and our belief that individuals have a right to choose their own lifestyle make the issues more difficult to handle. Merely planning a program around a particular issue can create strong emotional reactions within the community that can seriously damage extension's credibility. However, that doesn't mean we should shy away from program planning altogether.

Two of extension's strong points are its reputation for reliable information and the informal educational network. Much of extension's efforts can be focused at the awareness level. Most issues evolve over time. This provides ample opportunity to help citizens understand what the concerns are before a decision has to be made or before the topic is so controversial it cannot be easily handled. Teaching citizens process skills so they can take a more active role in decision making and providing information to help people think through issues can be major extension contributions.

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