

Family Disintegration: A Threat to Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Nations of the world are working round the clock, strategizing and re-strategizing to ensure that sustainable development is attained as outlined in the sustainable development goals. As important as this is, there are prevalent conditions in the society that needed serious attention if sustainable development must be achieved. This paper considered why sustainable development cannot be attained in the face of family disintegration. Its objective is to find out the roles of family in achieving sustainable development and the effects of family disintegration. The researcher used open-ended questionnaire/interview and observation to collect data for the study. The study revealed that family disintegration encourages lack of respect for human life and distortion of values; it breeds violence and encourages gangsterism; and it leads to a collapse of traditional family life. The following recommendations among others are – provision of marriage training manual, inculcation of values and morals, establishment of guidance and counseling unit in schools and promotion of traditional family life through family life campaign and family life bill.

Keywords: *Family disintegration and sustainable development*

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Background to the Study

Sustainable development takes into consideration the general wellbeing of all (children, men and women) at present without endangering the future generation. It is a continual development which affects every aspect of the national life. Several activities at local and international levels have been going on to ensure that by the year 2030 this would be a reality. Re-echoing part of the vision of the United Nations at the inception of the vision 2030 "we envisage the world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; of respect of race.... A world which invests in its children and in which every child grows up free from violence and exploitation, A world in which every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality and all legal, social and economic barriers to their empowerment have been removed". This vision may be just a paper work if considerable attention is not given to the cradle and bedrock of the society (family) on whose pillar rests the society. Hence the concern of this paper, to examine the effect of family disintegration on the society and difficulty such might be posed in achieving sustainable development.

Conceptual Clarification

Family

Family is regarded as a major social institution and a locus of much of a person's social activity (Nam, 2004). It is a social unit created by blood, marriage, or adoption and can be described as nuclear or extended. Family is an intimate domestic group made up of people related to one another by bonds of blood, sexual mating or legal rights. It is the smallest and most basic social unit which is also the most important primary group found in any society. Ekpenyong (1996) defined family as a bio-social group of adults and children who are in an institutionalized relationship.

The common denominator in the definitions above is that family involves relationship, something that the members share in common; there is a bond which makes living together possible. Family is the base on which the society stands. Nam (2004) citing Eliot and Merrill (2004) stressed that family is a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption constituting a single household, interacting with each other in their respective social roles of husband and wife, father and mother, son and daughter, brother and sister creating a common culture.

Characteristics of family as outlined by Nam (2004), include the following: family is regarded as a universal group; it is based on marriage between two adults of opposite sex; family provides an individual with a name; Descent/ancestry are traced through family; it is the most important group in any individual's life and the most basic in primary socialization of an individual; it is a unit of emotional and economic cooperation; Duties and responsibilities are shared among members. As part of the functions of family it helps in procreation and propagation of human species, provision of individual identity, responsible for the upbringing of children and an important agent of socialisation and cultural transmission. Above all, it is a great source of emotional and psychological strength to its members in times of need.

Family Disintegration

Disintegration is associated to break up, when something gradually ceases to exist. It is making something become weaker and less effective. Disintegration is the process of something becoming weaker or being destroyed by breaking into small parts or pieces (Cambridge Dictionary). Family disintegration according to Oyet (2009), is the break up or disbands of the husband and wife. Family disintegration in a broad sense is not necessarily when the husband and wife break up and part ways as in the case of divorce and separation rather it encompasses the situation where conflict and quarrel is constantly present such that the peace and serenity of the home is distorted. Hence the popular saying, that no meaningful progress can take place in an atmosphere of rancor and chaos. Family can be said to disintegrate the moment that it can no longer in part or whole play its protective role to its members; instill core values; and provide basic needs among others. These needs can be summed up as economic need, social need, and psychological need, moral and spiritual needs (Oko-Jaja 2018).

Theoretical Framework

The development of the society or nation is a collective effort of all the variables in the society which include family, school, economic institution, political institution, religious institution and so on. Considering the concept of sustainable development as pointed out by Sachs (2015) in Onyido (2017), "sustainable development recommends a holistic framework in which society aims for economic, social and environmental goals". In addition, Onyido (2017), citing UNESCO website stated that "Sustainable development cannot be achieved by technological solutions, political regulation or financial instruments alone. We need to change the way we think and act. This requires quality education and learning for sustainable developments at all levels and in all social contexts".

By implication, sustainable development requires not only a deliberate effort but also a holistic approach to engage all facets of the society into action without undermining any. This work, family disintegration, a threat to sustainable development is based on the social theory of structural – functional theory which considers the society as a complete but interconnected system where each part works together as a functional whole. Hence the performance of one affects the effectiveness of the entire system. By and large, the contributions of family towards the attainment of sustainable development cannot be over emphasized. However the other segments of the society seem to be working relentlessly, a disintegrated family may jeopardized the efforts.

The Role of Family in Achieving Sustainable Development

Sustainable development according to the Brundtland report could be defined as 'Balancing the fulfilment of human needs with the protection of natural environment so that these needs can be met not only with the present but in the indefinite future' (Wikipidea). The International Institute for Sustainable Development (2008) defined it "as that development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs". This simply infers that the concept of

sustainable development operates on the principle of need fulfilment both for the present generation and the ones to come. As a matter of fact, any action exhibited today however beneficial it might be to the person or group of persons in question, if it cannot contribute meaningfully and positively to and helping the next generation has defied the concept of sustainable development.

The importance of family in achieving the sustainable developmental goals (SDGs) is reflected in the national public policies (child allowances, paternity leave) which focus on family policies as a way to improve the living standards of future generations (UNICEF 2018) Thus families and the national policies that support them, play an important role in national efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The former United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan in 2010 stated that “the very achievement of development goals depends on how well families are empowered to contribute to the achievement of those goals. Thus, policies focusing on improving the well being of families is certain to benefit development”. The UN in one of its meetings set up a team of family policy experts to look into the families and policies as they affect the realisation of sustainable development goals. The report pointed out how the six SDGs (poverty, health, education, gender equality, youth unemployment and ending violence) can be impacted by well-designed family – oriented policy and programme design, implementation and evaluation. It was noted that family environments can be the cause of and solution to negative social outcomes.

Despite the wide acknowledgment of the valuable role played by the institution of family, this institution continues to face various challenges. Some of these challenges relate to social and economic development of societies whereas some are affected by natural and manmade disasters such as conflicts and epidemics. Lamenting on this, Butt (2018), stated that among the most vulnerable to such challenges are families that are headed by single parents, in particular women. These challenges apparently affect the well being of the affected families and consequently affect the development of their respective societies all things being equal.

Causes of Family Disintegration

There is no smoke, they said, without fire. The disintegration of family is as a result of several factors which can be classified as remote or immediate. Some of them include:

Insufficient preparation before entering into marriage: Some marriages are entered without the people concerned understanding what marriage is all about. Some might be under-age, while some entered under duress, that is, pressure by parents/guardians or even friends, whereas some due to unexpected pregnancy. In such situations, the probability of having a smooth and enduring relationship is slim.

Marriage induced by financial or material possession: When a marriage is founded on money or what money can afford, it may hardly survive the pressures and challenges that are part of life, especially when there is financial crisis or economic meltdown.

The busy nature of many parents: Being committed and busy in ones filed of work is a mark of being responsible through it has some side effects especially when there is much concentration on a task as the expense of ones' family. This left the children without guidance.

Drug: Drug abuse and addiction is a very dangerous disease which has stripped families of their joy, peace, wealth and sense of living. Drunkards do not stay at home, neither do they save enough to take care of their families. In addition to not providing for family members, such parents turned out to be negative role models to the children. This will invariably lead to anger as rightly put by Salkio (2017), that the spouse or other family members may not be comfortable with this development which may decide to break out from the family or even the victim (addict) himself/herself.

Scarcity of romance in marriage: Romance exist in a marriage when spouses are attracted to each other, desire and care for each other; when they enjoy the company of each other. Such an atmosphere increases family bond and unity. Unfortunately, the lack of romance gives room to broken relationship.

Over criticism: Criticism in relationship acts like a toxic in the body when it is irrational. Criticism is the act of focusing on your partner's flaws and passing judgment (Higgins 2017). She went further to state that "over time, a critical stance can turn into a habit of disapproving, critiquing, correcting, blaming, nitpicking or trying to fix your significant order". Obviously critical remarks may seem good and tolerable for the time being but the cumulative effect can turn out to be destructive. Criticism often creates an emotional distance between couples. Grayless (2017) citing Gottman (2017) pointed out that the worst thing about criticism is that it can lead to contempt. Contempt, according to him is about holding your partner in a negative light without giving them the benefit of the doubt. This can send the message that he/she is not liked, appreciated, understood or respected. This can lead to a breakdown at the long run all things being equal.

Rigidity in sexual relationship: Sex is an integral part of marital relationship. Sex promotes oneness, bonding, unity and friendship (Oko-Jaja, 2020). Research shows that sex is one of a man's most important needs. When a wife, for instance resists intimacy or only passively interested in her husband's sexual satisfaction he may feel rejected and unimportant. Similar thing happens when a wife's sexual satisfaction is not met. This condition gradually will affect communication, intimacy and peaceful atmosphere.

Harsh economic condition: A harsh economic pressurises spouses to take up more than one job so as to meet up the family needs – food, shelter, clothing, education and so on. This oftentimes create a wide gap between parents and children; and between spouses which may eventually lead to neglect of family values and lack of parental guidance

Effects of Family Disintegration

Burrows (2007), emphasising on the state of the family in a changing world stated 'the family is in a state of decline and confusion and it is being challenged in so many ways,

both from within and without. The decline has gone to the point of redefining what family used to be. He went further to say that an 'alternative families' has risen. An alternative family according to Burrows (2007:97) is a set up where homosexuals and others with abnormal lifestyles and behaviours insist on living together and raise children, For instance, man versus man and woman versus woman (same sex) marriage relationship. The fact remains that there will be an appreciable difference between children raised by same sex parents and that of opposite sex parents. Irrespective of how a woman in a same sex relationship assumes the role of a man, that does not really make her one. Because man by nature and design is unique likewise the woman. That a child calls a woman 'dad' does not make her a dad. It will be like a scenario in the holy book (Bible) where Jacob disguised himself to be Esau so as to take the latter's blessing. Since Esau was hairy, he decided to cover himself with goat skin. As he drew near his father, he noticed a mixed up, such that he could not hide his feeling "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau" Genesis 27 verse 22).

Under this family arrangement, the stability of the child is in question. Burrows (2007) commenting on this opined that having 'two mothers' or 'two fathers' is an unnatural environment to raise children, it breeds confusion and disorder both at individual and societal levels. He stressed further that the best environment to raise healthy and happy children and a stable society is where two parents in their proper roles as male and female role models (father and mother) joined and live together.

Researches over the years have proved that the weight and effect of family disintegration is more on the children. Judging from the discipline the child acquires, Uche (1980), argued that child discipline is the concern of both parents (husband and wife). The mother disciplines the child more frequently, however in the event of any serious breach or violation of rules, the father may make the final decision with regard to disciplinary measures. Similarly, Oko-Jaja (2013) maintained that the discipline of a father is different from that of the mother though may not be regular. There is a kind of fear in children when the father speaks and gives instruction. What then happens in the event of divorce, alternative family or single parenting where a woman for instance is both the father and mother or woman being the father or vice versa? In most cases, such children have behavioural role disorder or grow wild and are difficult to control at the long run.

Burrows (2007), emphasizing on the effect of divorce, stated that divorce has wreaked havoc in the lives of many young children and this often affects their development for years afterward. With the rise of divorce, he continued, there are many 'unparented' or 'under parented' children who have to find their way in life by themselves because their families are in upheaval. The confusion sometimes arises from inconsistency in child discipline. Since both parents are not together, one parent might be liberal and may allow the child do whatever he wants to do while the other may be strict. In the event of spending sometime here and sometimes there, the child is put in a state of dilemma as to which lifestyle to imbibe.

Another consequence of family disintegration is the rise of gang families according to Burrows (2017). Gang families are families without mother and father but made up of children (youth) who are not under the care of their parents or any adult. The members seem to have something in common – drug abuse/ addiction, cultism, prostitution and the like. It is obvious that the activities of the gang families would breed tension, robbery, violence, insecurity and other vices.

In addition, there are many blended families – families usually formed after divorces and remarriages. These children in these families have multiple parents with multiple influences and they have to adjust to new siblings as well. This creates authority and discipline problems. Sometimes the parents in these families fight each other and use their children as pawns. There are also cases where step parents sexually molest their step children.

Children from a broken home have psychological problem. The fact that they come from such a home is enough embarrassment. They seem to have little or nothing to contribute among their peers with regards to family life. Such children are crushed inside and regret ever coming from such a home. Burrows (2007: 139) quoted a poem written by a girl under the torture of divorce

“Mommy's crying, Daddy's gone
Mommy is no longer singing a song
I hurt so bad inside,
With you not by my side
Mommy and Daddy, please hear my cry.

Love the children;
Give us a chance
We are tomorrow;
We deserve a chance”.

Children who are rejected by their parents who grow up in homes with considerable conflict or who are inadequately supervised are at the risk of becoming delinquent. Wright and Wright (1994), citing the research conducted by July and Farrington on two hundred examined deviant behaviour and family disruption in a longitudinal survey of South London males from age eight to forty six, found out that 29% of the boys from disrupted families were convicted as juveniles compared with 18% of the boys from stable families. They concluded that family disruption was one of the contributory factors to the upsurge of juvenile delinquency in Britain. Supporting this view, Oyet (2007), citing Goode (1964), pointed that the failure of adequate socialisation due to breakdown give rise to delinquent children. Amadi (1982), in Oyet (2007), stated that the delinquency is owing to what he called 'incomplete parentage' where children are trained and raised without affectionate marital care.

Family life has been seriously distorted, the traditional family setting where mother, father and children live together and enjoy the warrants of one another is fading away Hymowitz (2019), writing on “The decline of the family has unleashed an epidemic of loneliness” pointed out that traditional values in the western countries came under attack when societies become richer and goods cheaper and more plentiful such that people no longer had to rely on traditional families to afford basic needs. This has resulted to breakdown or divorce. The rate of divorce both in the developed nations and developing nations is on the increase though very high in the former.

The big question before us is – in the face of this incessant disruption of family life, how can sustainable development be attained? Considering the negative impact it has on the society (sexual promiscuity, crime, drug and substance abuse etc), can a meaningful development take place? It is pertinent to point out that a sick family will give rise to a sick society.

Methodology

The study is a qualitative research which used an open-ended questionnaire/interview and observation for data collection. The researcher engaged ten respondents in an interview to find out what effects family disintegration have on them.

Discussion and Findings

Three major forms of family disintegration were studied. These include:

- (a) Family characterized by incessant quarrel and conflict by the couple.
- (b) Broken family (Divorced).
- (c) Single parent family.

Two respondents were victims of incessant quarrel and conflict, living with both parents while eight are victims of broken marriage (divorce), out of which three are living with one of the parents while two with the grandmother and three are living on their own.

The responses were as follows:

- i. How do you feel watching your parents quarrel and / or fight?
 - a. It was embarrassing, shameful, like a dream and disgusting.

- ii. Do you consider your home environment a school where you are exposed to values that will promote good living?
 - a. 80% of the respondents felt that the home environment was not conducive for learning since it is characterized with abuses (physical and emotional) neglect, hatred, battering, bullying, and different kinds of assault.

- iii. To what extent do you open up to both or either of your parents to share your feelings or issues bothering you?
 - a. Divergent views were expressed which include; Not seeing parents capable of handling their fears; No serious relationship exist between parents and children that calls for opening up; Very scared of the father and feel more relaxed to share with friends than parents; Can hardly see parents at home.

- iv. What is growing up like without a father or mother or both parents?
 - a. I do whatever I feel like doing because my grandmother would not want to hurt or offend me.
 - b. Hardly sees mother because she's always working to make ends meet, so I feel abandoned.
 - c. Always feel insecure and very conscious of danger.
 - d. My whole world collapsed when mother left the house and father married another woman. I was treated like a slave.
 - e. I was sexually violated by my step father and step brothers.
 - f. 20% received a good training, courtesy of their mother who always encourage them to learn from their (parents) mistakes since what happened to them could be avoided or managed.
 - g. 90% were financially handicapped and basic needs could not be met.

- v. What are your regrets?
 - a. 40% could not trust men, consider them to be heartless and wicked.
 - b. 70% dropped out of school.
 - c. 50% are scared of marriage, never see anything good in marrying.
 - d. 30% preferred being a single parent.
 - e. 80% were involved in cultism, gang rape, drugs and different kinds of violent acts.

Summary of Findings

Family disintegration gives rise to the following:

1. Lack of respect and trust and distortion of values.
2. Breeds violence, encourage gangsterism and cult activities.
3. Increase the number of school drop outs.
4. Encourage hard work to an extent.
5. A threat to marriage and traditional family life.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the effects of family disintegration obstruct the child's developmental process, by creating so much psychological problem. Confirming the assertion of Burrows (2017) and Uche (1980) that such children are crushed inside, feel embarrassed and abandoned. This often leads to engaging in some unwanted behaviour. When a child feels abandoned, he/she will desperately look for acceptance which he/she will definitely find among the peers in the street. This is what Burrows (2017) referred to as gang family which heightens lawlessness and breakdown of law and order in the society and no meaningful development can take place in such a state. It is important to reiterate that marriage is a gateway to family which serves as a bedrock and pillar of the society. The desire to enter into marriage relationship is hampered in the face of family disintegration. Where this persists, it will affect the development of vibrant and strong family life; hence, single parenting will be on the increase. This implies that in discipline will be on the increase, considering the assertion of Oko-Jaja (2013) that a child is best disciplined where both parents are living together.

The effect of living children on their own in the event of divorce especially when they cannot cope with either of the parents has so much effect on the children in particular and society at large. According to Collins (2015) the lack of parental care will produce vulnerable children who are emotionally unstable, develop conduct disorders and have low self-esteem. Whereas Xiao (2015) in his study as cited by Collins (2015), stated that lack of parental care can directly affect brain development. He said that “children who receive sensitive responsive care from their parent and other care givers in the first years of life enjoy an important head start toward success in their lives”.

Conclusion

Family disintegration occurs when family could no longer in part or whole play its roles in the upbringing of children and stability of the society. So many factors are responsible for this which includes unpreparedness before entering into marriage, over commitment of couples in their work place, harsh economic condition, scarcity of romance, over criticism, insisting on insisting on individual's right etc. From the findings, family disintegration obstructs the child's developmental process, promotes indiscipline and delinquent behaviours, discourages marriage relationship by promoting single parenting and unparented and incomplete parented children; and finally produces a weak and unstable society.

Recommendations

Sustainable development is a collective responsibility. Every individual has a part to play, hence no one should be left behind bearing in mind that a child today is an adult tomorrow; and there can be no next generation without the today's children. On this note the following recommendations are made:

1. Adequate preparation should be made before entering into marriage, bearing in mind that marriage is a lasting relationship. Religious bodies and counselors at private and public enterprises should develop training manual to achieve this; while parents on their own part should dutifully inform their children.
2. Government through the legislative body at the local, state and federal levels should propose bill protecting family life and ensure its implementation.
3. Separation and divorce should be discouraged considering its effect on the children in particular and society at large. The Public Health Workers should spearhead this campaign in conjunction with the religious bodies.
4. Inculcation of values and morals should be taken seriously. Parents, teachers and religious bodies should ensure compliance.
5. Educational planners and curriculum experts should adjust the curriculum of both primary, secondary and tertiary institutions to accommodate value education. When respect, love, tolerance, selflessness, patriotism and the like are learnt, so much value would be placed on human life.
6. Guidance and counseling unit should be established in all the schools and professional counselors employed.
7. The United Nations through its Family policy makers team should reiterate the need for strong family ties and as well challenge nations to appreciate traditional family living.

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