Family Literacy and the Future of Humanity

A Proposal for a Global Family Literacy Peace Initiative

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The President of the UN General Assembly On Global Cooperation For Conflict Prevention and Building A Sustainable Peace

"It is important that we respond to the big and important questions," the President of the UN General Assembly, H.E. Miroslav Lajčák said in his opening address at the conference "Sustaining Peace: Partnerships for Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding" convened by the UN and Columbia University (December 8, 2017).

"There is no room for complacency," President Lajčák said. He spoke of "too many local and regional conflicts" and of the need to "sustain peace – a peace that lasts for generations." He talked about "conflicts within and between countries," and he said, "We do not have a good mechanism for dealing with them."

President Lajčák also talked about the need to stay ahead of potential conflicts, and of the UN's resolution to do so. He emphasized the need for: conflict prevention; predictable and sustainable financing of prevention; more coherence in the UN support for peace; and partnerships with civil society with the intent of sustaining peace. He repeated several times that local knowledge and participation of the local people in peace initiatives is of vital importance.

"What tools do we have at our disposal?" President Lajčák asked at the end of his address. "And, how can we give greater visibility to sustaining peace?"

It is worth repeating that local knowledge and participation of local people in peace initiatives is of vital importance, and that unrecognized local peace building efforts are already well established in most UN Member States. A strong argument can be made for reconsidering the significant role that family literacy programs can have as conduits for local peacebuilding initiatives that enhance the lives of vulnerable people in every UN Member States, including economically advantaged countries.

Reframing UN Family Literacy Programs as Global Peace Initiatives

The concept of family literacy[i] is an organizing principle and holds promise for a global peacebuilding and for peace sustaining initiatives that incorporate the UN Sustainability Goals. Family literacy could quite possibly foster ties between nations and an easy to implement macrostrategy for ensuring life for future generations on Earth.

By reframing family literacy programs in UN Member States, these well-established collaborative initiatives offer real possibilities for peace building, and the support of family literacy could have a vital role in achieving consensus on political solutions for sustainable peace.

To write that family literacy is important to the future of humanity may seem a bit far-fetched, but perhaps it is not. The family is the one essential element that all human societies share. Literacy on the other hand is not ubiquitous, but there is ample research evidence that in times of devastating sorrow and in extreme circumstances, reading and writing can be of vital importance to the very survival of the family.

In a time of protracted conflicts, sectarian violence, population displacement and refugee challenges, being able to read and write can become the determining factor of whether entire families live or die. It is for this reason that family literacy is important to the future of humanity.

In this paper I will focus on the many opportunities that family literacy initiatives –already established by UN Member States – offer as a viable conduit for sustainable development, peace building and sustaining global peace.

This idea for a *Family Literacy Sustainable Development and Peace Building Initiative* will require a significant reframing of the current responses to the human activity that is damaging the planet, and also a reduction in the extreme geopolitical tensions that are endangering human survival. It is important that established approaches to mitigating life threatening risks should not be abandoned, but reconfigured in response to the systemic complexity of risks – the myriad of ways in which various kinds of risks are tied together by many links and commonalities.

Worldwide threats require stronger alliances, but not all UN Member States are stepping-up. For example, the US has withdrawn from the UN Global Compact on Migration and also from the Paris Climate Accord, and it is worth noting that there are more displaced people right now than at any time since WWII. These massive global movements of people are intricately tied together with climate change.

Given the isolationist stance of the U.S. and some other Member States, the limitations of silo diplomacy are lamented at the UN, and alternate approaches to advancing both sustainable development and peacebuilding are being sought.[ii] The advantages are considerable of re-imagining existing family literacy initiatives that are already directly engaging with families in sustainable development projects and peace building initiatives are considerable.

There is ample evidence that families rise to the challenge when disasters occur, but most people living humble lives do not think they have the power to reduce the risks that

confront them. However, there is a large database to support the proposition that family literacy programs in UN Member States are not only pushing the risks down, but that they are doing so in cost effective ways. These programs and projects maximize the realization of achievable goals, and they have the capacity to provide opportunities to link and access different country-specific databases in collaborative efforts to achieve and sustain global peace.

Quixotically, the idea of a *Family Literacy Sustainable Development and Peace Building Initiative* is the only viable response I have found to a decades long quest to answer the Question of Questions (QoQ):

> How can timely actions be undertaken at unprecedented and multiple geographical and geopolitical scales, where the nature and scale of the issues involved means that the actors have widely differing and disconnected values, ethics, emotions, spiritual beliefs, levels of trust, interests and power?[iii]

By taking family literacy as the unit of analysis and operationalizing the idea, the problem of reducing the systemic complexity of risks and catastrophes is avoided. This approach to achieving sustainable development and to building a sustainable peace not only enables "timely actions to be undertaken at unprecedented and multiple geographical and geopolitical scales," but also succeeds in geopolitical contexts "where the nature and scale of the issues involved means that the actors have widely differing and disconnected values, ethics, emotions, spiritual beliefs, levels of trust, interests and power."

In many U.N. Member States, programs focus on family literacy initiatives that encourage peacebuilding, finding employment, and empowering women and girls. Some programs address the psychosocial needs of women and their concerns about health and family planning. Still others, in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq, where the human suffering is extreme, family literacy programs focus on war trauma and PTSD.

At a time when we are well beyond normalcy, what is incomprehensible to many is that there is no coherent strategy for risk reduction within or across governments and agencies. UN Member States have an opportunity to establish new priorities based on common understandings already established that family literacy holds benefits for humanity that transcend regional conflicts and global threats.

Women and Children Are Vital to Family Literacy Sustainable Development and Peace-Building Initiatives

The reframing of family literacy programs as peace-building initiatives would recognize the important role of women and children in peace sustaining efforts. Throughout history women have always been homemakers caring for their families, and in that capacity they have often been peace builders and peacekeepers, sometimes taking a leadership role

and sustaining peace in the most difficult of circumstances. Ethnographic family literacy research in regions of armed conflict and catastrophic events speaks to the unrecognized role of women and also to the importance of families in sustaining peace.[iv] Five key aspect of existing family literacy programs that encourage reframing follow:

1. **Family literacy has become a vital and successful way of promoting literacy in families and communities that improves life circumstances and increases the literacy levels in many, possibly all, UN Member States.**

   There is research evidence that people who can read are healthier, happier and live longer than people who don't, and that women and girls who are educated have fewer children and those they do have are twice as likely to survive. There is also evidence to support the statement that for every 1% increase in a country's literacy rate, there is a permanent 1.5% increase in its gross national product. By contrast, illiteracy costs the global economy $1.19 trillion each year.

2. **Family literacy is used to frame well established peace enhancing initiatives by UN Member States**.

   Countries such as Afghanistan, Nepal, and Sub Saharan Africa offer village based family literacy programs, which seek to develop literacy in the context of community needs such as health, employment and family planning. In some countries family literacy initiatives are designed to reduce gender inequality and family violence, while in other countries family literacy programs focus on the amelioration of psychological and emotional traumas resulting from armed conflict, as well as the support of family members physically disabled by war.

3. **Family literacy has evolved into a peaceful way of recovering from many local, regional and global conflicts that are deleterious to the health and wellbeing, and even survival of vulnerable families**.

   Ethnographic research provides evidence of how vital family literacy is to cohesion and to reducing fragmentation within communities. In fact it could be argued that unbeknownst to many at the UN and civil society NGOs, peacebuilding is almost ubiquitous in UN Member States through family literacy initiatives, and a reframing of the concept of "sustaining peace" is recommended to include the efforts by local communities, as well as regional and international organizations, to overcome the enormous challenges confronting families as they endeavor to live healthy, productive and *peaceful* lives. It is worth stating that it is entirely possible that the present regional fragmentation and global social unrest would be far more devastating without the focused efforts of families who are participating in programs that use literacy as a conduit for peaceful coexistence and sustainable development.

4. **Family literacy is integral to and in keeping with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.**

   A systematic analysis of the family literacy initiatives in UN Member States reveals that family literacy is used in most countries in ways that are in keeping with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Most importantly, family literacy initiatives are used to promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies. The focus of worldwide family literacy initiatives on many of the 17 SDGs is both remarkable and profound.

   Most family literacy programs in UN Member States are conceptually plural and are focused on ending poverty and hunger, and on promoting good health and wellbeing. The majority of initiatives have as their mission inclusive quality education, gender equality, climate action, peace and justice, and revitalizing partnerships for the goals. Most include programs especially for girls and women.

5. **Family literacy initiatives create opportunities for the development of peace and security and human rights to be interlinked and mutually reinforcing.**

   A remarkable fact not mentioned in relationship to sustaining peace is that UN Member States – considered to have "silos mentalities" and to be resistant to UN peacebuilding and peacekeeping initiatives – are in fact already actively supporting such initiatives through family literacy programs that are well-established in their countries. There are now family literacy initiatives in almost all UN Member States and the reframing of these projects so they are regarded as vital to peaceful co-existence would undoubtedly have a positive impact by increasing social cohesion, reducing the radicalization of youth and diminishing local conflicts.

The potential outcomes for the future of humanity that the simple act of reframing family literacy projects and initiatives undertaken by UN Member Sates cannot be overstated. As the President of the UN General Assembly, H.E. Miroslav Lajčák stated, "There is no room for complacency." There are "too many local and regional conflicts within and between countries" and "we do not have a good mechanism for dealing with them."

President Lajčák's warning should put us on high alert, for families for peace can so easily be persuaded by gifts of water for war. In an article published on the Vision for Humanity website Ruth Lyons[v] writes that climate change creates the conditions for instability and that 16 million people live on the brink of starvation in East Africa because of a prolonged drought and lack of water. In water scarce Yemen Al Qaida has been building wells and young men have been joining Al Qaida in return for water for their families.

Thus climate change, the lack of water, and violent groups such as Al Qaida become threat multipliers with very real risk of violent acts not only in East Africa but Europe because of a bargain being struck to provide water for poor. If starving people is not enough to change the living circumstances of 16 million people perhaps the high price of terrorist acts is a reason the UN Member States would undertake plantings for peace. Provide the water, support crop production, and feeding of livestock, support the families not only because it is moral and ethical but also because such humanitarian acts will increase the potential of peace throughout the world.

We know that all the big existential risks are anthropomorphic, and that geopolitical tensions are as severe now as they were at the time of the Second World War. The present displacement of populations and the scale of global migrations are unprecedented since that time. The increase of nuclear risks is also unprecedented, with more states having nuclear capability and more threats and posturing by world leaders. The combination of these geopolitical tensions with the step-change from the Holocene to the Anthropocene exacerbates the systemic complexity of the existential risks confronting humanity. Add to this the socioeconomic tensions between the super rich elites and the destitute poor, and the likelihood of humanity reaching the next century is exceptionally bleak. This is especially true when cyber capability adds a level of unprecedented complexity to the QoQ requiring a new version of the old question:

> What happens when a vast and ungovernable on-line world collides with a physical world, in which human activity takes place at unprecedented and multiple geopolitical scales, involving people of widely differing, and often disconnected values, ethics, emotions, spiritual beliefs, levels of trust, interests and power?[vi]

One of the grand paradoxes of this time is that the global participation of people in a virtual world has the capacity to jeopardize human existence in the physical world. People are changing their neural circuitry at the same time they are changing the geology of the planet. In *Neuron Review* (2018) Patrick Chen and Weizhe Hong[vii] write, "the influence of artificial intelligence in our species' communication has already been changing and will continue to change the way we socially interact with one another."

Summing up, in 2008 Nick Bostrom[viii] wrote that within a decade or so catastrophic risks would include "risks from nuclear war, biotechnology (misused for terrorism or perhaps war), social/economic disruption or collapse scenarios, and maybe nuclear terrorism." Bostrom also predicted that "over a somewhat longer time frame, the risks from molecular manufacturing, artificial intelligence, and totalitarianism may rise in prominence and each of these latter ones is also potentially existential." He was right in his predictions.

On February 13, 2018, the Directors of the DNI, CIA, NSA, DIA, FBI, and the NGA[ix] testified before the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on the

increasing concern about global threats and national security. It was not surprising that all the Directors and the Senators agreed that cyber is now considered a weapon system, but it was surprising there was also total agreement that there is no cohesive plan of action across agencies or across government to respond to the threats. There is also no legislative plan of action and there are no whole government policies in place – either offensive or defensive – to respond to the existential risks, which have increased exponentially in complexity with the rapid development of cyber capabilities. This conclusion is stated in no uncertain terms in the *Rand Corporation Report on U.S. Military Forces for a Dangerous World* [x] with the authors of the report criticizing the "out-of-date priorities" of the U.S. military.

When individual governments fail to reduce the possibilities of global man-made catastrophes, then the people must step up. A global *Family Literacy Sustainable Development and Peace Building Initiative* is an ethical macrostrategy that provides opportunities for UN Member States to change the dominant narrative, and to use actionable knowledge gained from forty years of family literacy research and initiatives to reduce the risks that are threatening *all* human societies. UN Member States have an opportunity to work with NGOs in civil society to build stronger local communities that could positively impact the global community.

Many families with their many literacies can make a difference.[xi] It is a reasoned empathic approach that unites hearts and minds at a time when the rhetoric of global leaders is becoming dangerously strident. Family literacy programs have enriched the lives of millions of adults and children, and these initiatives have a well-documented track record of assisting families as they work together in their local communities to recover from mass trauma caused by the devastating impact of both natural catastrophes and human disasters. Every UN Member State is knowledgeable about this work, and every UN Member State already has the tools to participate in the conversations about a global plan to support the world's families regardless of their widely differing, and often disconnected values, ethics, emotions, and spiritual beliefs, levels of trust, interests and power. Fostering a focused discourse on global catastrophic risks and their mitigation will require hearts and minds united in compassion, empathy and trust at the species level to take on the daunting challenge of safeguarding families, their communities, and their countries – ensuring the survival of humanity.

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[i] The concept of family literacy originates in my doctoral research at Columbia University (1977-

[ii] United Nations and Columbia University Conference, Sustaining Peace: Partnerships for Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding, December 2017.

[iii] I participated in the 2009 ICSU/ISSC On-Line Global Visioning Consultation and the 2010 ICSU/ISSC Open Visioning Consultation Forum at UNESCO in Paris. The QoQ originates in these re-visioning consultations that resulted in the publication of the *Grand Challenges Report,* which is a consensus list of the highest priorities for Earth system science that would remove critical barriers impeding progress toward sustainable development. My participation in the Open Visioning Consultation provided the transdisciplinary framework which formed the basis of four peer-reviewed presentations accepted for the *Planet Under Pressure Global Conference on Earth System Science*, London, 2012. The presentations focused on: (1) The State of the Planet; (2) Meeting Global Needs;(3) Transforming our way of living; and (4) Governing Across Scales.

[iv] For the past 40 years I have worked with families struggling in the margins of society, with families living in regions of armed conflict, and I have been a first responder when catastrophic events have taken place. Invariably my access into vulnerable communities is framed by a series of organizing principles, which includes families' use of literacy, experiences of trauma, and evidence of imagination and the human spirit.

[v] Lyons, Ruth (2018) Hot-Headed: How Climate Change Induced Drought is Destabilising Global Drought is Destabilising Global Peace. http://visionofhumanity.org/peace/hot-headed-climate-change-induced-drought-destabilising-global-peace/

[vi] Taylor, D. (2014) *Nineteen Clues: Great Transformations Can Be Achieved Through Collective Actio*n. New York, NY: Garn Press, (p. 1).

[vii] Chen, P. and Hong, W. (2018) Neural Circuit Mechanisms of Social Behavior. *Neuron Review*, pp. 16-30. http://www.cell.com/neuron/pdf/S0896-6273(18)30147-8.pdf

[viii] Bostrom, N. and Cirkovic, M., (2008) Introduction, *Global Catastrophic Risks.* Oxford University Press, p. 28.

[ix] U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 13, 2018, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*. Daniel R. Coats, Director of National Intelligence; Michael Pompeo, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency; Admiral Michael Rogers, Director of the National Security Agency; Lieutenant General Robert Ashley, Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency; Chris Wray, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation; and Robert Cardillo, Director of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

[x] Ochmanek D., Wilson, P.A., Allen, B., Meyers, J.S. and Price, C.C. (2017) *U.S. Military Capabilities and Forces for a Dangerous World: Rethinking the U.S. Approach to Force Planning.*

[xi] Taylor, D. (Editor) (1997) *Many Families Many Literacies*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.