

## Towards An Informed Family Policy\*

**I**n his opening remarks at the Second National Conference on the Caring Society, 27-28 February 1992, ISIS Chairman **Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong** spoke on the need for policies on the family to be based more on objective data and research and less on emotions and nostalgia. ISIS FOCUS reproduces his speech for the record

All of us here are familiar with the 'Caring Society'. We are gathered here today in support of this very notion of 'caring' – to define the kind of society that we want, and to reexamine and recommend the ways in which we can help create such a society.

The Caring Society Programme was established at ISIS to address our Prime Minister's concern that Malaysia must be prepared to deal with the negative social consequences of development, as the country becomes more industrialised and urbanised, so that it will not become another affluent developed country, beset by problems such as drug addiction, suicide, child abuse, crime and violence. We at ISIS have attempted to develop this concern into an agenda for systematic study and research.

A very important part of our work is therefore to understand how industrialisation will affect our society and what measures might be taken to ensure that the institutions of family and community in particular will be able to withstand and respond positively to the challenges of a society rapidly exposed to profound technological, economic and social changes.

Our concern for the family focuses on two related questions: one, how are industrialisation and development transforming family roles and structures; and two, how will these transformations of roles and structures affect the caring functions of the family and especially the welfare of women and children.

These questions often elicit emotional responses which have limited usefulness in the formulation of public policy. We must strive to obtain more objective data and research if 'strengthening the family' is to become an important policy goal in our country.



The family is the cornerstone of any society. It is the place where our values are forged and our needs, be they biological needs, emotional or spiritual, are met. It is the immediate unit of society into which we are born, in which we grow into adulthood and where we spend our old age. It is where we are cared for and where we care for others. Simply put, it is the fount of caring in any society although it is too easily taken for granted.

We must recognise and accept that the family in modern times is subject to new stresses and strains. At the same time, we cannot afford to be nostalgic about the family of the past: the family in which the women

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stayed at home and took care of the children, and in which many generations lived under one roof. Women are increasingly better educated and want to leave their homes to work outside. The development of our country needs their contributions to nurture new and relevant values. Rather than keep women at home, we must find new ways to support their families, their obligations and responsibilities.

Apart from this, our national plans are already calling for the family and the community to increasingly shoulder the burden of caring for the nation's disabled persons, the elderly and those who are dependent on others to meet their basic needs. Yet we have little information on the capacity to meet those needs. This conference hopes to bring together available research and data to show how the family is changing and how this is affecting social welfare.

Without more research and hard data, policies for the family are at the risk of being based on emotions and nostalgia. It is important to bring the study of the family under closer scrutiny.

Over the next two days, I hope the participants will be able to deliberate on the issues and problems confronting us in the context of creating a more caring society. I sincerely believe that your presence and participation would be an invaluable contribution towards achieving our current goals and visions of fostering such a society.

As usual, we wish to acknowledge the contribution of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). Its contribution and interest assisted us considerably in organising this seminar. Thank you.



The Opening Session of the First National Conference on the Caring Society, 1990: (From left) Puan Zaharah bte Tun Dr Awang, formerly of Hospital Universiti; Assoc Prof H M Dahlan, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Kota Kinabalu; YBhg Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong; Assoc Prof Chiam Heng Keng, Faculty of Education, Universiti Malaya; Ms P C Sushama, formerly of Universiti Sains Malaysia; and Mr Martin Khor, Consumers' Association of Penang