



# IFFD

INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION FOR FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

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### **Parents need to be helped, not to be replaced** **What we can learn from the August 2011 Rioting in England**

**1st September 2011**

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The recent riots in England have posed quite a few questions for many experts<sup>1</sup>. Why did they happen? Who are to blame for them and why? How could they be prevented in the future? They are relevant for that country at this particular time, but I am sure that some similar situations will occur sooner or later in other places if we don't learn from this, as I will try to explain. Societies of today's world are not so different as to remain isolated from one another.

But first of all, if we want to find the answers, we need to clarify what happened and who have been the actors of this drama. Unlike what has happened up to now in other places, this was not an isolated incident, or an immigration issue, or a protest for the lack of freedom, or a consequence of the present recession. What we could see in all the images that were broadcasted worldwide, this was about "looting, violence, vandalising and thieving. It is criminality pure and simple", as Prime Minister Cameron put it<sup>2</sup>.

About the subjects of these actions, we know that the immense majority were young, men and women, even children. But, as the English writer Nick Young mentions from a place as significant as Uganda, "this can't be treated as just a 'youth' issue. The youth of any society are its most real 'output'"<sup>3</sup>. Time will demand of their generation the ability to manage our society, but it won't grant them the necessary knowledge without a proper education.

#### **What has wealth brought to our children?**

"What kind of a society could produce something like this?," asks Young. "It is a society steeped, on the one hand, in the moral cynicism of economic neoliberalism –that greed is good, a necessary component of economic vitality; that only the individual matters– and on the other hand in the

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<sup>1</sup> Between 6th and 10th August 2011, many London districts and some other cities and towns in England suffered widespread rioting, characterised by rampant looting and arson attacks of unprecedented levels. Five people died and at least 16 others were injured as a direct result of related violent acts. An estimated £200 million worth of property damage was incurred, and local economic activity was significantly compromised. As of 15 August, about 3,100 people had been arrested, of whom more than 1,000 had been charged.

<sup>2</sup> 9th August 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Daily Monitor (Kampala), 11th August 2011.

sharp inequalities that these doctrines have generated.” That’s why we shouldn’t look to the present recession if we want to find an explanation, but better to what caused it.

In this context, I find some of the conclusions of a recent Children’s Society report very interesting: “Research suggests that our wealth has not bought us the kind of childhood we want for our children. While average incomes in the United Kingdom have doubled in the last 50 years, people are no happier today, on average, than people were fifty years ago. In fact, for young people in particular, there is evidence to suggest that the opposite is true: that improved economic conditions seem to be associated with increasing levels of emotional problems. Depression and anxiety have increased for both boys and girls aged 15-16 since the mid-1980s, as have what are called ‘non-aggressive conduct problems’ such as lying, stealing and disobedience”<sup>4</sup>.

Somehow, we should find difficult to blame our children for being anti-social after having told them in all possible ways to ‘be yourself,’ ‘believe in yourself,’ ‘love yourself before you can love someone else.’ The transition from the ‘Me Generation’ to the ‘Me-first Generation’ is just what we could have expected<sup>5</sup>.

“This is where having a new pair of trainers is the most important thing, where success is measured by the mobile phone or the jacket you’re wearing,” says James Treadwell, a criminologist from the University of Leicester. He suggests that “the argument over whether this is about a reaction to deprivation or the chaos of a ‘feral underclass’, is missing what’s actually happening”<sup>6</sup>. Personally, I must say I was shocked while listening a 16-year-old looter on television saying that he felt no remorse for what he had done, because “I just watch my ‘plasma’ and think that Christmas came early”<sup>7</sup>.

### **Are parents allowed to fulfil their task?**

Who are then to be blamed for this? Many have turned to the parents, asking where were they while all this happened, like Allison Pearson does –“There’s no use blaming the police; it’s the parents, stupid. A report by the Centre for Social Justice found that the UK excels in the three D’s of family breakdown –divorce, dysfunction and dadlessness. Of the 805 violent looters arrested, how many come from homes without a father? I reckon we can guess the answer. A study back in 2001 found that 85 per cent of Indian families were headed by a married couple while 50-60 per cent of black families were headed by a lone parent, usually the mother. Is there anyone who still believes there is no link between that agonising statistic and the young males running amok on our streets?”<sup>8</sup>.

Of course, parents should be responsible for what their children do, and their absence or the abdication of their duties is not acceptable. But are our societies encouraging or even allowing them to do it? Sir Max Hastings seems to deny it when he mentions “a perverted social ethos, which elevates personal freedom to an absolute, and denies the underclass the discipline –tough love– which alone might enable some of its members to escape from the swamp of dependency in which they live”<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘The Good Childhood’, 2009. Marian FitzGerald, professor of criminology at the University of Kent, adds that “the socially excluded are not always the ones who are rioting – in fact they are often the ones who are most vulnerable to riots. We need a better thought-out approach rather than just using social exclusion as an excuse.” This view –which I fully share– shows that if we didn’t have enough reasons by now, a rethinking of the system of values we have fostered during the past decades has to be urgently designed. What is very clear at this stage is the failure of a Social System that has been trying for many years now to counteract all the negative aspects of British Society.

<sup>5</sup> Anglican Bishop of Manchester Nigel McCulloch will say people of all ages and backgrounds have become “confused about the difference between right and wrong” and “the result is a me-first, ultra-consumerist culture, in which the quest for possession of things overrides a caring concern for others, and the key commandments become don’t get caught and don’t grass... We have had an unpleasant glimpse of the default position to which society inevitably returns when its moral imperatives are forgotten” (BBC News, 14th August 2011).

<sup>6</sup> BBC News, 9th August 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Sky News, 12th August 2011.

<sup>8</sup> The Telegraph, 15th August 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Daily Mail, 10th August 2011.

A stable family with both parents present is usually the only environment in which a child can be educated in a proper manner, as countless studies unanimously show –and many of them produced in the same United Kingdom that has witnessed the riots<sup>10</sup>. Though, surprisingly enough, everything seems to be against those young couples who would presumably choose that kind of project for their lives. Social policies, political correctness, public opinion, educational programs... all is sending the wrong message to these young people, making even the attempt of such a project a heroic exploit, and we know that by definition heroes are the exception<sup>11</sup>.

I would like to quote again the British Prime Minister, as he summarizes what has happened and how to deal with it –“If we want to have any hope of mending our broken society, family and parenting is where we’ve got to start”<sup>12</sup>. Little by little, concepts like ‘family perspective’ as something policy makers should implement on all levels are becoming better known and accepted, as Cameron himself recognizes. “So from here on I want a ‘family test’ applied to all domestic policy. If it hurts families, if it undermines commitment, if it tramples over the values that keep people together, or stops families from being together, then we shouldn’t do it.” The sooner this ‘family test’ (or ‘family impact report’, as from The Family Watch we have usually named it) should be implemented in a society, the better for its future.

It is only after realizing this and assigning responsibility to policy makers and opinion makers first that we can turn to the parents, because only by allowing them to fulfil their task we can then make them responsible about it. I feel a good way of expressing the situation was posed by the General Secretary of the British Association of School and College Leaders, Brian Lightman. “Parents are not willing to say ‘no’. That short, simple word is an important part of any child’s upbringing. It’s desperately important that children have a sense of right and wrong. But we often come across children who have never been told that something is wrong. The majority of young people have a very clear sense of right and wrong,” he says. But if there is no sense of this passed on to young people – “you only have to read ‘Lord of the Flies’”<sup>13</sup>.

### **How can conflicts be prevented?**

But it shouldn’t all be about the negative approach of ‘not denying’, but also about the positive of ‘showing the way and encouraging’. That is why I believe that the preventive action of parenting courses should be much more spread than the reactive intervention to conflicts, because there are many reasons for making the institutional intervention as exceptional as possible. There are also

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, ‘When couples part: Understanding the consequences for adults and children’, One Plus One Marriage and Partnership Research (2009).

In ‘The Price of Parenthood’ (2005), Robert Rowthorn explains: “Britain will soon be the lone-parent capital of the Western World. This is partly because the absolute number of children living in one parent families is so large and partly because the birth rate among intact couples has fallen. As a result of these twin developments, the percentage of children who are living in a one parent household is now much higher in Britain than elsewhere in Western Europe and we are about to overtake the United States. Many of the children currently living in such households will eventually end up in step-families, or as they are described in Newspeak, “blended” or “reconstituted” families. There has been a great deal of research in recent years on what these developments mean for children and society in general. The conclusions are clear. Although many lone parents and step families do an excellent job, children in such families are at much greater risk of abuse and neglect as well as worse social, educational and health outcomes when compared to children who live with both their natural parents. Ideologues may deny this, but the evidence is now overwhelming. The decline of the traditional family is harmful to children and also to the wider society.”

<sup>11</sup> I think David Wilson, professor of criminology at Birmingham City University and a former prison governor, is right when he says that “it’s about politicians, it’s about bankers, it’s about footballers. It’s not just about a particular class, it permeates all levels of society. When we see politicians claiming for flat-screen TVs and getting jailed for fiddling their expenses, it’s clear that young people of all classes aren’t being given appropriate leadership” (The Tribune, 15th August 2011).

<sup>12</sup> David Cameron, 15th August 2011.

<sup>13</sup> BBC News, 9th August 2011. It is interesting that he mentions this novel, because it is well known that its stances on the subjects of human nature and individual welfare versus the common good came out as a response to another work. ‘The Coral Island’ (R. M. Ballantyne, 1857) shows a complete opposite development of a group of European boys who also end up alone in an island, one that would be fit to that concept of natural lack of evil in humans. It is as wrong as these riots have proven it to be more than a century and a half after.

many studies showing how expensive and usually ineffective this is, compared to the right exercise of parenting<sup>14</sup>.

This is what the International Federation for Family Development has been doing now for more than forty years through its courses and other activities<sup>15</sup>. Showing and encouraging, not patronizing or complicating... Our unique method has proven to be useful for many thousands of couples and contributes to make parenting both an enjoyable and a fruitful task.

It is true that other factors should be mentioned as part of the causes for these events, like spending cuts, weak policing, racism, opportunism and technology. All those arguments have their place, but don't justify by themselves what has happened. Even the so-called "gang-culture" is not primarily relevant, as it finds its justification only as the way to fill the gap that the absence of a real family produces.

David Lammy, Tottenham's Labour MP, knows what he is talking about when he explains it. "How do you find your masculinity in the absence of role models? Through hip-hop, through gang culture, through peer groups. It is hugely problematic. Teenagers are in school until 3.30, and then MTV, Facebook, the internet, kicks in with a set of values that comes with it. It is not clear to me that parents are equipped to deal with that. There's an inability to delay gratification, alcohol, sex, drugs"<sup>16</sup>. Actually, learning when and why it is worth to delay gratification is what education is about, what we all need to learn either at home or the hard way, when it is in fact too late for it.

Implementing a 'family perspective' worldwide through the establishment of a 'family impact report' and promoting parenting courses to allow, show and encourage. These are two proposals that can help to prevent the youngsters of today and the adults of tomorrow to become actors of such sickening acts and to promote what we have called a 'sustainable family', the one "which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"<sup>17</sup>.

Ignacio Socías Piarnau.

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<sup>14</sup> About the influence of 'at-home good parenting', John Vorhaus (National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy) shows that it has "a significant positive effect on children's achievement even after controlling for (almost) all other factors shaping attainment" and that "in the primary 5-11 age range the impact caused by different levels of parental involvement is much larger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools." (2011).

<sup>15</sup> The Family Watch was founded under the inspiration of the International Federation for Family Development and is a member of it. The objective of IFFD is to provide solid support and effective aid for parents in their instructional role through Family Development Programs & Courses.

<sup>16</sup> The Telegraph, 10th August 2011.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Sustainable Family', The Family Watch (2009).