

Tackling Child Poverty – Practical Next Steps

We are delighted with the leadership this Government is providing to tackling child poverty. We are keen to constructively support overcoming this challenge as this represents Christian compassion in action.

Nature of Poverty

Today, poverty in Aotearoa, New Zealand is a human creation and is the result of inequality in accessing our nation's wealth. Sustainable solutions to poverty need to: be woven across all sectors; be supported by the majority of society while targeting those in need; identify new investments; and create opportunities for people in poverty to contribute to their own solutions.

The Strength and Limitations of Government

Government is exercising strong collective leadership in naming, measuring and tackling this issue. The Child Poverty Reduction Bill is a key historical milestone. We in the Churches have been a part of this journey especially through the Family Centre Social Policy Research Unit (FCSPRU - Anglican Social Services), the Salvation Army Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit (SPPU), and the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (NZCCSS) measuring and working against poverty. 7 of the 10 measures in the Bill were introduced to NZ through the NZ Poverty Measurement Project (Waldegrave and Stephens) and the SPPU Annual State of the Nation Reports (Roberts, Johnson and Hutson) have consistently published data on all forms of poverty and particularly child poverty.

Effective Political leadership is informed by a long term vision and an appreciation of what Government is well equipped to do, and where other parts of the community can play a key role. We acknowledge this Government is moving on addressing areas where it has strength. These include: increasing benefit levels; addressing the housing crisis; rebuilding public institutions (hospitals, schools, housing); and emphasising a caring culture in government agencies. We applaud these investments and encourage Government to push the fiscal and social envelope with wise investments and encouragement of innovative approaches to address the burgeoning social deficit that underfunding in public infrastructure and incorrect policy settings have led to.

A legacy of the social deficit is intergenerational dynamics of compounding trauma within whānau. Many in this sub-population avoid services designed to help, and government systems struggle to effectively engage with these groups. The fragmented nature of state support into sector and professional silos and the tendency for the Wellington-centric public policy machinery to develop packaged solutions, risk being ineffective for many in this population. The increasing access to, and use of mega-data on citizens represents a risk and

an opportunity. If this data is only analysed and interrogated in Wellington, then its value is limited and the risks of poor policy are high. However, if this data is shared and socialised with the people for whom it reflects their lives, the process of collaboratively making meaning of the data can only strengthen the policy process. Our experience is that creating opportunities for these people to be more directly involved in forming solutions in partnership with local community organisations and leaders, helps overcome the limitations of over-prescribed solutions. Innovation is needed to overcome these complex issues and this innovation is best grounded in the everyday reality of the people experiencing the struggles. This is not a new insight and has been a strong theme in the Christian tradition over hundreds of years. A new approach needs to take cognisance of the role and nature of whānau and communities as key environments where social and human capital is enhanced and poverty diminished.

Linked to this is the highly vulnerable position of most values-driven non-profit community and iwi organisations. This capacity is not well understood or valued by government agencies and this sector lacks industrial or political clout to bring attention to their position. They are well placed to help tackle the impacts of poverty, working across sectors and being responsive to local communities. It is critical that any comprehensive child wellbeing package focuses on restoring the capacity of this key component of New Zealand's social landscape.

Ensuring inter-generational poverty is tackled

Our collective experience of working with the poor suggests that people more recently caught in poverty are more responsive to interventions and can more easily negotiate their way out with effective support. Conversely children raised in families experiencing inter-generational poverty face bigger but not insurmountable hurdles. The systemic oppression inflicted on Māori highlights the historical roots of poverty for Māori, and the research into trauma and inequality highlight a pattern of transferring poor outcomes to future generations. To avoid the risk that solutions to poverty are skewed towards benefiting those most recently experiencing poverty it will be important we exercise our 'compassionate muscle'. The newer poor can appear more 'deserving' and are frequently more articulate and open to being helped. This prevention focus is important, however - it is a concern if sub-populations for whom the distress of poverty is the norm are pushed further back in the queue. People experiencing inter-generational poverty can display 'anti-social' behaviour and tend to be by-passed due to the challenge of engaging them. We believe this group need to be clearly in Government sights. It is this group that represents the biggest social and economic cost to the country (health, justice, education, lost productivity, reduced social capital). This is also the sub-population where a more radical shift is required, stretching our compassion and calling us to put more trust and leadership in the people seeking the change. This will move us away from the overly punitive or heavily prescribed approaches of the past.

Productivity, Wealth and Wellbeing Generation

Too frequently reducing poverty and increasing wealth are framed as separate or opposing goals. We understand economic, social and environmental objectives are intertwined. The history of the Church has highlighted that when societies ignore their shared humanity we eventually get into trouble. The growth of poverty is one expression of our current 'trouble'. Effective poverty reduction policies should grow our collective wealth and wellbeing, and conversely policies that increase our productivity should provide equitable opportunities to enhance our collective wellbeing. This will entail strategic alignment between tax, welfare and wellbeing systems. We need to realise the folly of believing improved wellbeing and happiness is only linked to the growth in consumption and wealth. Critical to achieving these objectives is our valuing our connectedness, prioritising healthy relationships, and appreciating the shared value of the 'public good'. This reinforces the role of leadership at all levels.

Leadership

This paper affirms the change of heart and mind-set that the Prime Minister is calling the country to. We support the need for leadership to be demonstrated at all levels and across sectors. It will require naming the values and modelling behaviours that are respectful of all people. A whole parliamentary approach (multi-party support) for the high-level goals will be an important goal to provide a clear and stable framework to continually develop and test solutions. This whole parliament approach can exist along-side the healthy critique and monitoring by our oppositional Westminster system. Equally, leadership opportunities need to be created at the family and community level. Solutions crafted and owned by a group are more sustainable and effective than ones parachuted in from Wellington.

Strategic Opportunity

New Zealand is strategically placed to exercise leadership on a global scale. Never before have we had so many adults to support our nation's children. The demographics are in our favour. The Tiriti o Waitangi informed approach that is taking shape provides a better opportunity for Māori world views to inform solutions. And our relatively small size and stable political system reinforce the opportunity we have to make our contribution.

Our Advice

To support reductions in child poverty we encourage:

Affirming values and behaviours - Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy states clearly the values and behaviours adult society seeks to embrace to enable us to collectively raise all children in this country. This will help flush out values or attitudes that no longer contribute to child wellbeing and we need to let go of.

Lifting Government investment in public infrastructure – raising benefit levels, up-grading schools and hospitals, changing the culture of government agencies to support people.

Addresses under investment in community initiatives and organisations – community organisations are the front-line in communities struggling from the stress of poverty. Significant increased resourcing is required to restore the capacity of the network of community / iwi organisations that work flexibly alongside whānau in communities.

Interweave initiatives across sectors – All new policy and investments demonstrate their link to tackling child poverty. The range of reviews currently in-train could intentionally highlight how their recommendations support the poverty reduction goal.

Prioritise the re-design of Government funding – the funding system needs to better support more flexible and innovative community responses that actively involve the people experiencing hardships and makes accessible collated data on citizens.

Prioritise investment to address the lack of housing supply and affordability – Housing costs are the largest contributor to poverty in NZ. They form the greatest item cost in low-income household budgets. We commend our associated paper on housing with recommendations to accelerate and deepen government's response to this problem.

Integration of models - We need common language and evaluation framework across all agencies in relation to child wellbeing. One body needs overarching responsibility for informing best practice, guiding and monitoring outcomes, and system cohesion. This will help address the current fragmentation and completing priorities. This may be a re-imagined Investing for Social Wellbeing agency.