



MEDIA RELEASE / Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers

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Child poverty a number one issue in Aotearoa New Zealand

The case made this week by the Children's Commissioner and Barnardos for making the eradication of child poverty an economic and social policy priority should be widely supported, says Rose Henderson, President of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW).

"We commend the Children's Commissioner, Dr Cindy Kiro, and Barnardos for commissioning such a well-researched report as 'A Fair Go for all Children' [released on Thursday 7 August] and for their advocacy of a better deal for our future generations, our tamariki and our mokopuna. As stated in the report this is not a case of whether we can afford to act on the 32 proposals it puts forward, but whether we can afford not to".

"The conditions in deprived neighbourhoods that can lead to a higher incidence of child physical abuse and neglect are a major concern for Social Workers. As highlighted by this report it is difficult to tell with any certainty what difference the current mix of initiatives focused on children and families is making. Evaluations of initiatives such as Social Workers in Schools are positive. Yet there are concerns that we have too much of a patchwork of services, and that there are persistent gaps in service provision. There also needs to be an acceptance that services alone cannot fix structural inequalities such as inadequate income, bad housing, unemployment and discrimination".

"Setting targets to work towards, across all the indicators of poverty - low family incomes, poor health status, poor nutrition, poor education outcomes, overcrowded housing, and stress and violence in households - is the right thing to do. As stated in the report all of these issues are inter-connected, and any progress made on one front can be undermined by lack of progress on others. To quote the report: 'In New Zealand, there is a strong case for specific goals to address the over-representation of Maori and Pacifica children among poor children. There is also a need for specific goals for groups of children who are particularly vulnerable - disabled children, children in non-English speaking migrant and refugee families, and children in foster care'".

"Working together to progressively eradicate child poverty by taking more action is about both social justice and our future prosperity and well-being as a society," says Rose Henderson.

"If we all agree that we live in a society that is committed to values of fairness and equality, then, as stated by Dr Kiro, this should be most apparent in the way we care for our children. Their fate should not be determined by factors such as whether their carers are receiving a benefit or not. As shown in this report we haven't yet put children's development on a path that will lead away from poverty and social exclusion, and one of the reasons for that is that the children of beneficiaries are being treated unequally. That message should be heard loud and clear".

"It is a fact that there will always be some children whose families depend on benefits for some of their lives. As noted in the report this may be due to illness, disability, unemployment or caring responsibilities - circumstances that any of us could experience. Families in poverty often have limited choices. A work pathway is not always open or possible or realistic. By contrast it is notable that the countries with the least anxiety about benefit dependency and that maintain low child poverty rates are those that provide generous support for both parents in work, and all families with children".

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