



## Our Children Our Choice: Priorities for Policy

### Wellington Launch

### Speech by Dr Claire Dale

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#### **Our children, our choice: The project, the people, the publication**

##### **The project:**

Began August 2013 and ends today, 9 September 2014 with the official launch, though we only have a few hardcopies. (can order it online)

While the focus tonight is on the Adequate Incomes chapter, I want to say a few words about the people involved, and the whole publication.

##### **The people:**

Like most CPAGers, including the Wellington team, the authors are volunteers. They are committed to doing all they can, using their expert knowledge and experience to describe the particular risks to children imposed by poverty, and to make recommendations to remove or at least ameliorate the risks for our children. We thank them all for their huge contributions to improving awareness of both child poverty, and of viable solutions.

##### **The publication:**

There are a total of 45 recommendations. The first two are in the introduction are general rather than sector-specific.

#### **Introductory Recommendations**

##### **1. Government to put children's rights and needs at the centre of policy**

A child-centred policy approach underpins every recommendation. Every policy, every piece of legislation, needs to be scrutinized for its impact on our children.

We don't have a chapter on social hazards chapter in this monograph, in part because if this recommendation was applied, it would address the impact of social hazards on children, and in part because CPAG has published submissions and backgrounders on these issues this year, including the debt backgrounder in February.

## **2. An interest rate cap on consumer credit.**

All of you working with low income families will know how deeply debt cuts into the physical and mental well-being of many of those families.

Debt is keeping food off the tables of poor families, and much of that unmanageable, crippling debt is created by unregulated consumer credit, by legalized usury. We can't call ourselves civilized as long as we allow fringe lenders to charge desperate families 500% interest.

While the other recommendations relate to each sector, their effects also overlap. To focus for a moment on one recommendation from each chapter:

### **Part one. Child health and poverty**

In Aotearoa, one in five children lives in severe poverty, and largely as a consequence of that, we have some of the worst child health statistics in the OECD. Much of this ill-health is preventable, and would be prevented if families were supported and could afford to take their children to a doctor when they needed care.

**Recommendation 6:** Primary health care services are free for all children from maternity through to age 18, including general practice services, prescriptions, dental and optometry care.

### **Part two. Early childhood care and education and child poverty:**

The recently introduced sanctions policy means beneficiaries can have their incomes cut in half if they don't comply with the compulsion to have their child attending an early childhood education centre. Apart from the imposed cost, this policy also implies that parenting your own child has no value. Yet there is no stipulation that all staff will be adequately trained, and the ratios of care-givers to children is constantly climbing.

**Recommendation 2:** The Ministry of Education and ERO work together to ensure provision of high quality, culturally and linguistically responsive ECCE services, with particular emphasis on quality for infants and toddlers.

### **Part three: Compulsory schooling and child poverty**

Not all disadvantaged children are poor, but all children in poverty are disadvantaged. Our decile funding system was designed to address some of that. As education and learning become more vital to functioning in our increasingly complex society, we need to continue to provide greater funding support for education in low income areas.

**Recommendation 10:** Retain the decile funding system principles, based on need and equality of outcome.

### **Part four. Housing market changes and their impact on children**

While rents are climbing, the quality of housing is variable, and much of the cheaper housing is unhealthy: uninsulated, damp, unsafe and not actually fit for purpose. Cold, damp houses impose extra heating costs on the families who live in them. They also impose health costs that impact particularly on children.

**Recommendation 4.** A housing warrant of fitness for all rental properties be put in place within five years to ensure that all rental properties meet acceptable health and living standards.

**Part five. Adequate incomes to address child poverty**

Overall, whatever else we do, we need to ensure that families that need assistance are given adequate assistance. Few families require long term state assistance, and even fewer people abuse that assistance. We have a duty to all the children in our communities to set up conditions for them to survive, and thrive. We have had name changes to assistance, and reduced access to assistance, but we need a child-centred review of the state support system.

**Recommendation 10.** Act with urgency to gain cross party support for an overhaul of all parts of the welfare and tax credit system that affect families with children.

Particular thanks to the Wellington team for your work in bring attention to this CPAG publication. What happens over the next three years is our choice. We hope, with your help, *Our children, our choice* will move people toward a deeper understanding of the spread and depth and enduring harm of child poverty in our land. And we hope that understanding will manifest itself in child-centred policy and legislation by the incoming government.

Thankyou