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Social Policy for an Inclusive New Year?

The Ministry of Social Development has just released its social policy blueprint for the next three to five years, "Opportunities for All New Zealanders" (available online at <http://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/publications/strategic-social-policy/opportunity-for-all.pdf>).

CPAG believes this catalogue of classical Third Way social policy offers a pretty crisp, if not downright chilly New Year's outlook for New Zealand's most vulnerable children.

Work and economic growth programs, along with investment in indirect 'poverty compensation' and 'social cohesion' measures in the areas of health, education, and justice, are the principal solutions envisaged in "Opportunities". These include, for example, 'enabling' workforce participation by pushing parents a bit more comprehensively at points of labour market entry and preparation/transition, as well as augmenting programmes designed to address community fallout in conspicuously poor health areas (obesity, drugs), domestic violence and community safety. Relationships between communities, between communities and the justice system (police, youth courts and programmes), and community and government also loom large, at least in principle.

But in sum, these "compulsory workforce and community inclusion" approaches means long-term, structural underinvestment in our most vulnerable children will continue unchecked.

This basic orientation sees child poverty shunted from the government's list of major issues and priority action areas.

"The government's vision for a truly inclusive society is hamstrung by a short-sighted "work cures all" approach" says CPAG spokesperson Dr. Susan St John. "The social plan has nothing to say about the social and economic costs of child poverty, nor does it build any constituency for understanding the seriousness of the problem as has been the approach in the UK. Meantime the new 'Working for Families' package will leave many of the most vulnerable children out in the cold for many New Years to come - even although as the report itself puts it, "a caring society does not tolerate the ... neglect [including deprivation] of its most vulnerable members."

Like a bad New Year's Day hangover, the personal responsibility rhetoric so beloved of Winston Peters and Jenny Shipley in the mid 90s persists in the plan: "Families/whānau are responsible for the wellbeing of their members, particularly that of dependent children. While there are and must be exceptions, it is a reasonable expectation that families will, for the most part, 'look after their own'."

Meanwhile a precious collective opportunity in the form of our relatively high fertility rate will be allowed to pass us by. "A truly strategic, joined up approach to social investment would prioritise funds where they count the most: in the first five years of a child's life. Childhood is an invaluable window of opportunity in which to address the multiple lifetime disadvantages that flow from the experience of poverty in early life," says CPAG health spokesperson Dr Nikki Turner.

CPAG champions the principle of collective responsibility for the children of Aotearoa, to be backed up by solid measures like direct income assistance to families and social housing programs.

Persistent inequalities and child poverty, in fact, lurk in the background of this report. The 2004 Social Report showed no substantial improvement in overall income inequalities in NZ, and no improvement in overall housing affordability. 'Opportunities for all New Zealanders' acknowledges, "New Zealand is still in the bottom half of the OECD for per capita income and income inequality. The risks of poverty, low living standards and household crowding are greater for children, particularly in the 29% of New Zealand families headed by a sole parent". But then fails to prioritise child poverty and housing issues.

The current high growth/ higher employment context is laudable, and is already making major differences to many poorer NZ families, which 'Social Report' figures will show in time. But it's not a plausible redress to two decades where poverty has become concentrated especially among poor, sole parent families with benefit income.

"The minister has been saying there's more to do for the poorest kids" says Dr. David Craig, co author with Susan St John of Cut Price Kids, CPAG's analysis of the Working for Families package. "If he really wants to address the most entrenched child poverty, he knows exactly where to target substantial greater support".

But sidestepping the issue again here, as it did in Working for Families, seems to confirm a scary willingness to leave around 175,000 of the poorest New Zealand kids further behind.

The plan features, instead, a preponderance of fairly thin rhetoric and flimsy 'participatory' processes aimed at making people and communities feel they're included and in "improved relationships" with each other. Government's own processes become a focus of hopes for better outcomes, including intentions to make government more efficient and "increase public confidence in the police, judiciary and other justice institutions".

However, there is very little indeed of substance on offer to address the sizeable inequalities which skew and threaten the basis of these seemingly valued relationships.

Thus we see a further opportunity is lost, pandering politically to welfare prejudice and parsimony, while offering the language of social inclusion as a sop to the security and social cohesion fears of the more affluent.

The five identified 'priority areas' in "Opportunities" make especially disappointing reading, given the bigger challenges the Social Report points to. Potential education initiatives aside, overall the measures outlined are cheap; funding them won't test anybody's budget. The health (obesity and drugs/smoking) and domestic violence priorities are the most obvious band-aids: fine in themselves, but again, a bit cold blooded in the wider inequalities context, which in fact demonstrably drives health and violence outcomes.

All this needs to be read alongside Minister of Social Development Steve Maharey's press release comments after a recent Manukau City Child Poverty function, within days of the launch of "Opportunities for all New Zealanders: "Poverty – especially child poverty – is one of the most daunting challenges faced by governments around the world. In New Zealand, we are making tremendous progress in addressing child poverty with the second-lowest unemployment rate in the OECD, paid parental leave, and our \$2.75 billion dollar investment in low and middle-income families with the Working for Families Package.

"More work needs to be done. I hope that other communities follow the lead of Manukau by coming together and partnering with government to meet one of our greatest challenges."

But, reviewing his recent research government community partnerships, Dr David Craig says "Communities and government working closely together is just a very small part of the answer. And there's a long way to go there too. Until now, such partnerships have had little bits of money here and there. Without more funding, and more money in the pockets of

poorest families, it can be a recipe for shifting responsibility down to local levels. If the minister is serious here, he won't ask communities to carry the can for what should be central government responsibilities".

If child poverty is the challenge, "Opportunities for all New Zealanders" fails to rise to it.