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### **Child poverty figures remain needlessly high say child advocates**

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) is not surprised that a Unicef report released today shows that in 2000 NZ had the fourth highest child poverty rate in the OECD behind Mexico, USA and Italy. The rate was three times that of countries leading the way on child poverty reduction.

The report emphasises that higher government spending on family and social benefits to lift family incomes is clearly associated with lower child poverty rates. CPAG agrees. "New Zealand cannot use the excuse that the figures are out of date because there has been very little improvement in the incomes of the poorest children in the past 5 years," adds CPAG family economics specialist Dr Susan St John. "In the meantime, countries like the UK have used the past 5 years to pour billions of pounds into the problem and as a result they are moving ahead rapidly. Financial assistance for all children has been a critical tool," she says.

The latest available Ministry of Social Development figures show that nearly 30% of all children live in families with less than 60% of the median income, adjusted for household size and housing costs. This line is widely agreed to be more realistic as a poverty measure in New Zealand than the 50% line used by Unicef as a measure of relative deprivation. Unicef's international child poverty rankings are however the only reliable ones for international comparisons. As per the Unicef report, CPAG calls on the government to utilise the full extent of its influence to establish credible, regular measures, targets and timelines for the elimination of child poverty among all New Zealand children.

"In the first five years of life the groundwork is laid for a child's lifetime," says CPAG health spokesperson Dr. Nikki Turner. "Our aging society can't afford to lose sight of any of its precious children. Yet despite the economic boom, many of my patients still can't regularly afford nutritious food for their children. These children frequently come from overcrowded houses and stressed environments. They suffer recurrently with preventable illnesses – such as skin infections, diarrhoea, whooping cough and other respiratory diseases. It is heartbreaking. The very poorest children are found in families on benefits. Where is the commitment to solving this at a national level?"

"In fact, current policy deliberately leaves the poorest, most marginalised children excluded from vital government aid aimed at low income children," points out CPAG social security spokesman Associate-Professor Mike O'Brien. "The much heralded Working for Families package doesn't go nearly far enough. We cannot afford to allow children's wellbeing to depend on whether or not parents are in work. Current policies recognise that children whose parents are in low-paid work need extra income; help for these families, although long overdue, is at least on its way. However, those children whose parents are not in work live in even worse circumstances; we need to be more generous with them, rather than less. Their needs require urgent attention," he says.

As the report underlines, there are tens of thousands of kiwi children living in poverty in the wake of the market reforms of the 80s and 90s; they experience multiple forms of deprivation every day, leaving them unable to achieve their full potential.

CPAG calls on New Zealanders young and old to ask politicians in this critical election year to make child poverty reduction a key priority, given that it is in their power to do it. An action plan, with specific targets and timelines and substantial resources committed, is urgently needed to give all our children an equal, fair start in life.