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A national anti-poverty plan needed for Australia

Why is this issue important?

Despite rising economic growth, surplus budgets and a booming mining sector, evidence is increasingly showing that the benefits of Australia's record prosperity are not being experienced by all. This is particularly the case for those who are most vulnerable, such as children, older people, people with disabilities, people living in rural and remote communities and Indigenous Australians.

What are the facts?

A 2005 international study of 17 OECD countries found that Australia was one of only four which has exhibited rising income inequality in the last four decades (Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the USA). Fundamental to this growing divide were common elements relating to a neo-liberal policy approach.

40 per cent of Australian households share in just 21 per cent of household income (Australian Bureau of Statistics)

The Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW also explored this growing divide. It reported that since 1995-96 "half of the income generated by economic growth has been of no benefit to the bottom four-fifths (in income terms) of the population." Furthermore this divide has grown more rapidly in the last 15 years than during the 1980's.

The growing divide is about more than just income; it is about access to affordable housing, health services, and educational and employment opportunities. It is about how a lack of opportunities and resources can create barriers to full participation in community life.

According to the recent (2006) United Nations Human Poverty Index study of 17 countries in the OECD, Australia had the third highest proportion of people living below the 50 per cent median income line poverty measure.

Overall, Australia ranked 14th out of 17 OECD countries on a combined index which included income poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and reduced life span. Australia also ranked poorly among OECD countries in terms of Government spending on education.

Yet poverty is not experienced uniformly across society. Some groups are much more vulnerable to poverty than other groups. Three of the most vulnerable are children, Indigenous Australians and people in rural and remote communities as shown in the following points:

- ***Children and Poverty***

Research has shown that children are a particularly vulnerable group in relation to the incidence of poverty. According to UNICEF, reducing child poverty is “a measure towards social cohesion, equality of opportunity, and an investment both in today’s children and tomorrow’s world”.

14.7% of Australian children live in poverty. Almost one in ten (9.5%) of working-age households with children do not have an employed parent.

Child poverty remains a persistent problem in Australia. A review of international evidence carried out by NATSEM found that Australia placed in the middle grouping of OECD countries on child poverty rates, with 14.7 per cent of Australian children in poverty. In Australia, some 9.5% of working-age households with children did not have an employed parent, one of the highest rates in the OECD. On this measure Australia ranked 24th out of 25 OECD countries.

- ***Indigenous People***

Indigenous Australians experience above average levels of poor health, disability and income poverty. Incomes among Indigenous Australians are low, particularly in rural and remote communities. Life expectancy is 18 years less than the national average, with more than one third (37 per cent) reporting a disability or a long term medical condition. Death rates for different age groups are three times higher than for non-Indigenous Australians. Furthermore “Indigenous males and females died at 8 and 11 times the rates for non-Indigenous males and females respectively from endocrine, nutritional and metabolic diseases, caused mainly by diabetes”.

- ***People in Rural and Remote Communities***

The mapping of disadvantage by postcode in Australia has highlighted that pockets of severe and entrenched social disadvantage exist across rural and remote areas as well as suburban Australia. The most disadvantaged three per cent of Australian localities have double the national rate of unemployment, disability support, psychiatric admissions, criminal convictions and imprisonments. Policy development is needed which targets these most disadvantaged of communities.

What would Anglicare Australia like to see?

To effectively address poverty in Australia, an integrated policy approach is required bringing together Federal, State and Territory Governments as well as the non government and private sectors. This would establish a clear poverty agenda, and would see policies integrated on employment, incomes, skills, social development and access to health and community services. This would take special notice of those groups of Australians currently at risk of poverty and those that will become

increasingly vulnerable for example older people dependent on pensions. The aim would be to seek to balance economic policy with a strong commitment to the right of every Australian resident to enjoy a decent standard of living. This would form a national anti-poverty plan coordinated by an Anti-poverty Commission or similar agency, whose role would be to advise the executives of each of the governments.

NOTES FOR THE MEDIA:

This release is part of a series published by Anglicare Australia calling for government action on the income divide, housing affordability, climate change, reconciliation, and State and Federal relations.

The Anglicare Australia network is made up of 43 agencies in Australia who spend \$635 million every year supporting disadvantaged Australians. 20,000 volunteers and 10,000 staff provide services to almost 500,000 people in every state and territory of Australia at every stage of life. Anglicare agencies feel strongly that there is more to supporting people than simply meeting their immediate need and seeks to speak out to provide a strong voice for Anglican care in Australia.
