

National Call For Action

New Zealand has a higher proportion of children than many other industrialised countries, with three out of eleven New Zealanders being under the age of 18 years. The ethnic diversity of the population is greatest among children: 24 percent of children are Maori (the indigenous people), 10 percent are Pacific, 7 percent are Asian, and the others are predominantly of European ethnicity (Statistics New Zealand, 2000). The Government has obligations to Maori children under the Treaty of Waitangi signed between Maori and the British Crown in 1840, as well as obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Family structures are changing. The number of children living with only one of their parents doubled between 1981 and 1996 to almost a quarter of all children (Statistics New Zealand, 1999a; Statistics New Zealand, 2000). Yet government policy - even, for example, in the way statistics are collated - has often assumed that children live in two parent nuclear families (Shirley, Koopman-Boyden, Pool, & St. John, 1997).

New Zealand has been through extensive economic and social reforms since the mid 1980s. In its 1997 report on New Zealand, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern about the effect of the reforms on children (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1997). Inequality has grown (Statistics New Zealand, 1999b). Although there is no official poverty line children are much more likely to live in relative poverty than adults, and some research indicates that about one third of children live in relative poverty (St John, Dale, M, Blaiklock, & Milne, 2001). Maori and Pacific children have been particularly affected and are worse off than other children on a wide range of indicators including health and education (Howden-Chapman & Tobias, 2000; Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 1999; Ministry of Social Policy, 2000; Statistics New Zealand, 1999a; Te Puni Kokiri, 2000) - which reflects the effects of poverty, inequality and discrimination on children.

In 1990, at the World Summit for Children, New Zealand promised it would develop a national plan of action. This did not happen. In 1997 the Committee on the Rights of the Child said the Government's "approach to the rights of the child appears to be somewhat fragmented, as there is no global policy or plan of action (Para. 9)" and recommended New Zealand have "a comprehensive policy statement with respect to the rights of the child, incorporating the principles and provisions of the Convention (Para. 22)" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1997).

However it was not until mid-2000 that Government commenced work on a children's policy. This year Government released a discussion paper entitled 'Agenda for Children'. It proposed that the goals of the Agenda are to change the way children are viewed so they are recognised as respected citizens with valuable contributions to make; ensure government policies and practices, and service funding and delivery, responds to 'children's interests, rights and needs'; and give priority to addressing child poverty, violence in children's lives, and 'maximising opportunity for all children'(Ministry of

Social Policy, 2001). The Government promised wide consultation and encouragingly sought the views of children.

Unfortunately New Zealand has had many excellent reviews of the situation of children and plans to improve policies and services which have been only partly implemented (Blaiklock, 2000). There is fear that the same may happen to the Agenda for Children.

Violence against children is common. A recent ministerial review found that care and protection services have long been seriously under-funded and troubled and there is an urgent need for a change in adult attitudes towards children (Brown, 2000). The law specifically allows physical punishment of children by parents. The government has announced increased funding for care and protection and is reviewing the law.

New Zealand ratified the CRC with three reservations. The Government would not promise to comply with CRC on support for children who are not citizens or residents (meaning for example, that hundreds of children (perhaps more) miss out on health care and education), on child labour (meaning for example, there are no minimum ages for different types of work and working conditions), and on placing children in adult prisons. In 1997 the Committee on the Rights of the Child asked the Government to withdraw these reservations (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1997). In 2001 the Government announced it is reviewing the reservations (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2001).

Progress on implementation of the CRC and the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child has been slow. The Government has signalled its intentions to do better (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2001) and to strengthen the Office of the Commissioner for Children whose role includes encouraging compliance with the CRC. The two previous Save the Children reports in this series, *Children's Rights: Reality or Rhetoric* and *Children's Rights: Equal Rights?*, illustrated ways in which New Zealand law policies and practices do not comply with the CRC, and what could be done to achieve compliance (Muscroft, 2000).

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