

NEW ZEALAND SHOULD BE LEADING THE WAY IN CHILDREN'S RIGHTS, BUT WE'RE NOT

We simply have to do better for children in New Zealand. Choosing not to, to count rodents because it is easier, is completely unacceptable.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child monitors implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, covering all children under 18. Its recommendations over the weekend suggest a genuine disbelief that in a progressive country like New Zealand, such scant regard is paid to children's rights and interests. The Committee of 18 leading experts on children's rights expressed deep concern about the enduring high prevalence of poverty among children and the effect this has on their standard of living, access to housing, health and education.

Their recommendations include taking urgent action to both define and set targets to address child poverty, and to reduce levels of violence, abuse and neglect. The recommendations indicate systemic failures are continually undermining the wellbeing of Kiwi children.

The recommendations follow 18 months of government and non-government reports culminating in a meeting in September between the Committee and a Government Delegation, led by Minister Anne Tolley. For two days the Committee considered how the Government treats New Zealand children.

Their questioning was rigorous. They asked what is being done to address the inequalities experienced by children in New Zealand and what the root causes of this discrimination are. They questioned how well policy and programmes take into account the development of the whole child, whether they advance all rights for all children.

Now the Committee has advised the Government to adopt a comprehensive policy and strategy for all children based on children's rights.

Amal S. Al- Doseri, Vice-chairperson of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, said: "...the Convention on the Rights of the Child is not about vulnerable children, it is about every child living in the state party. What we appreciate more as a committee is the consideration of each right stipulated in the convention, of each and every child, living in the state party with equal importance. This can be achieved by developing one comprehensive national strategy in light of the provisions of the Convention for all children, including vulnerable children."

Those of us in the children's sector couldn't agree more. An overarching, rights-based, plan and vision for all children is desperately needed.

Some will ask why we should listen to an international forum like this; that New Zealand doesn't have to comply with our international obligations, "because everyone else does it".

We actually have to do it because we have children with cancer and two week old babies who have nowhere to live. Working mums and dads are living with their children in cars. Daily, children miss out on being at school, learning with their peers, because their schools cannot accommodate them. Seventeen year olds are treated as adults in the justice system – many of these young people we know will have undiagnosed neurodisabilities. Those children who most need financial assistance are not covered by Working for Families.

Seventeen thousand children in the lowest income families are being pushed further into hardship by financial sanctions that reduce their family income by up to half.

I see reporting to the UN as an opportunity to draw on the wealth of expertise in the Committee to hold government to account. It's a chance to put the spotlight on issues for children; to reflect and ask ourselves whether we are satisfied that we are doing all that we can for children in this country – and receive an independent and well informed assessment of this.

There are 4.5 million of us, abundant resources and a culture of mucking in to help others out - just look at how people rallied around Te Paea marae when they in to shelter homeless families.

We should be world leaders on children's rights but we're not.

At the moment we have an unprecedented opportunity to lay a strong foundation for meeting children's rights. The child protection system is being overhauled and the Education Act 1989 reviewed. There is increased focus on being child-centred and significant levels of public concern about children in poverty may translate into political will and impetus for action.

New Zealand ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1993. It's well past time we began using it to enhance the wellbeing of all children now and into the future. Addressing the issues highlighted through the reporting process would make a real difference to the lives of thousands, if not all, children in New Zealand. And we need to make a difference now - we cannot afford to wait another 23 years.

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Andrea is a member of the Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa (ACYA) Steering Committee and was part of the non-government observer group who attended the New Zealand Government's UN hearing in Geneva. Also attending as observers were representatives from UNICEF, and Sonja Cooper Law, as well as independent Māori observers, the Children's Commissioner and the Human Rights Commission.

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