



## **CATHOLIC SOCIAL SERVICES (AUSTRALIA) <sup>1</sup>**

# **SOCIAL POLICY FORUM SUMMARY RECORD**

**CANBERRA, 3-4 APRIL 2006**

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<sup>1</sup> “Catholic Welfare Australia” was re-named “Catholic Social Services (Australia)” with effect from 27 April 2006.

# 1 Forum objectives

## *Summary of delegates' stated objectives:*

- 1 More clarity about what distinguishes Catholic Social Teaching from broader social commentary:
  - (a) By what criteria should we select key policy targets?
  - (b) How do we communicate from a values position without compromising and taking on completely the language of the government or popular debate?
- 2 Consider what differentiates or unites work of member agencies and work of peak organisation.
- 3 Contribute to the development of a CSS social policy platform that is proactive/strategic rather than reactive; and identify our key policy targets.
- 4 Set agenda for how CSSA establishes its commentary on the Commonwealth policy agenda:
  - (a) Need commentary on the value of the local connections in the community.
  - (b) Seek greater analysis/critique of Government's philosophical approach to many issues – e.g. self reliance, mutual obligation and economic rationalism.
  - (c) Identify opportunities to collect and present both anecdotal and quantitative information in support of our policy agenda.
  - (d) Link state and Commonwealth policy issues.
  - (e) Taking a role in leadership from CSSA to support the work of the broader sector.
- 5 Build some kind of coalition in the lead-up to the election.
- 6 Review the role of the media in these debates.
- 7 Better understand the context for the services that we provide.
- 8 Identify areas for joint or common research.
- 9 Map issues and events so future work can be more effectively coordinated and mutually supportive.

## 2 Discussion of draft CSS White Paper on Poverty

Simon Smith of CSSA National Office presented the major findings of the draft White Paper. The broad aims of the White Paper are to build a strong knowledge base on the key issues related to poverty in Australia, and to use the findings of the research to develop a policy platform to address social disadvantage. The White Paper is built around five themes related to poverty: the Australian labour market; education, skills and training; changes in Australian families; housing; and health.

The White Paper provided a useful starting point for discussion. Comments on the paper suggested increasing the focus on mental health, incorporating “case studies and colour to bring the figures to life”, and incorporating statements from Catholic Social Teaching.

## 3 Presentations from experts in the field

### 3.1 **Welfare-to-Work - Professor Anne Harding (NATSEM) - [www.natsem.canberra.edu.au](http://www.natsem.canberra.edu.au)**

Professor Harding's power-point presentation is available on request. She:

- Presented work based on earlier research into the impact of Welfare-to-Work policies.
- Outlined these policies' impact (principally reduced income and increased "mutual obligation" requirements on single parents and disability support pensioners).
- Noted that only minor changes had been won to soften the Government's policy after initial announcement (notably the increase from 6 to 8 in age of youngest child for a single parent's entitlement to switch from Parenting Payment Single to Newstart Allowance).
- Stressed that the new arrangements will mean sharply increased Effective Marginal Tax Rates (EMTRs) for sole parents and people with disabilities.
- Noted impact of "WorkChoices" coupled with the impact of Welfare-to-Work.

Topics discussed after Professor Harding's presentation included: "WorkChoices"; breaching; New Zealand's experience of encouraging sole parents into employment (involving intensive case management); and the challenge posed by perceptions in some quarters that welfare recipients do not want to work.

### 3.2 **Family Law - Ms Jac Taylor (NCSMC) - [www.ncsmc.org.au](http://www.ncsmc.org.au)**

Ms Taylor's power-point presentation is available on request. She:

- Summarised important recent changes to family law, including the planned Family Relationship Centres
- Identified as key concerns the risks that:
  - Focus will move from the best interests of the child to an emphasis on parents' rights (especially the rights of the non-resident parent).
  - Changes will undermine the safety of children and their family members (especially mothers).
- Outlined and commented on the changes in child support arrangements which are scheduled for implementation in three stages commencing 1 July 2006.
- Provided a bibliography of research on family law.

Topics discussed after Ms Taylor's presentation included: whether "equal time" means "equal residency"; interaction on relevant issues with "mens' groups" and with politicians; training and accreditation arrangements for Family Relationship Centres; and distributional impacts of changes to child support.

### 3.3 **Issues for the Community Sector - Mr David Thompson (Jobs Australia)**

Mr Thompson addressed:

- Broad context of community sector's work; and the new Not for Profit Roundtable.

*Employment services and "Welfare-to-Work":*

- Remaining "pool" of unemployed significantly mismatched with the employment opportunities that are on offer: with increased mental health issues, increased skills shortages, and more complex needs.
- Next three years will see a net real reduction of 16% in the value of job network contracts.
- People in welfare system must display enterprise, tenacity and resourcefulness to deal with Centrelink, Job Network etc. (this the message of ARC-funded research by University of Queensland).

- Query helpfulness of “work first – any job will do” approach, with getting a job prioritised above education and training. We need more investment in human capital: university/vocational training.
- “Welfare-to-Work” package accompanied by very little political concern.
- Community sector must consider what its performance indicators are and whether some government programs might bring “dangerous accountabilities”.

*WorkChoices and the community sector*

- Jobs Australia with QUT is presenting a video on the implications of the WorkChoices legislation on the community sector (available from QUT website).
- Government’s clear objective is a significant real reduction in minimum wages, and we are likely to see the end of long-service leave, penalty rates and other things. We may be on the way to a new U.S.-style system, with many working poor.

Topics discussed after Mr Thompson’s presentation included: the “creep of corporate charity”, tensions arising in community sector involvement with Job Network, and the need to re-assess the basis of involvement in particular Government programs as the nature of those programs alters under successive Government policy changes.

## **4 Developing a CSS Social Policy Platform**

### **4.1 Overview**

This section notes some ideas generated in small-group Forum discussion of four issues addressed in the draft White Paper on Poverty: employment, education, changes in families, and housing.

### **4.2 Employment**

- Our research needs to be informed by program knowledge (e.g. by contact with service providers).
- More resources needed for current employment assistance programs and for refining them.
- For alternative employment programs, consider youth focus (e.g. Marist Youth Camp/BoysTown) and job creation programs.

*Training*

- Need greater emphasis on skills development in employment assistance services.
- Need better incentives for businesses to train lower-skilled casuals.
- Need better matching of training opportunities to job shortages.

*Monitoring impact of “WorkChoices” and “Welfare-to-Work”*

- Need to monitor the impact of Workchoices/Welfare to Work: consider (a) a new measure of “working poor” to better track the impact of these policies; and (b) collecting case studies.

### **4.3 Education**

*School-age students*

- Early intervention is most important factor in school retention: case management should be stressed. Should draw lessons from successful models, such as:
  - BoysTown’s programs of “experiential learning” and integrated vocational training and employment experience.
  - Schools as core social centres (Victorian approach mentioned by JSS)
  - Homework help (Centacare Sydney)

- Must ensure culturally appropriate education for Indigenous students.

#### *Vocational and skills training and university education*

- Need re-investment in vocational and educational training (esp. with skills shortage).

#### *Matching training to labour market opportunities*

- Consider re-establishing old “Regional Training [or “Development”] Organisations”, which enabled matching by focusing on *local* labour market, skills shortages and training opportunities.

## **4.4 Changes in Families**

- Delegates stressed the need to continually check family-work balance, esp. for “working poor”.
- Doing more in economy means doing less in and with the family: is there a contradiction in government policies here?

#### *What assistance should be provided to families that are separating?*

- Assistance in conflict resolution and anger management skills.
- Support for children: the interests of the child should be kept at the forefront.
- Women need information on their rights – for example, property rights; places to go for assistance (especially in cases involving domestic violence).

#### *What can be done to alleviate poverty-induced pressures on family relationships?*

- Work-family balance is critical.
- Need more research on family relationship breakdown (see BoysTown research).

## **4.5 Housing**

#### *How can we contribute to debate around the negotiation of the next public housing agreement?*

- Stressing consequences for people’s dignity of decline in public housing.
- Doing analytical work comparing cost of rent assistance with investment in housing stock.

#### *Responses to homelessness*

- SAAP funding is not increasing / stock not increasing or being replaced.
- Flexible and appropriate funding: Build links between homelessness, mental health, and alcohol and drug services.
- Collaboration between agencies.

# **5 Enhancing the Social Policy Network**

## **5.1 Overview**

The aim was to focus on concrete, specific, achievable steps. The four topics considered here were:

- Our **principles**: how to ensure centrality of Catholic Social Teaching.
- Our **social policy platform**: how CSS and its members could develop this in partnership.
- Our **strategy**: what specific activities we might work on together.
- Our **shared agenda**: how we can share resources and communicate with each other better, and also how we can collaborate with those outside our network.

[Text in square brackets indicates which bodies were proposed as responsible for actioning a specific idea.]

## **5.2 Our Principles: Catholic Social Teaching as core influence**

*Key question: How can we ensure that Catholic Social Teaching (CST) remains the core influence in our services, our programs and our work in policy, research and advocacy?*

*Educational material made available to agencies on Catholic Social Teaching.*

*CST incorporated into ongoing work:*

- For all programs and services, ask “why are we doing this?” to keep CST central [members and CSSA].
- Catholic Social Teaching should be regarded as integral, as our starting point, as a means of putting theology into practice – and should be [members and CSSA]:
  - Incorporated into strategic planning processes.
  - Incorporated by each agency into a matrix linking: (1) CST principles, (2) agency core values, and (3) ethos of agency founders.
  - Referred to regularly in training, workshops, conferences, etc.
  - Applied in our everyday work.
- Consider how CST has been and is being interpreted outside Australia (e.g. Vatican, our overseas counterparts, U.S. Bishops, etc. [CSSA]).

## **5.3 Our Platform: How to develop a social policy platform in partnership with members?**

### **5.3.1 What are our strengths?**

- Ability to connect theory with practice.
- National spread of agencies and diversity of services provided.
- Ability to collect data on program delivery – using e.g. database, case studies, and focus groups with frontline staff and/or service users.
- Ability to undertake program evaluations.
- Capacity to run pilot projects.

### **5.3.2 What are our weaknesses?**

- Lack of time / resources.
- Under-development of capacity to collect data from the network – should consider (a) On which indicators do we want to collect data? (b) How to collect data? and (c) Where to store data?
- Evaluation of programs operated by network not always automatic / built into contracts.
- No central collection point exists for pilot projects going on in the network.
- Need to build links with programs network doesn't run (such as Catholic schools / hospitals).
- Need more feedback from consumers of our services.

### **5.3.3 How can we draw on research/policy expertise in our network?**

- Issue-specific forums / workshops (e.g. on employment or future directions on public housing).
- Better communication systems to share information on areas of expertise and on current research projects: see under Sections 5.4, 5.5.1 and 5.5.2 below.

### **5.3.4 What criteria should we use in developing our platform?**

- Focus is critical.
- What is our time-frame? What are our short-term, medium-term and long-term goals?
- What criteria will we use to measure our success?

## **5.4 Our Strategy: What specific activities can we undertake together?**

### **5.4.1 General scope for joint activities**

- Network-wide database of research activities, case studies and areas of particular expertise.
- Improved data collection (with due regard to privacy and intellectual property issues).
- Opportunities for joint research.
- Could ask each member agency to nominate a research liaison person.
- Use of statistics and key facts in advocacy (e.g. in “fact sheet” format).
- More use of Catholic media and Catholic parishes.

### **5.4.2 Joint activities in lead-up to next Federal election**

- Main thrust must be before commencement of formal election campaign.
- Pre-election coordination of action – such as:
  - Establish contact with members of Parliamentary Committees [CSSA].
  - Interested agencies to target local MPs (esp. in marginal seats) – for example, by making contact with local MP well before election period, using “talking points” or “fact sheets” provided by CSSA National Office.
- Consider how to express our principles in way that will resonate – e.g. reference to “fair go”?

### **5.4.3 Joint activities monitoring “Welfare-to-Work”**

- Consider longitudinal study (12-18 months) on effects of “Welfare-to-Work” policy changes.

### **5.4.4 Ideas for other specific joint activities**

- Longitudinal research on the impacts of other specific government policies.
- Joint activities on behalf of people who may slip between Commonwealth-State boundaries (e.g. those caring for aged people with disabilities).

## **5.5 Our Shared Agenda: What information and resources can we share, and who are our allies?**

### **5.5.1 What information and resources can we share?**

- Consider information repository (database) of key documents and resources – such as contacts; current research/policy projects in the network; repository of successful tenders, subject to confidentiality/privacy issues; and useful weblinks.
- Could share advice on how agency staff can collate material on own experiences e.g. to write papers for presentation at conferences.
- Possible projects we could work together on include: youth participation models; young people and the labour market; training and employment services; ethics around internal evaluation; “WorkChoices”; and mental health.

### **5.5.2 How can we communicate more effectively as a network?**

- Newsletter.
- New communication systems providing improved web-based information (e.g. chat room; E-mail trees; Bulletin Board; "intranet style" listings) – if we have the resources to maintain these.
- More in-person interaction among staff across network (e.g. inter-agency visits/secondments).

### **5.5.3 With whom can we collaborate?**

- Other religious organisations – including non-Catholic bodies and the broader Catholic community.
- Non-religious organisations sharing a similar values base, such as other welfare agencies; and state and federal peak bodies (such as ACOSS).
- Researchers, e.g. at universities and think-tanks; issue-specific organisations as appropriate; ethnic community bodies; and our overseas counterparts.

## **6 Evaluation of Forum**

This section summarises feedback received from participants at the Forum and in evaluation forms. Comments indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the extent to which the Forum met participants' objectives, and included suggestions for improvements at future forums. There was strong support for the idea of another Forum – perhaps as an annual event.

- Forum provided a helpful chance to consider broader agenda, and displayed the depth of expertise across our network.
- A valuable networking opportunity showing the importance of keeping in touch: we need not work in isolated units on research/policy/advocacy issues of common concern.
- Program worked very well: White Paper discussion enabled input and was good start towards a policy platform; and high-quality experts' presentations highlighted inter-linkages across issue areas.
- "A great and fairly painless way to get a lot of work done", "stimulating", and "invigorating".

#### *Suggestions for any future Forum:*

- Scope for more detailed discussion of particular issues, possibly through the mechanism of issue-specific policy forums (e.g. on housing or employment programs).
- Opportunity for presentations by member agencies about current research projects.
- A more practical focus on how to enhance inter-agency co-ordination of policy and research work.
- In the interests of closer intersection of policy development and service delivery, could invite program staff to future Forum for two-way exchange of ideas.

## **7 Next Steps**

National Office of Catholic Social Services Australia:

- Will produce a record of this Forum to help develop a forward agenda.
- Will be informed by Forum discussions as it develops its organisational Operational Plan, especially in identifying key policy targets for 2006/2007.
- Will consider ways of implementing ideas expressed at Forum for enhancing the social policy network.
- May convene a future social policy forum (perhaps about one year after this Forum).