

Universal Periodic Review of Australia – Joint NGO Coalition

Fact Sheet 12

Poverty

Unacceptably high levels of poverty

Suggested Question

Given that Australia is a prosperous country, why does 12 percent of the population still live in poverty?

Background

In 2008, 12 per cent of Australians were found to be living in poverty, which is a higher proportion than the OECD average.¹ The risk of poverty for Australian sole parents is extremely high, at 70 percent.² Older Australians are also particularly affected by poverty. For single people aged over 65, the income poverty rate is 50 percent – the highest of all the countries in the OECD.³

Australia's Social Inclusion Agenda aims to address social exclusion and reduce disadvantage. However, social security benefits are currently pegged at rates that leave people living in poverty and the needs of many people on extremely low incomes are not being met. Further, Australia is not using a human rights framework to underpin its Social Inclusion Agenda.

In 2009, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recommended that Australia take all necessary measures to combat poverty and social exclusion and develop a comprehensive poverty reduction and social inclusion strategy.

Proposed Recommendation

That Australia develop and implement a comprehensive national poverty reduction strategy, which recognises the need for an

adequate level of social security and adjusts Centrelink (the Commonwealth statutory authority responsible for delivering social security payments) levels accordingly.

Compulsory income management

Suggested Question

On what basis does Australia continue the compulsory quarantining of welfare payments for all “vulnerable” persons, including particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Northern Territory?

Background

In 2010, the Australian Government passed legislation expanding the operation of compulsory income quarantining to apply to all “vulnerable” welfare payment recipients across the Northern Territory. Previously, the income management had only applied to Aboriginal communities as part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (see fact sheet on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples). The measure is punitive in nature and its operation is not based on reliable or credible evidence to support its effectiveness.

In 2009, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights expressed concern that such conditionalities for the payment of welfare benefits have a negative impact on disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and groups and strongly recommended that abolition of the quarantining of welfare payments under the Northern Territory Emergency Response. Despite this recommendation by CESCR, Australia has expanded the operation of the scheme.

Proposed Recommendation

That Australia abolish compulsory income quarantining in all communities.

¹ OECD, 'Country Note: Australia', *Growing Unequal?: Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries* (2008), 1, available at

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/44/47/41525263.pdf>.

This means that 12 per cent of the population lives on less than half of the median average income.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.