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Submission on the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children

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Introduction

ChangeMakers welcomes the opportunity to be part of a New Zealand-wide discussion on how to ensure that all children growing up in Aotearoa feel like they belong, thrive, and are able to achieve.

We would like to recognise the Government's willingness to engage with New Zealanders on this issue and look forward to policy and operational changes that will help improve New Zealand's ranking of having among the worst child outcomes in the OECD¹. ChangeMakers agrees that the state, community and family all have a role in improving these outcomes and ensuring that all children in Aotearoa New Zealand are supported to achieve.

ChangeMakers has discussed the Green Paper with other refugee organisations, at community meetings, and with refugee-background youth to identify common concerns, shared priorities and 'gaps'. These discussions have raised a number of issues that need to be carefully considered in order to improve outcomes for our children. There are also issues critical to children's wellbeing – particularly children who are already vulnerable – that are not covered in the Green Paper. Our submission reflects these discussions.

Many refugee-background children fall within the category of 'vulnerable children' due to their forced migration from their homes and subsequent resettlement in Aotearoa New Zealand. While this submission explicitly references the needs of refugee-background children, we also make reference to New Zealand children in general. This includes those refugee-background children who now have a new home: Aotearoa New Zealand.

To address New Zealand's poor outcomes for children we recommend that:

1. **Children themselves need to be fully engaged in the Green Paper process.** Not only is this good practice and will result in better outcomes, but under Article 12 of the legally binding UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) children are entitled to have a say in matters affecting their social, economic, religious, cultural and political life.
2. **Children's wellbeing needs to be at the centre of policy decisions.** Children's needs should be built into policy considerations and subsequent programmes and services.

¹ Infometrics calculations from OECD (2009) 2009 OECD report, *Doing Better for Children*. See http://www.infometrics.co.nz/article/we-are-failing-our-children--and-ourselves_5526.html

As noted in a report on children's health and wellbeing in New Zealand by the Public Health Advisory Committee, 'policies should be developed around agreed whole-of-government child development outcomes rather than agency mandates.'²

This whole-of-government approach should be led by a Minister for Children, and supported by an Office for Children to carry out cross-government policy making.

- 3. Wellbeing should be a universal goal for all children, not just for 'vulnerable' children in their early childhood.** Good universal policy and careful programme design can capture the diversity of the population. The way that universal services are designed should be appropriate for all New Zealand children and not just the majority population, and these services need to prioritise prevention as much as they do protection.

A further challenge of focussing on vulnerable children is around who defines who is vulnerable and what determines vulnerability. The refugee-background youth consulted for this submission were unsure who the vulnerable children were as described in the Green Paper. They asked 'What does vulnerable mean? Who's vulnerable?'³ They were concerned that without having a clear definition of who qualified as 'vulnerable', some young people would be left out.

Youth consulted for this submission further pointed the danger of solely focusing on 'vulnerable' children. They are concerned – as we are – that this may lead to refugee-background young people having 'another level of stigma to deal with'⁴ by being overtly targeted for services on the basis of their refugee background. We know this concern has been echoed by both Māori and Pasifika communities for the same reason.

Targeting those who are already vulnerable does not prevent others from becoming vulnerable, nor does it guarantee that programmes will reach those who are vulnerable yet remain invisible (eg not yet on CYFS files, behaviour that has not been identified as high-risk and referred etc).

A universal approach to children's wellbeing also ensures that children's wellbeing from early childhood to young adulthood is equitably prioritised across the age spectrum. We don't disagree that early childhood is a critical time to 'get it right', but it is not the only time – vulnerable children come in all ages.

The Green Paper cautions that funding may have to be pulled from spending on older age children in order to spend more on young children (p7). We strongly urge that early childhood programmes should not be carried out at the expense of other young people.

One refugee-background youth pointed out that prioritising early childhood at the expense of older age children doesn't mitigate the huge possibility for risk for 12-18 year-olds: 'you're going to undo all that work you did – it should be "and", not "or"'.

² Public Health Advisory Committee (2010) The Best Start in Life: Achieving effective action on child health and wellbeing. Available at <http://www.nhc.health.govt.nz/sites/www.nhc.health.govt.nz/files/documents/publications/the-best-start-in-life-21may.pdf>

³ Refugee-background youth consulted for this submission, 19 February 2012

⁴ Refugee-background youth consulted for this submission, 2 February 2012

Another young person commented that pulling funding from older children is 'like saying you're old enough to take care of yourself'. Another noted, 'When you're a teen, you might know what you want to do, but the more people can support you, the more likely you are to actually get there'. She added, 'teens need to go to university, but they need *support* to go to university'.⁵

The young people consulted for this submission were high school and university students. They are cognisant of the challenges to achievement – particularly around drugs, alcohol, poverty, and peer pressure. They observed that it's too easy to get used to barriers to achievement such as living in an unhealthy home, lacking access to services or support, to the point where 'you adapt and think it's ok'. Instead of withdrawing support for older children, they called for more mentoring and life skills programmes, more programmes for youth to help them make successful transitions from high school, through tertiary, and towards adulthood, and especially 'more adults to support kids through high school before they quit early'.⁶

We are concerned that pulling funding from programmes for older age children will mean that very many vulnerable youth will effectively lose access to essential services or supports and/or their visibility will be further compromised. These young people will soon be working people – their needs also need to be addressed now as they enter into adulthood.

- 4. Widening the Green Paper political process so that achieving good outcomes for children becomes a cross party accord rather than being limited to the current government.** As emphasised under *Who has a role?* on page 7 of the Green Paper, we support the need for families, communities, and agencies to recognise their role in protecting children and supporting them to thrive. Cross party engagement is critical to achieving good outcomes for children, in addition to family, community and cross-agency involvement.

A cross party accord ensures that all voices in the political spectrum have an opportunity to debate and agree on the underlying principles and policies. It will also help ensure that children remain at the centre of policy and that the principles agreed to are not subject to changes in government.

The call for a cross-party approach has also been made by the Minister of Health-appointed Public Health Advisory Committee in a 2010 report. The report argues that to achieve sustained, meaningful outcomes for children's health and wellbeing, planning needs to be long-term, spanning 'year by year and government by government'. It goes on to point out that New Zealand already has 'a similar approach in place for polices and services for people aged over 65'.⁷

Shared priorities and identified solutions across political parties will help ensure a robust commitment to achieving long-term goals to improve children's wellbeing,

⁵ Refugee-background youth consulted for this submission, 2 and 19 February 2012

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Public Health Advisory Committee (2010) *The Best Start in Life: Achieving effective action on child health and wellbeing*. Available at <http://www.nhc.health.govt.nz/sites/www.nhc.health.govt.nz/files/documents/publications/the-best-start-in-life-21may.pdf>

increasing our chances of achieving good outcomes for New Zealand children, regardless of which parties are in government at a given time.

5. **The Government takes immediate steps to address the growing gap between rich and poor.** Recent OECD research indicates that inequality in New Zealand is growing with our Gini coefficient (a standard measure of income inequality) increasing by more than 10% from mid 1980s to late 2000s.⁸ Many people in refugee-background communities throughout New Zealand are living in poverty, which threatens the health and wellbeing of their children.

The significant number of New Zealanders living in poverty and the associated public health impacts of housing problems, healthcare costs, and the rising price of food has the compounding effect of putting more children at risk.

To be comprehensive in its approach to addressing the needs of vulnerable children and mitigate the likelihood of even more children being negatively impacted by poverty, we urge Government to not just focus on neglect and abuse but also examine the broader indicators leading to poor outcomes of New Zealand children and include public health services and policies in the Children's Action Plan.

6. **Allocated resources are treated as an investment rather than expenditure.** We are concerned that the underlying emphasis in the Green Paper is a focus on expenditure and where the money for new initiatives comes from.

There is a large body of evidence that indicates that money invested in early years will result in significant savings in government expenditure in the future. A report commissioned by Every Child Counts found that 'a tentative estimate of the cost of poor child outcomes in New Zealand is approximately three percent of GDP (approximately \$6 billion). That figure represents potentially avoidable expenditure on public health, welfare, remedial education, crime and justice.'⁹

While we are cognisant of the Government's desire to return New Zealand's public budget to a surplus, money spent effectively on children is building an asset that will result in significant economic and social returns.

Failure to view the allocation of resources as an investment means that it is highly unlikely that the Minister's stated aim to 'tackle complex, controversial issues and make decisions that will affect generations'¹⁰ will be achieved.

7. **A review of the level of public investment in children is carried out with more resources being allocated to ensure the safety and protection of children if there is need to do so.** While we agree with the sentiment expressed by the Prime Minister that the answer does not necessarily lie in investing more money, it appears that New Zealand is underfunding our investment in children. For example, currently New Zealand is investing approximately US\$14,339 in the first five years of a child's

⁸ OECD (2011) *Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising*. Available at: http://www.oecd.org/document/51/0,3746,en_2649_33933_49147827_1_1_1_1,00.html#COUNTRY_NOTES

⁹ Infometrics Limited (2011) *1000 days to get it right for every child: The effectiveness of public investment in New Zealand children*. Available at: <http://www.infometrics.co.nz/reports/ECCIInfometricsInvestmentinchildrenAug11.pdf>

¹⁰ Bennett, P. *The Green Paper*. Ministerial Foreword.

life according to the OECD. This is significantly less than the OECD average (US\$ 30,187) and less than Australia (US\$29753.7).¹¹

- 8. Policy and operational options are considered as part of a 'bigger integrated picture'.** For example, the Government is considering implementing changes to the welfare system that could have significant impacts on not only parents but also their children.

Government should be aware of conflicting priorities as it balances supporting families to meet children's needs with welfare reforms and changes to employment policies. These changes are putting pressure on families who are already struggling with the stresses of an austere economic environment – a group that frequently includes refugee-background families – putting children at greater risk.

There is a need to ensure that the potential positive outcomes that could flow from the implementation of the Vulnerable Children's Action Plan are not undermined by changes elsewhere.

- 9. Investment in initiatives that support people from vulnerable populations into finding meaningful work, such as specialist employment services that target people from refugee backgrounds should be increased.** Research conducted in Australia indicates that refugee-specific employment services are key to helping former refugees obtain meaningful and durable employment.¹² Reducing the number of people who are dependent on a benefit and increasing household income of refugee-background families will help decrease the number of children in these families who are living in poverty.
- 10. The capacity of staff in government agencies to work effectively with refugee-background communities is built.** 'Not every family is the same; there's no one-size-fits-all model.'¹³ Child welfare paradigms need to allow for an increasingly culturally diverse population. We strongly encourage that the Children's Action Plan includes strategies around reaching these diverse populations. This includes building relationships with agencies, service providers and refugee-background communities, and supporting 'mainstream' agencies to respond to their unique needs.

There are a number of initiatives that could be utilised to build capacity such as the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) training, which organisations such as Wellington Refugees As Survivors delivers.

- 11. Relationships are built with refugee-led organisations to ensure that there is a strong government community engagement on this and other issues that impact on refugee-background communities.** This model reflects ChangeMakers *Standards for Engagement*, which has been successfully implemented in areas such as family reunification and on the proposed Refugee Resettlement Strategy. In such cases the Department of Labour, working through four DoL funded Strengthening Refugee Voices organisations, has engaged directly with communities about these issues.

¹¹ Infometrics calculations from OECD (2009) 2009 OECD report, *Doing Better for Children* see http://www.infometrics.co.nz/article/we-are-failing-our-children--and-ourselves_5526.html

¹² Refugee Council of Australia (2010) *What Works. Employment Strategies for Refugee and Humanitarian Entrants*. Available at http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/docs/resources/reports/What_Works.pdf

¹³ Refugee-background youth consulted for this submission, 2 February 2012

We encourage the Government to recognise the strengths that already exist within refugee-background communities, and the role that communities can play in identifying their own solutions to support their children to thrive and belong.

12. **Initiatives to achieve results for vulnerable children must be underpinned by sound research.** The Green Paper has some visionary outcomes, yet much of New Zealand's child-focused service delivery will be coming from the NGO sector, where in an environment of often dramatically reduced funding, there is little available capacity for research and evaluation to inform service and funding decisions.

It is essential that sustainable funding is available so that NGOs are able to undertake research-informed practice, programme monitoring, and programme evaluation. Again, this is where the need for a cross-party agreement on outcomes is critical in allowing for long-term, evidence based monitoring and evaluation of child protection and wellbeing programmes.

13. **Success needs to be measured against clear deliverables and outcomes.** In drafting the Children's Action Plan it is imperative that Government asks: What will good outcomes look like? When will we realistically begin to see these changes in a tangible way?

The Children's Action Plan should include clearly defined, measurable outcomes. It should be realistic about when medium and long-term outcomes will be reached and provide sustained funding to meet these outcomes. A cross-party accord would strengthen the likelihood of long-term investment into programmes.

Monitoring and measurement tools should look beyond changing levels of referrals and costs of CYFS interventions and also pay close attention to broader indicators such as changes to parental income, which has known links to children's wellbeing, and less tangible indicators of success such as self-reported wellbeing.

14. **Focus on the whole family.** Policies and programmes that are included in a Children's Action Plan should apply a whole family model. Many people from refugee-background communities come from collective societies that stress a 'village approach to raising a child'.

Extended families and communities need to be well-supported to best support their children. ChangeMakers is aware that for many communities, raising a child in New Zealand presents a number of unique challenges. These challenges include:

- trying to maintain their own culture, values and beliefs in a new country
- having a mistrust of authority based on their experiences in their home country
- struggling to learn a new language and in some cases relying on their children to act as an interpreter
- struggling to communicate with their own children and grandchildren as mother tongue becomes lost.
- having limited income¹⁴

¹⁴ 63% of former refugees said they did not have enough money to meet their everyday needs in Department of Labour's *New Land, New Life: Long-Term Settlement of Refugees in New Zealand*. Available at <http://www.dol.govt.nz/publications/research/new-life-new-land/report-01.asp>

- not having durable and meaningful employment¹⁵
- poor health¹⁶

This means that to ensure that children are supported to achieve and thrive, broader issues such as poverty, lack of meaningful employment, prohibitive welfare reforms, and housing need to be addressed. As one refugee-background youth we consulted stated, 'Don't think about it as "fixing the kid", without looking at the broader problems behind what's going on. Look at the whole picture and the way support is applied.'

Although we agree wholeheartedly that outcomes must be child-focused, service provision should include support mechanisms that extend to the whole family.

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¹⁵ Ibid. 51% of former refugees reported government benefits as their main source of income.

¹⁶ Ibid. 38% of former refugees were found to have a chronic health problem or disability.