

A Pasifika Voice and Perspective on ‘The Child Poverty Reduction Bill’-

[Prof. Fele Nokise submitted to the Select Committee 16 May 2018]

This oral submission is made in support of Methodist Public Issues and is complementary to the presentation by Dr Betsan Martin.

Reference documents used in preparation for the oral submission include: the findings of the Report ‘He Ara Hou: The Pathway Forward: Getting it right for Aotearoa New Zealand’s Maori and Pasifika children (August 2011); the Working Paper (no. 15) from the Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty entitled: Better public service performance on poverty amongst Pasifika children; the Research Note: Subjective Wellbeing in New Zealand: Some Recent Evidence by the New Zealand Productivity Commission April 2016; and statistics from Department of Statistics measuring and monitoring social indicators regarding Child Poverty, all provide invaluable data and information in shaping the primary concern of the Child Poverty Reduction Bill which is to reduce poverty and enhance wellbeing of our children.

I commend the attention that has been given in the Bill to the plight of Pasifika children. In particular the integrated approach adopted in recognizing that they are a crucial part of the bigger picture not only in relation to the issue currently under scrutiny, but also in reference to the changing socio-demographic landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand now; and the inevitable impact on the political landscape in the foreseeable future.

I applaud the efforts by experts to gather the necessary data to try and identify, explain and discuss the multi-dimensional reality of Pasifika children’s situation. That ‘cultural identity’ has been highlighted not only as a formative but a relational indicator is a step in the right direction.

However, I wish to bring to the attention of the Select Committee an issue that is found wanting in all the available reports and research which if not considered and no provision provided for, could be viewed as a major flaw in how the Bill is perceived and interpreted by our Pasifika community. The issue is as much to do with methodology as it is with process.

There seems to be very little evidence that efforts were made to explore whether there exist a distinctly Pasifika understanding of what a ‘child’, of what ‘poverty’ means and represents within their uniquely cultural framework. We can add to this the need to ascertain their understanding of what constitutes ‘wellbeing’. The matter is compounded by the absence of a carefully researched understanding and a clear articulation of this by Pacific people themselves that has emerged out of their experience of living and being part of New Zealand society. This is not to deny that remnants of their cultures as understood and practiced back in their former island homes continue to provide important bearings on their lives. Nevertheless, an intriguing question arises as to the extent they have intentionally or otherwise allowed changes to infiltrate their traditional expression of cultural values and beliefs as an unavoidable consequence of being exposed to another culture and having to adapt as part of the process of survival. This concern is

all the more pertinent given the presence of 3rd and 4th generation children of original Pacific island migrants.

And here lies the irony of the dilemma facing the Pacific community. When Pacific people are subjected to research and survey to try and obtain their views on issues, what exactly is the nature of such views? What shapes such views? Whose views are they really expressing? They live in New Zealand. They are citizens of New Zealand. But they are also a distinct ethnic minority with a 'cultural' identity. This 'cultural' tag is problematic as an identification label.

Pacific islanders in New Zealand are multi-dimensional cultural persons. What is crucial is their perception of who they are as Pacific islanders living in New Zealand. But this perception is blurred to say the least the studies and reports have not taken into account the fact their views of what cultural identity means is a diluted version of what they brought with them when they first arrived. In other words, their needs of what must happen to reduce poverty for their children and for their general wellbeing as a families are essentially measured and weighed according to what is required to survive in New Zealand as New Zealanders but not necessarily as Pacific islanders.

A major setback is the lack of any established institution where their distinct cultural understanding of their values and beliefs as Pacific island New Zealanders are nurtured, leaned and cultivated. Their churches do not meet this need because the framework and theology supporting such efforts tends to reflect what they encountered in the islands rather than what is happening to their life situation in New Zealand. There is an urgent need for qualified Pacific islanders to carry out such research work to ascertain what is happening to their original cultural values and beliefs since they have been living in New Zealand. This would enable them to offer a genuine contribution to our search for ways to reduce child poverty and enhance their general wellbeing.

It is characteristic of our people to be oriented to the wellbeing of our communities and society as a whole. So wellbeing for us includes the capacity to bring our Pacific contribution to Aotearoa New Zealand.

This work is work that has not been done but needs to be done.

Prof. Feleterika Nokise.