



## **NZCCSS Closer Together Whakatata Mai BACKGROUND**

Closer Together Whakatata Mai is a project of the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (NZCCSS) aimed at building a New Zealand where the income gap between the rich and the poor is getting closer together..... not wider apart.

The project is targeted specifically at reducing poverty, by addressing income inequality in Aotearoa New Zealand. This is in keeping with the NZCCSS' mission to work for a just and compassionate society in Aotearoa New Zealand, giving priority to the poor and vulnerable members of our society.

NZCCSS members come from six denomination-based networks: the Anglican Care Network, the Baptist, Catholic, and Presbyterian social services agencies, as well as the Methodist and the Salvation Army churches.

Collectively, these six members are responsible for around 650 social service delivery sites throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. Members deliver a wide range of services that cover such areas as child and family services, services for older people, foodbank and emergency services, housing, budgeting, disability, addictions, community development and employment services ([www.justiceandcompassion.org.nz](http://www.justiceandcompassion.org.nz)).

There are around 2,500 parishes and congregations in the networks of the church denominations associated with the social services.

Closer Together Whakatata Mai aims to build a forum of public debate about the impact of inequality on Aotearoa New Zealand's economic and social success. It is hoped the debate will create a grassroots groundswell to ensure all government policies address the issue of reducing inequality, in particular income inequality.

The project is based on extensive international and New Zealand research. The international research is brought together in the book 'The Spirit Level (Wilkinson & Pickett, UK 2009) while the evidence from this country is summarised by NZCCSS in the article 'Inequality in Aotearoa NZ – the Spirit Level Index of Health and Social Problems.'

The Closer Together Whakatata Mai campaign includes a choice card, where people can actively show their commitment to reducing inequality.

## **NZCCSS Closer Together Whakatata Mai FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### **What is Closer Together Whakatata Mai?**

Closer Together Whakatata Mai is a project of the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (NZCCSS) aimed at building a New Zealand where the income gap between the rich and the poor is getting closer together..... not wider apart.

The project is targeted specifically at reducing poverty, by addressing income inequality in Aotearoa New Zealand. It aims to build a forum of public debate which will eventually encourage all politicians and decision makers to develop policies which help to reduce income inequality.

### **New Zealand is a great place. Why do we even need to look at inequality?**

It is a great place particularly if you are on a good income. But over the past 20 years, the gap between the rich and poor in Aotearoa New Zealand has increased. In fact incomes for people on the lowest fifth of incomes have decreased in that time. Over the past 20 years social problems have increased in Aotearoa New Zealand.

### **What is income inequality?**

Income inequality is the extent to which income is distributed unevenly in a country. Quite simply, it's how much the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer in New Zealand. The trouble with this is that the wider that gap gets the healthier it is for everyone in the country.

### **What difference would income equality make in New Zealand?**

Reducing inequality in New Zealand could help make these changes:

- Reduced levels of depression and other mental illnesses
- Reduce by more than a hundred the number of babies dying each year in their first year of life (currently over 300 per year)
- Fewer cases of diabetes and heart disease as a result of lower obesity levels
- Around 2000 fewer unwanted teenage pregnancies meaning fewer abortions, and fewer kids and young mothers struggling with social problems
- 4,000 fewer people in prison through halving the current number of around 8,000
- Fewer teenage suicides
- Around 1500 fewer 15 year olds with low reading and maths literacy

### **Isn't poverty the problem and not income inequality? It doesn't matter how rich the rich are if there are no people in poverty.**

Poverty is a real problem in New Zealand. We believe that reducing income inequality is the best way to address poverty, especially the extremes of poverty within New Zealand.

### **Seems to me this is a case of tall poppy syndrome, dragging down the rich and successful?**

NZCCSS is not anti-wealthy but our mission is to work for a just and compassionate society in Aotearoa New Zealand. We are concerned about the poor and vulnerable members of our society, who too often cannot speak for themselves. However the research shows that New Zealand will be a healthier, safer, more educated and connected place if we can reduce the income gap. This is not about lowering the bar for a few; it is about raising the bar for all.

**I'm alright. Why should I care about equality?**

This is not about you or I, it's about you AND I. We want to build a fairer New Zealand that is good for everyone, not just for the rich. The relationships between inequalities; poor health and social problems are too strong to be attributable to chance.

**There are lots of types of inequality: why are you talking about income inequality?**

There are all sorts of social and economic inequalities that cause problems for our society. By focusing on income inequality we note the strong links this has to other forms of inequality (wealth, inequality, social inequalities). Income inequality has been measured consistently internationally and plays a key role in dealing with other forms of social and economic inequality.

**I've never even heard of the Index of Health and Social Problems. What is it?**

UK researchers Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson devised a new and innovative method that used 10 key indicators, mapped against income inequality to establish the rankings for the 23 countries included in their research. New Zealand is one of those countries. Their work is published in the book, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (Penguin, UK, 2009).

**I've heard that the research in the Spirit Level is wrong?**

There are many other sources of evidence both in New Zealand and from overseas that support the analysis presented by Prof. Pickett & Wilkinson. The special contribution of their work is to bring together a synthesis of our own and other's research (over 300 studies), all of which has been subject to high standards of academic scrutiny ("peer review"). Their work is very robust and can be relied on.

**How does New Zealand fare compared to other countries?**

Overall New Zealand currently ranks 17<sup>th</sup> out of 21 countries. The sad news is...

Key Indicator	NZ Ranking	No. of Countries
Imprisonment	20	23
Teenage births	19	21
Obesity	13	21
Infant mortality	21	22
Mental illness	9	12
Life expectancy	16	24
Social mobility	No ranking	

The good news is that we ranked well in these areas...

Key Indicator	NZ ranking	No of countries
Trust	6	23
Maths and literacy	5	21
Homicide	6	23

**Why should I listen to overseas academics about the New Zealand situation?**

New Zealand is one of 23 countries included in the Index of Health & Social Problems. All the countries included belong to the world's richest and most developed countries. Only in the past decade has it been possible to collect statistics across all these countries that can be properly compared. New Zealand is constantly concerned about how we rate in comparison with similar countries, as this tells us a lot about how well we are using the very high level of wealth our country has achieved. All these countries have



reached a point where increasing the total wealth of a country through economic growth does not make people in those countries any happier. Poorer countries and developing economies definitely benefit from increasing overall economic growth so are not included. When wealthy countries are compared, it becomes clear that how the wealth is shared out is more important than economic growth.

**I want a healthier, safer New Zealand. What can I do to support Closer Together Whakatata Mai?**

Sign up to Closer Together Whakatata Mai choice. And sign up your friends and whanau. It costs nothing and can be done online at [www.closetogether.org.nz](http://www.closetogether.org.nz), twitter or facebook. You can encourage your MP to sign the Closer Together Political Pledge.

We are hoping to gather 5000 signatures as part of the Closer Together Whakatata Mai campaign. We encourage everyone to talk about reducing inequality. Write letters to the local newspaper; participate in talk backs or blogs. Let's make it an election issue.

**Churches are rich, why don't they just give money to the poor?**

The churches do give of millions of dollars each year in donations and in support services to our communities and are always striving to do more. The churches and their social services have many thousands of people who volunteer their time and skills to support people and communities. But this alone is not enough – we all need to be part of the solution. Reducing income inequality is not just about money. Building a stronger fairer community requires many people to work together over a long period of time to change legislation, change attitudes and change expectations. The NZCCSS is committed to this work.

**What difference can I make?**

Everyone can contribute to making New Zealand a better, fairer place. Sign up to Closer Together, Whakatata Mai.