

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
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To the Committee Secretary,

Please find below our response to a question on notice received following our appearance at the 10 November 2023 hearing of the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee inquiry into the *Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee Bill 2023*.

Question

Regarding membership of the Committee: Why is it important to involve people with direct experience of disadvantage who are also actively involved in advocacy and peer support work, rather than someone with past experiences but lacks current connections to communities? Please provide examples where, in your opinion, government consultation with people with direct experiences on matters to do with economic exclusion was insufficient.

Response

Consultation with people who are poor cannot replace the expertise of people who are poor.

The individual knowledge that comes from personal experience and the collective contribution generated through meaningful consultation must be synthesised with advocacy, policy and research skills that are commonly viewed as exclusive to people who work in academia, think tanks or social services organisations. It is for this reason that the Antipoverty Centre has engaged in capacity building and supported a growing number of people in poverty to participate fully in parliamentary, academic and related processes.



The novel approach we have established in our work combines these elements with peer representation and peer-led engagement that draws on the unique expertise and skillset of advocates who themselves have direct, contemporary experience of economic exclusion, such as ourselves and groups we named in our submission to this inquiry.

During the 10 November hearing there was discussion of consultations that informed the interim committee's report. It was a surprise to hear that structured consultations had taken place, as to our knowledge no advocacy organisations led by people with direct experience of poverty were contacted or invited to participate in any way.

As we mentioned in our opening statement, the Antipoverty Centre was established to fill the gap in understanding and practice. We have been developing a model of engagement specifically to address this problem. It is fundamental that people involved in designing consultations have shared experiences with people participating in the consultation. This work cannot be adequately or competently replicated by organisations that do not operate under the leadership of people with direct, contemporary experience of economic exclusion.

We have shown that a peer-led approach to consultation and engagement produces qualitatively different outcomes to work conducted by people who do not understand the lives of those they are seeking input from. Many contributors to our work, including those who participated in the recent project we completed for the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, have echoed this in their feedback to us. What we hear is that people have more trust in processes led by their peers, feel that the method, themes and questions are more relevant to their lives, are presented in a more sensitive and accessible way than in comparable processes, and that this combination of factors has enabled them to identify and feel confident in their own depth of expertise.

It is this qualitative difference that we believe must be incorporated in the committee's practices to ensure its work can be peer-led so that recommendations ring true and better reflect the priorities of people who are economically excluded.

While we believe it is necessary for the committee to have a reference group and broader consultation, this is not an adequate substitute for the inclusion of full committee members with direct, contemporary experience of poverty. Without this the committee's work can have no credibility. It is not sufficient to include members in the committee whose role is to share their personal experiences and nor is it sufficient to conduct consultation through a reference group or co-design process.

Every person directly affected by welfare and related policies has valuable expertise to contribute, however there is an important distinction to be made between people who have direct experience more broadly and the specific recommendations we make in relation to the composition of



this committee. Those who don't have experience in research, policy and advocacy work are disadvantaged in spaces dominated by people who are accustomed to these environments. This inhibits full participation, regardless of whether a person is appointed as a full committee member.

We need to establish a new norm for how policymaking work is done in relation to poverty. In Anglicare Australia's submission to this inquiry they have pointed to an example of a sophisticated policymaking approach that incorporates the leadership of health consumers who are also advocates embedded in relevant committees and decision making processes, and we echo their call to follow a similar approach with the exclusion committee.

We note this question also requested that we provide examples of past government consultation with people directly affected by economic exclusion that was insufficient, however there has never been adequate consultation and thus there are too many to list.

Recommendation

We urge the government to meaningfully incorporate the expertise of a variety of advocates with direct, contemporary experience of poverty as full members of the exclusion committee as well as seeking broader input via peer-led consultation. The government should look to how comparable bodies and processes have been developed in relation to other policy areas, such as consumer health advocacy.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide additional information regarding our contributions to this inquiry. If there are any further questions or information required please contact us via team@antipovertycentre.org.

Regards,

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Antipoverty Centre