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Author	藤田, 智子(Fujita, Tomoko)
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# Strengthening Australian Families and Communities: Case Studies of Projects Funded Under the Howard Government Family Policy

Tomoko Fujita

## **Abstract**

The former Australian Government led by John Howard attached extraordinary importance to “family” not only as a place for care but also as a bearer of social welfare. Since 1997, the Howard Government had adopted tax policies based on the male-breadwinner model which supported “the family”, the “Australian traditional” nuclear family, as the ideal. On the other hand, the government promoted a further movement toward welfare reform driven by neo-liberalism which started in the 1980s, and as a means to achieve that reform, the government launched a four-year policy called the “Stronger Families and Communities Strategy” (the Strategy), a policy for other types of “families”, in 2000 and renewed it in 2004. Through case studies of the projects funded by the renewed Strategy, mainly based on interview analysis, this paper examines limits and negative consequences of the expanding neo-liberal welfare reform under the Howard Government and explores possibilities of overcoming these limits and outcomes by examining the efforts of community groups and other organizations at the grassroots level to turn these severe situations into their opportunities.

The interviews were conducted with organizations carrying out community-based projects mainly in the Melbourne area, funded by the renewed Strategy. These projects were “Communities for Children-Broadmeadows”, “Eastern Melbourne Parenting and Relationship Skills for Multicultural Families”, and “Mothers, Fathers and Newborns: Preventing Distress and Promoting Confidence Program”. Project target regions included six areas centered around Broadmeadows in the City of Hume; Monash, Whitehorse and other six areas in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne; and Yarra, Casey and other areas in the State of Victoria. Two of these regions in particular were explained as disadvantaged, or culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse.

As the actual means for promoting a neo-liberal social welfare system, the Strategy aimed to strengthen families and communities to achieve self-reliance. While revealing the difficulty of accomplishing that goal because of the severe funding situation, an analysis of the interviews clarifies the flexibility of these organizations in moderating and avoiding negative results of stigmatization and marginalization of welfare recipients caused by the

Howard Government family policies and in using the projects as an occasion to appeal to the government on behalf of community needs. Although the Rudd's Labor Party ousted the Howard Government in the general election of 2007, it is still significant to look closely at the former government's family policy since the Labor Party won the election emphasizing social policies as well as industrial relations using "working families," and the Rudd's family policy seems to share some features with the Strategy.

## I. Introduction

The Liberal-National Coalition government led by John Howard was defeated by Kevin Rudd's Labor Party in the general election of November 2007. Lasting 11 years, the Howard Government had been the second longest administration in Australian history, one noted for claiming "strong families" as a social welfare system. Constructed on "the family", the "Australian traditional" nuclear family based on sexual division of labor, the Australian welfare state transformed its welfare model through a "neo-liberal route". It also shifted toward gender equality. However, the Howard Government took a regressive, male-breadwinner approach toward family policies along with promoting further neo-liberal welfare reform, resulting in strong support for "the family" in contrast to other "families" which were expected to be self-reliant.

The Australian welfare state has experienced a significant transformation from a unique model founded primarily on wage control to a neo-liberal welfare reform emphasizing the obligation of welfare recipients. Castles has labeled the traditional Australian model as a "wage-earners' welfare state", based on its wage regulation through the institution of compulsory arbitration, complemented by policy measures involving "high levels of tariff protection" and immigration restrictions (Castles 1985: 102-9, Castles 1996: 92-3). Achieving high wages, job security, and full employment, Australia had guaranteed "the needs of most families" by this "wage-setting process which gave heed to social policy objectives" and offered "residual" social policies, namely means-tested and targeted income support benefits to those in need until the 1970s (Castles 1996: 93).<sup>1</sup> The Whitlam Government, launched in 1972, extraordinarily undertook social democratic universal measures and committed to "large scale government spending in the areas of health, housing, urban development and education". However, situations after the mid-1970s, such as the end of full employment due to a recession, "the decline in economic growth, and the related increase in levels of poverty", mounted critical arguments against rising welfare expenditure and the coming Fraser Government returned to "a selectivist/residual approach to welfare" (Mendes 2003: 23). Liberalization of the Australian economy through the 1980s along with "changes in [social and legal] mores, family structures and patterns of female labour force participation" guided the substantial changes to the traditional welfare system and resulted in refurbishment of the "wage earners' welfare state" (Castles 1996: 103-10, Esping-Andersen 1999: 89). Taking what Esping-Andersen (1996) called "the neo-liberal

route”, the Labor government, launched in 1983, carried out economic and social reforms founded on “economic rationalism”, which resulted in the decline of real wages and wage inequality. The “active society model”, and a principle of “reciprocal obligation” which emphasized the responsibility of welfare recipients, led to further neo-liberal reform after 1996 under the Howard Government based on the principle of “mutual obligation” and “social coalition”.

Since the 1990s, feminist scholars such as Bettina Cass and Sheila Shaver, who had criticized the sexual division of labor and the male-breadwinner family model as pillars shaping the traditional Australian social security system and depicted the Australian model as the “male wage earners’ welfare state”, have recognized the improvements in gender equality during the previous few decades. Shaver (1993) argued that there was a shift in the system from a principle of gender difference toward gender equality, an erosion of the male-breadwinner family model and that “the system has come increasingly...to offer them [men and women] the same structure of choices between work, welfare and family dependency” since the 1970s (Shaver 1993: 3).<sup>2</sup> Mitchell (1998) argued that this shift initiated by feminist action resulted in a hybrid institutional structure “where policy assumptions based on the ‘norm’ of a male breadwinner family co-exist[ed] with policies which recognise gender equality and individual social right” (Mitchell 1998: 20).

Despite the current of gender equality in the social security system since the 1970s, family policies under the Howard Government had regressed to a male breadwinner model which led to the adoption of different policies according to family types. Cass and Brennan (2003) denounced policies under the Howard Government including the Family Tax Benefit<sup>3</sup> for “a substantial and regressive” move away from the principle of gender equity and for being “based on (apparently) contrasting family types” (Cass and Brennan 2003: 37-57). Hill (2006) similarly claimed that the male-breadwinner model lying “at the centre of Howard’s approach to work and family policy” meant that “some family types [were] supported more than others”. On the other hand, Mitchell (1997) took account of the neo-liberal route of welfare state transformation and noted the continuation of contractionary approaches of the Howard Government toward social policy along with “indication of a return to the male-breadwinner approach to family policy” (Mitchell 1997: 2). Unlike these studies mainly focused on tax/transfer systems, Fujita (2008) conducted a discourse analysis of a Howard Government initiative for families and communities (which took a prevention and early intervention approach) called the “Stronger Families and Communities Strategy” and argued that while the government had adopted tax policies based on the male-breadwinner model which supported “the family” as the ideal, it had been also promoting a neo-liberal family policy asking other “families” to be self-reliant.

Launched by the Howard Government in 2000 and renewed in 2004 for five years, the “Stronger Families and Communities Strategy” (the Strategy) was an initiative which was explained as “a major shift from more traditional social policy” (Emerson 2000: 66). Adopting principles of prevention and early intervention to encourage the cost-effectiveness

of service provision along with capacity building and social partnerships, the Strategy was a part of its neo-liberal welfare reform, strengthening “families” to be self-reliant. Through case studies of projects funded by the renewed Strategy in the Melbourne area, this paper examines limits and negative consequences of the expanding neo-liberal welfare reform especially targeting “families” under the Howard Government and explores possibilities of overcoming these limits and outcomes by examining the efforts of community groups and other organizations at the grassroots level to turn these severe situations into their opportunities.

Data for the discussion in this paper consist of government documents and websites relating to the Strategy (including papers by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), the federal family research institution), Prime Minister’s speeches, documents and websites relating to the specific projects including brochures and a strategic plan by the project managing organization, as well as interviews mainly conducted on managers in charge of these projects. For these semi-structured interviews, I chose a project in the Melbourne area from each initiative under the renewed Strategy other than Choice and Flexibility in Child Care initiative, namely “Communities for Children-Broadmeadows” for Communities for Children initiative, “Eastern Melbourne Parenting and Relationship Skills for Multicultural Families” for Local Answers initiative, and “Mothers, Fathers and Newborns: Preventing Distress and Promoting Confidence Program” for Early Childhood-Invest to Grow initiative. The interviews were held in May and June, 2007 for about one to two and a half hours each, asking about the details of the projects, including the actual procedures, targeted subjects, main aims and intended outcomes of the projects along with difficulties in running them, such as “when and how did this project begin”? and “who are the targeted families and people”?; about the targeted communities including specific issues that these communities had; about the Strategy including opinions about amount of funds as well as its approach; and about family values within the projects, such as “how does this project conceptualize ‘family’”?<sup>4</sup>

An analysis of these interviews reveals the difficulty of even accomplishing the “official” Strategy goal of strengthening families and communities for self-reliance because of funding problems, while illustrating the flexibility of these organizations and their ability to moderate and even avoid the negative results of stigmatization and marginalization of welfare recipients caused by the Howard Government family policies and to use the projects as an occasion to appeal to the government on behalf of community needs. These findings would have significant policy implication for the Rudd Government since it took charge of the Commonwealth Government by emphasizing social policies and amendment of industrial relations legislation with “working families” as a key component of its campaign while its principal election policies were sharing some features with the Strategy including an early childhood scheme.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the next section, I review the Howard Government welfare reform and briefly explain the background and the process of the Strategy

enactment along with its principles to clarify its main goal and the negative results that come from social policies under the Howard Government. I also explicate initiatives of the renewed Strategy and projects funded by each initiative which I chose for interviews. In section III, I analyze the interview results and reveal the problems and the negative consequence of the Strategy while clarifying the possibilities of these projects.

## **II. Melbourne Area Projects Funded by the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy**

### **1. The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy**

Under the Howard Government, the phrase “stronger families and communities” had been emphasized on numerous occasions and had been a basis of the government’s neo-liberal social policy and its claim to families as a social welfare system. As mentioned above, the Australian welfare reform driven by neo-liberalism had begun in the 1980s and the Howard Government further promoted that reform based on the principles of “social coalition” or partnerships between social institutions (including families, communities, businesses, and governments), social capital, and “mutual obligation.” The government sought a smaller government, featuring a shift away from top-down and “blanket approaches to all” toward “local answers to local problems,” and from governmental welfare responsibility toward sharing welfare responsibility with other social institutions (Stone and Hughes 2000: 21). In that process, Howard had also linked the words “families” and “communities” and promoted “stronger families and communities” in his speeches. At the same time, he had asserted that families are “the best welfare support system yet devised” (Howard 1995)<sup>5</sup> and expected families to be self-reliant (Bateman 1996 and *The Australian*, May 14, 1997). In 1998, the Department of Social Security merged with the services for families and children provided by the Department of Health and Family Services and was renamed as the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS, Shaver 2001: 286).<sup>6</sup> The neo-liberal government was indeed trying to manage social welfare based on self-reliance of families and communities along with the partnerships of social institutions.

In April 2000, Howard launched the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000-2004. It took “a prevention and early intervention approach to helping families and communities build resilience and a capacity to deal with problems before they develop” and especially targeted families and communities at risk, helping them to be stronger and to “have less need for crisis services and welfare support.” (Emerson 2000: 66-8) A\$240 million, later revised to A\$225 million, was allocated to a wide range of initiatives. These included family-focused initiatives such as Early Intervention (Early Intervention, and Parenting and Family Relationship Support), Stronger Families Fund, Early Childhood Initiative (National Early Childhood Agenda Early Childhood Initiative), the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, Greater Flexibility and Choice of Childcare, and National Early

Childhood Agenda Initiatives. These also included community-focused initiatives like Potential Leaders in Local Communities, Local Solutions to Local Problems, National Skills Development for Volunteers Program, Can Do Community, and Volunteer Small Equipment Grants.<sup>7</sup> Under the Strategy, community groups and other organizations would receive grants for their community-based project plans and the government would support families and communities indirectly through the selected projects. The priority areas were originally early childhood and the needs of families with young children; strengthening marriage and relationships; and balancing work and family, but shifted to early intervention and prevention and welfare reform (Rogers et al. 2008: 3).

Principles adopted by the Strategy indicated that the Strategy was intended to strengthen families and communities to achieve “self-reliance,” and the Strategy was another move toward welfare reform, the actual means for promoting a neo-liberal social welfare system. The Strategy had a set of eight principles, including working together in a partnership for sustainability, capacity building,<sup>8</sup> encouragement of prevention and early intervention, and development of the local solutions to local problems. The government believed that capacity building along with social partnerships would allow families and communities to handle their own problems or intervene early before they become entrenched, which makes families and communities stronger and self-reliant (Howard and Newman 2000: 4, Stone 2000:11). The idea was that “strong communities will assist weak families...and strong families will assist weak communities” and in that way, both of them will become self-reliant (Stone 2000:11).<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, FaCS and AIFS asserted the significance of the prevention and early intervention approach as its cost-efficiency (Fish 2003, Gauntlett et. 2000: 92, Tomison 2003), also indicating the intention of the government cutting the welfare cost. Fish (2003) noted that “a focus on early intervention and prevention, rather than on treatment after a problem has developed, is both socially and economically more effective in the long term” since “an investment in the health and development of young children...produce[s] economic benefits, particularly associated with a decreased need for services.”<sup>10</sup>

As a result of the emphasis on self-reliance, however, the Strategy was likely to stigmatize families receiving income support and marginalize them as “partial citizens.” The Howard Government identified “self-reliance” in opposition to “dependency,” leading to this labeling of welfare recipients as unsuitable citizens. Parker (2004) argued that there was an underlying “dependency” or “welfare dependency” in the Howard Government’s “mutual obligation,” the basic principle of the Howard Government’s social policies. In this “mutual obligation,” people were required to give something back to their communities by paid or volunteer work in return for the support they received. All welfare recipients were assumed to be dependent upon income support and not self-reliant. Therefore, they were not participating enough in the society and became “less than full citizens, implying an inferior moral status” (Parker 2004: 29-30). The government was to reform the welfare system which had generated welfare dependency, and to encourage them to be ideal citizens.

The Strategy was renewed in April 2004 and the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2004-2009 was launched with an eventual budget of A\$490 million.<sup>11</sup> In the speech launching the Strategy, Howard explained the Strategy as fusion of “the twin concepts of the social coalition and early intervention” (Howard 2004). The government also stated that it still “continues the principles of the original Stronger Families and Communities Strategy” (FaCS 2005b: 3), a claim which suggests that the renewed Strategy continues to promote the self-reliance of families. In particular, the initiative called Local Answers seemed to take over initiatives of the former Strategy since AIFS stated that “the Local Answers initiative...will continue to provide funding for projects that help families and communities help themselves...Building on the success of the first four years of the Strategy, the Local Answers initiative provides funding for small-scale projects developed by local communities in response to local issues” (Stronger Families Learning Exchange 2004: 4).

Named after a key phrase of the Howard Government neo-liberal welfare reform, the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy was the actual means for promoting a neo-liberal social welfare system with its main goal of strengthening families and communities to achieve “self-reliance”. The Government’s emphasis on “self-reliance”, identified in opposition to “welfare dependency”, led to the stigmatization and marginalization of welfare recipients as unsuitable, “partial citizens”. Through the following interview analysis, I examine whether this Strategy goal has been accomplished, especially under the severe funding situation, and explore the possibilities engendered by the struggle of the project managing organizations to avoid these negative consequences of the Howard Government neo-liberal social policies.

## **2. Melbourne Area Projects Funded by the Renewed Strategy**

The renewed Strategy consists of four initiatives: Communities for Children (CFC); Local Answers; Early Childhood-Invest to Grow; and Choice and Flexibility in Child Care. The first three initiatives are mainly for community-based projects and early childhood programs while the fourth initiative supports services relating to child care: in home care, long day care centers, the Quality Assurance System to Family Day Care and Outside School Hours Care services. As noted above, the interviews below were mainly conducted with the organizations receiving support from one of the first three renewed Strategy initiatives. For each project, I first provide an overview of the initiative based on the government documents and websites and then review the project, focusing on its aims, targeted subject, and main features of the community.

### **2.1 Communities for Children-Broadmeadows<sup>12</sup>**

Communities for Children is an initiative targeting children of five and under along with

their families. Recognizing the importance of “bottom-up” development and service delivery by communities, it provides communities having “high levels of economic and social disadvantage” with “the opportunity to identify and resolve their own issues” (FaCS 2006). It attaches importance to “the partnerships and governance arrangements that involve all levels of government, the community sector, non-government organizations, [and] business” and is breaking “new ground in policy development and service delivery” focusing on sustainability and capacity building (FaCS 2006). The CFC grants are provided to projects carried out by non-government organizations (NGOs) selected as Facilitating Partners. Their role in the project is to manage and oversee grants in a specific site while the actual activities are delivered by other local service providers. Therefore, much of the funding is allocated to those activities.

Receiving A\$3.5 million for 2005-2009, “Communities for Children-Broadmeadows” is a project targeting six areas within the City of Hume, which is about 20 km from Melbourne CBD: Broadmeadows, Dallas, Jacana, Coolaroo, Meadow Heights, and Campbellfield. These areas were the site of an initiative by the Victoria State Government called Best Start which had emphasized the prevention and early intervention approach before Communities for Children started. Similar to the Best Start initiative, Communities for Children-Broadmeadows was led by Broadmeadows Uniting Care in conjunction with Dianella Community Health Services and Orana Family Services as the Facilitating Partners. Broadmeadows Uniting Care is a local church-based organization which has provided such services as financial counseling, family support, and emergency relief for around 30 years. The project was launched with 24 activities, carried out by 28 local agencies for the first 18 months, along with 5 strategies developed based on consultations held with parents, children and early childhood professionals to ascertain the needs of the area.

Ms. T., the project manager, explained that the main aim of the project was “to make things better for children and their families”. According to the Community Strategic Plan prepared by the Facilitating Partners, the ideal outcome of the project is “optimizing the health, development, learning and well being of children participating in the community”. In this project, the targeted children are all under the age of six and not yet in school, and the project involves their families as well.

The site of the project is an economically disadvantaged, multicultural, multilingual, and multi-religious community. The City of Hume has more than 130 ethnic groups and new arrivals have come from countries including Iraq, Lebanon, and the Philippines. As a result, the population growth is remarkable and a variety of languages are used. The unemployment rate of the site is around 15%. The percentages of welfare recipients and sole parent families are relatively high comparing to the other areas within the City of Hume (Broadmeadows Uniting Care 2007: 21).<sup>13</sup>

Selected from the 24 activities of the CFC project, I interviewed the coordinator of “the Hume playgroup strengthening project”.<sup>14</sup> The coordinator, Ms. B., described the aims of this project (activity) as “to promote child development through play, link families with

universal services, improve parenting styles..., to strengthen parent-child relationships, and encourage family functioning”, as well as to link families in high needs and those who are isolated to the community.

## **2.2 Eastern Melbourne Parenting and Relationship Skills for Multicultural Families<sup>15</sup>**

The second initiative, Local Answers, funds “small-scale, time limited projects” to strengthen disadvantaged communities. Encouraging these communities “to develop effective, practical solutions specific to individual communities and their needs” by using their own knowledge and experience, the initiative supports projects that “build effective parenting and relationship skills; build opportunities and skills for economic self reliance in families and communities; strengthen support to families and communities by delivering better services and addressing unmet needs through the building of partnerships between local services; assist young parents in particular to further their education or access to training and other services...; and assist members of the community to get involved in community life” (FaCS 2005a: 5, Stronger Families Learning Exchange 2004: 4-5, Australian Government 2007). The aims of the initiative include to “strengthen communities to give children a better start in life; build community capacity; work together in partnerships; encourage a preventative and early intervention approach; ...and make the investment count.” (Stronger Families Learning Exchange 2004: 5)

The “Eastern Melbourne Parenting and Relationship Skills for Multicultural Families” run by the Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne), received A\$299,775 over 34 months as an approved project of round two funding. This project targeted refugees and newly arrived immigrants from Sudan, Liberia, China, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other culturally diverse people. Ms. C., as a family worker in this project, clarified the aim of this project as to support parents, allowing them to parent effectively within two cultures, and to establish routines with their children as well as to connect their families to the broader community.

...[T]he aim of this program is to help them [parents]...work out what they want from their teenager[s], what sort of behavior they want..., [to help them] work out what traditions that they want to pass out to their teenagers and children..., and to also get them to understand that they [their children] wanna fit in with their peers as well, so there needs to be compromises.

The project included recreational and therapeutic programs for children and young people as well as parenting programs for parents raising children within two cultures to make them understand the impact of immigration on their children.

### **2.3 Mothers, Fathers and Newborns: Preventing Distress and Promoting Confidence Program<sup>16</sup>**

The Early Childhood-Invest to Grow initiative provides funding “for national early childhood programs and resources” to “ensure that Australia continues to be one of the world leaders in best practice in the early childhood development area”. It supports prevention and early intervention programs as well as development of “innovative models for prevention and early intervention during early years” (Stronger Families Learning Exchange 2004: 4). It also supports “development of tools and resource materials for use by families, professionals and communities supporting families and young children” (FaCS 2007a).

“Mothers, Fathers and Newborns: Preventing Distress and Promoting Confidence Program” was a research program run by the Key Centre for Women’s Health in Society (KCWHS) at the University of Melbourne which received a grant of A\$481,000. This was primarily a research program which targets families with first babies in four Local Government Areas in Victoria including Yarra, Casey, Shepparton, and Bairnsdale and aiming “to assist new parents to negotiate their changing roles and relationships” (KCWHS 2007). It intended “to reduce parental distress...as well as unsettled infant behavior, such as inconsolable crying and irregular sleep patterns” and to help them adjust to their new roles as parents (FaCS 2007b). The existence of criteria for choosing examinees, including English proficiency, meant that the targeted subject was basically English speaking, non-immigrant families.<sup>17</sup>

According to the project manager, Ms. M., the main idea of this program was testing a one-day on-site seminar which was developed by the founding researcher of this program in the process of previous research. The central question of this program was “whether this one-day intervention...is effective and acceptable for use in standard care, so as part of standard health care that’s been provided in Victoria and across Australia”. According to Ms. R., a chief investigator, there were two sessions in the intervention and selected families enrolled were frequently required to participate and discuss issues, mainly with their partners. The first session focused on infant behavior and parents learned about infant temper, personalities and sleeping patterns, as well as ways of making them sleep. The second session focused on the relationship between parents. They had learned language to talk about their feelings, about losses and gains through the process of having babies, and about the development of relationships.

### **III. The Limits and the Potentials of the Strategy**

#### **1. Struggling to Strengthen Families and Communities**

Interviews clarified that organizations managing the projects were endorsing the prevention

and early intervention approach and its adoption by the Commonwealth Government, trying to define family as broad and diverse, and striving to link these diverse families at risk to the communities through their personal and institutional networks. These results indicate the basic acceptance of the approach by those organizations and their enormous struggle to achieve the Strategy goal of strengthening families and communities for their self-reliance.

Interviewees appreciating the prevention and early intervention approach upheld the Commonwealth Government's adoption of the approach and basically accepted the emphasis on cost-efficiency or cost-effectiveness, while being cautious about excessive pursuit of it. Dr. R., the chief investigator of the research program by KCWHS, said that the approach is theoretically cost-effective and that their program was trying to prove it. Ms. M. from the same program stated that this approach might be cost-effective to the government but it needed to be "done in the context of entire understand of the situation of covering all the basis" and emphasized the importance of balancing prevention and treatment.<sup>18</sup> While endorsing this approach, Ms. T. from the CFC project commented that it is probably cost-efficient but people should not "go too far with that kind of thinking." She stated that "the more help that you give families and little children, the more likely those children are to be...well and happy and...able to function well" and that the cost-effectiveness should not be the only reason for the adoption of this approach.

Meanwhile, "family" was described as very broad and diverse, not being partial to "the family", the "Australian traditional" nuclear family, indicating that these projects aimed to support diverse families at risk. Replying to the question on family values, Ms. T., the manager of the CFC project, commented that the project or agencies managing the project should not advance particular values especially within this kind of multicultural community.

...I don't think we want to impose any particular values or concepts on families...because it's a very diverse cultural community...There [are] people from many countries. We also have Indigenous Australians here...I think it's invasive...to promote particular values upon anybody. In a way, it's our role...to work out what values that community wanted to promote..., rather than the reverse, rather than...for us to tell them what their values should be. So they should tell us what the values are, as long as they know..., then we should promote...those understandings that...the community here has upon family values.

Ms. B., the activity coordinator of the CFC project also made mention of promoting acceptance of many kinds of families through the activities. Ms. C. from the Migrant Information Centre even questioned defining "family" itself. Ms. C. explained that the definition of families in this project is very broad and even stated that "I don't know whether it's particularly useful to" define it and "in terms of working with the families..., it's really doesn't matter". Even the research program by KCWHS which seemed to target English speaking, non-immigrant families resisted "bad mother" rhetoric drawn from emphasis on motherhood based on the sexual division of labor. Ms. M., the project manager, commented:

Previously a lot of...studies and what seem to be a lot of rhetoric...points out the mother and says [that] if you distressed, it's because you're not coping well, and if your baby cries, it's because you're a "bad mother." And I think that there is an awful lot of "bad mother" rhetoric out there and it's probably not fair...and it's definitely damaging...Whether it's the truth or not is not the point, it's how one copes with it...In general, we're social health unit. We're interested in...the social environment in which health and healthfulness...is determined and is affective...And so...we're looking at that whole dynamic.

While adopting broad definition of "families," interviewees emphasized the significance of linking these diverse families to the communities along with the autonomy of these families to participate in the community, and were tackling these tasks using their local partnerships and personal networks. In the context of family and parenting, Ms. T., from the CFC project, emphasized the importance of autonomous participation and management of the community, and the significance of engaging families through this project. Replying to a question about "the community leaders", she answered that they should be people from targeted groups, such as mothers and fathers in the playgroups.

Community leaders in this instance..., if we're talking about families with small children, it often means mothers, sometimes fathers..., who take responsibility for some things and who gradually might take more and more responsibility for different things, so playgroups is a good example of that...They might join playgroups so their children has someone to play, but then they might start to take...more and more responsibility, and perhaps eventually...they might decide...[if] I should go to study and perhaps I should get job in this area. So it's a kind of developmental process. And...this strategy is to develop more and more leaders...who can be active in this community...Because we are talking about families with small children, so really you should be looking at community leaders...from the target group.

As the CFC project itself is managed based on the networks of local agencies, each activity of the project is also set up based on the local partnerships and networks including the personal relationships of the activity coordinators. For instance, the activity coordinator, Ms. B., explained her significant role of linking families to the available universal services in the community and described the importance of knowing about the people in those community services. "Eastern Melbourne Parenting and Relationship Skills for Multicultural Families" project also attached importance to the development of networks between local agencies to connect families and community life. Ms. C. stated that her work with families especially focuses "on parenting and supporting families strengthening [their] relationships" and "involves specialist supports including specialist and financial counseling, child protection and housing support". She stated that "it was vital to have a network with other local agencies

and they have “regular network meetings to discuss within the broader community”. She also mentioned that things like club activities were essential for children to help them settling into “the Australian way of life” and were a way to connect children and their families to the community. The targeted families learn how to develop better ways of parenting, repairing and strengthening their relationships within two cultures, as well as developing networks with other families through those activities. For them, participating in the project activities including those she particularly mentioned has the meaning of participation in the communities and adaptation to the Australian society. For the community or the government, it means the inclusion of those families.

The attitude of participating organizations and their members toward linking diverse families to communities and encouraging their autonomous participation in the community illustrates their enormous efforts to strengthen families and communities for self-reliance. The Strategy is built on these efforts. Struggles of these organizations using their networks in the community itself strengthen the community which “will assist the weak families,” to borrow the Howard Government’s words. Basic acceptance of the Strategy approach of these organizations and their endeavor to strengthen families and communities for their self-reliance, however, would not simply provide assurance for the success of the Strategy. Moreover, these organizations are not just unquestioningly and passively accepting the Howard Government neo-liberal welfare policies, as the concern of some interviewees for pursuing cost-efficiency indicates.

## **2. Issues of the Limited Grants and Sustainability**

Interviewees pointed out some difficulties running the projects, including two issues related to the social coalition and community development. Ms. T. from the CFC project mentioned of the difficulties of “getting [these] three levels of government to talk to each other sensibly” and “the community consultation and community involvement to happen...in a way that...allows to develop its [community’s] own plans”. Although these problems are important since social coalition and community development were the principles of the Strategy, another significant issue which affected the goal of the Strategy was the inadequacy of funding.

Although all agencies are making efforts to use the community network as mentioned above, they do so not only because they were required to do so by the provisions of the Strategy but also because they are under the pressure of necessity from the limited grants. Ms. T. from the CFC project commented that funding “is not nearly enough” and mentioned a swimming pool demanded by parents in the consultation which could not be provided because the funding was not sufficient for its construction along with the other activities. In addition, the funding could only be used for services, not for the construction of facilities.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Ms. B. from the playgroup project pointed out a lack of venues especially needed for starting new playgroups, as well as resources for educational equipment and toys

useful for the playgroup activities.

The project-based nature of the funding is another issue which could result in difficulties in achieving sustainability and maintaining the quality of the services. The significance of sustainability was emphasized by the government. However, Ms. C. from the Migrant Information Centre pointed out the difficulty of achieving it and mentioned that the outsourcing of activities might decrease the quality of the services provided to the families in the communities.

When you are working with families...on issues such as parenting or...relationships..., once that funding finishes, that's it, so this agency isn't...able to work with families...and they can't help themselves which is what the sustainability is about...The groups that we run, we would have to outsource probably to different agencies...There are issues with that because...a lot of agencies don't have a lot of knowledge around...culture and...what is like to be a refugee, come to a new country, and all that sort of things...So even if we outsource to different agencies, they wouldn't be able to pick up and work with this many kids as we do, because of this program and funding that I have. So in terms of being sustainable, it is really not...The network...is something that will be sustainable. It will continue after the program finished, and...parenting groups will probably not continue...There needs to be further funding. I think the funding needs to be, needs to be recognition that working with clients is...long-term work...It's much more complex than we first thought...This project needs to be seen as a long-time project.

Ms. T. from the CFC project also stated that the Facilitating Partners need to find ways of promoting sustainability one by one, "little by little, not as a whole", meaning they need to find other grants after this funding ended. The research program by the KCWHS also needed to obtain other grants to do additional research and for instance, the investigators obtained funding for another project to develop a website based on this research with funding provide by a different source.

The community issues mentioned by interviewees include poverty, housing, intergenerational, interreligious and intercultural conflicts, as well as the risks of having newborn babies. Ms. T. from the CFC project stated that poverty and its effects were the main issues in the community.

I suppose that the...poverty is probably the main issue, but then it's how that poverty gets played out and becomes an issue for children...and...it's those questions of...how you measure the impact of poverty on kids...I suppose that the parents who are poor are quite stressed and so they have to worry about...how to pay the rent..., so that they might not play with their children as much as they might have if they didn't have these worries...Maybe their temper is not so good with their children because they're worried...So how does that play out for children as they get older?

At the same time, she mentioned psychological research on difference in the development of language skills and world-views between children from rich and poor families. She also implicitly acknowledged religious diversity as another issue in this community.

In Australia, one of the debates at the moment is about family values, but...there has also been all debates around terrorism...Once again, in Australia, where we have a very large Muslim community, in Broadmeadows where we have a large Muslim community, being inclusive...and not nasty...to people from that particular place is really important because there is a lot of that happening.

Ms. B., the activity coordinator of the same project described the challenges that this community was facing as transnational parenting, a multicultural community, indigenous families, families who have complicated needs including mental and substance abuse issues, families in public housing, and unemployment. Ms. C. from the Migrant Information Centre mentioned the difficulty of intercultural parenting and the intergenerational conflicts between parents and their children in the targeted community. She stated that “[o]ften they [kids] are caught between their families and their peer groups...For any teenager, it’s difficult and for parents of teenagers, it’s difficult, but it’s even more difficult here [in this multicultural community]”.

To truly achieve sustainability, activities and projects focusing on families and their funding need to be placed within a long-term framework since the community problems mentioned by interviewees were social, political and historical issues and complexly intertwined with related issues. For instance, problems of intergenerational, intercultural, and interreligious conflicts are closely related to the development of multicultural society in Australia caused by mass immigration and acceptance of refugees during and after WWII. Housing problems were mentioned by Ms. T., as a poverty issue while mentioned as an immigration issue by Ms. C., in the interviews. Therefore, they would not be solved in a short period of time and it is significant to see them within a long-term framework. Furthermore, as interviewees indicated, these problems as well as services targeting families and children affect individual development and their well being. Thus, those projects need sustainable funding which takes a long-term approach.

The result of the limited and project-based nature of grants was the difficulty of even strengthening families to be self-reliant, the main aim of the Strategy. The Howard Government shifted from a “more traditional social policy” and turned to community development policy to utilize networks and service delivery as its neo-liberal strategy. The government believed that the Strategy was especially cost-effective; however, the issue of the inadequate grants limited what organizations could do in their projects as well as the sustainability of projects. Consequently, even the self-reliance of families could not be realized. Despite the endeavor of the organizations managing projects to strengthen families and communities for their self-reliance, neo-liberal approach toward social policies under the

Howard Government itself ironically posed an impediment for realizing the main goal of the Strategy.

### 3. The Potentials of the Strategy

As mentioned in section II, the Howard Government's emphasis on "self-reliance" led to the stigmatization of welfare recipients and marginalization of them as "partial citizens." However, the organizations managing the projects showed their ability to moderate and avoid these problems and even to use the Strategy as an opportunity to appeal to the government.

By understanding the notion of "self-reliance" with rich meaning and taking an issue of cultural diversity as a strength of the community, interviewees from the CFC project avoided the stigmatization of targeted families. Ms. T. commented on the government's attempts to link and strengthen families and communities so that they become self-reliant:

Yes..., I think that's quite true, but you have to be careful because...underneath that question, there is an assumption that they are not already self-reliant and independent...and I think that assumption can be in many cases untrue...But also...we [want] families to be connected as well as self-reliant...I think in today's world where... there are more pressures on families in Australia, it's very difficult for mothers and small children to stay home...It's very hard financially to do that, so...many people get part-time work and so on so they'll have less time, I think, ...to do that community leaders things perhaps...So...Yes..., I think that's true but there're limits...to that question.

The Strategy, which targets disadvantaged communities and their families to encourage them to be self-reliant and stronger, is likely to assume them not being independent or strong. Although the Howard Government seemed to define the notion of "self-reliance" (in the economic sense) in opposition to "dependency", Ms. T. understood it as including a richer meaning beyond economic independence. She also identified issues of cultural diversity as the community strength.

There is a...research that says that...every community has its strength and every community has its richness and vibrancy, and that's certainly true here...It is a multicultural community with people from lots of different backgrounds and lots of different experiences and they all get along and speak with one another and so on.

While identifying cultural diversity as a community issue, Ms. B. from the same project also stated that:

[w]e have...multicultural and diverse social base in this community. So you could be

speaking to a family who, for example, [are] living in one suburb that's very rich in the City of Hume and...at a same playgroup, you could speak to another family whose house...[is in] housing commission and unemployed and has complicated needs...So it's a good mix and it's good that everybody learns from each other and learns acceptance.

These interview results indicate that interviewees seem to see possibilities in the process of overcoming cultural differences and reaching the mutual acceptance. In these ways, the project manager and activity coordinator avoided labeling families in the targeted community as "dependent" and fragile and causing the stigmatization of them.

The association of self-reliance with affluent additionally has possibilities of reaching beyond the limitations of the Howard Government's "citizen" definition and including diverse families as Australian citizens. Ms T's definition of self-reliance carefully avoided assuming disadvantaged families as dependent, implying a prospect for overcoming marginalization of them as "partial citizens" and respecting them as "full citizens" to work together in the community.

Furthermore, the Strategy has the potential to give advantages to community-based organizations in approaching the government to incorporate their views or to advance the needs in the community. Even though individuals interviewed for this research ostensibly sympathized with the intentions of the government, they were not agencies who were just reproducing these intentions, but rather they have been actually trying to utilize the Strategy system for their own purposes. For example, Ms. T. described the whole system of the strategy as an "education process". "Each local...community [approaches] to the government and they [government administrators] are educating us...to what they need too," therefore, the strategy is "a partnership in that sense". The intervention of government to make families self-reliant is a means of "social engineering" (Shaver 2001). However, understanding the system in this way seems to be a strategy of the participating parties to use "the shift from traditional social policy" to appeal to the government on behalf of families and their needs.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Through the case studies of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, this paper has examined the limits and the negative consequences of the expanding neo-liberal welfare reform especially targeting "families" under the Howard Government, namely stigmatization and marginalization of welfare recipients, and has explored possibilities of overcoming these limits and outcomes by examining the efforts of community groups and other organizations at the grassroots level to turn these severe situations into opportunities. As a means of promoting the neo-liberal welfare reform under the Howard Government, the Strategy aimed to strengthen families and communities in order to achieve self-reliance. While revealing the difficulty of accomplishing that goal because of the severe funding situation,

this paper has illustrated the “shrewdness” of the participating organizations in using the projects as an occasion to appeal to the government and their flexibility in moderating and avoiding the stigmatization and marginalization of policy subjects.

Although a sweeping change in the current of neo-liberal approach toward the Australian social policies would not be expected, the current Rudd Administration may produce a slight, gradual shift. Nonetheless, the bipartisan approach to family policies focusing on early intervention and the flexibility of participating parties in obtaining federal funding suggests that these organizations will resiliently adjust to the new government and provide a degree of continuity. The new government is expected to take family initiatives from a long-term perspective and to improve the nature of funding.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this context, Castles and Mitchell characterized Australia as taking unique approach toward social security, essentially social democratic and egalitarian, and constructing the forth welfare world (Castles and Mitchell 1993, Esping-Andersen 1999: 89) in spite of Esping-Andersen’s welfare regime classification into three worlds and identification of Australia as a liberal welfare regime. Series of welfare measures to complement the “wage-earners’ welfare state,” including child endowment, widows’ pension as well as unemployment, sickness and pharmaceutical benefits, were introduced since the wartime period of 1941.

<sup>2</sup> Bacchi insisted that “[w]hat Shaver calls ‘equality’...is more appropriately described as *equal treatment* and is premised on the desire to increase self-sufficiency.” (Bacchi 1999: 136)

<sup>3</sup> Introduced in 2000, Family Tax Benefit (FTB) Part A and B are assistance payments for raising children. Feminist scholars especially criticized FTB Part B, an additional payment for “single income families” with at least one youngest dependent child under 16 (18 if he/she is a student), as a policy based on the male-breadwinner model.

<sup>4</sup> These interviews were conducted as a part of a project called “Social Reconstruction of ‘the Australian Family Stories’ - Historical Change of the “Family” Discourse and its Politics in Australia”, supported by a Sir Neil Currie Memorial Australian Studies Award of the Australia-Japan Foundation.

<sup>5</sup> Similar statements were made for a number of times. For instance, in 2000, Howard asserted in his speech launching the Strategy that the family is “the best social welfare system that mankind has ever devised.” (Howard 2000)

<sup>6</sup> In January 2006, FaCS merged with the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC) and became the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA). Under the Rudd Government, it was renamed as the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSI). For the sake of consistency and understandability, this paper uses “the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS).” In the first re-organisation in 1998, the federal family research institution, the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) fell under FaCS, then moved to the portfolio of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) under the Rudd Government in 2007.

<sup>7</sup> National Early Childhood Agenda Early Childhood Initiative and Volunteer Small Equipment Grants were announced in May 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Here, sustainability means services, activities, and the network developed through the projects being maintained even after the grants end. Capacity building means developing “human capital (levels of skills, knowledge and health status), social capital (networks, norms and trust), institutional capital (leadership, capacity to plan and implement projects), and economic capital (local services, infrastructure and resources)” as well as natural and cultural capital (Funnell et al. 2004: 1).

<sup>9</sup> The booklet explaining the Strategy 2000-2004 said that “the traditional institutions of family and community, not governments, provide the most effective social support. It is strong family relationships that are the vital building blocks of strong communities. In turn, it is only strong communities that have the capacity to truly engage families in economic and community life. For instance, strong family and community networks nurture children, care for those in need, and help people take up opportunities and find work. It’s about neighbours and families helping each other in times of crisis. It also involves the commitment of local volunteers who provide much-needed community services and who work on community projects. It’s about community leaders pulling their communities together in times of change.” (Howard and Newman 2000: 2) In explaining the idea of strengthening families and communities and making them self-reliant, Stone has pointed to the same passage.

<sup>10</sup> For more detail on the developmental process of the Strategy 2000-2004, refer to Fujita (2008).

<sup>11</sup> The final report of evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000-2004 was published in 2008 (Rogers et al. 2008). The operating period for the renewed Strategy was first set as 2008 at the launch but then extended to 2009.

<sup>12</sup> An interview with the project manager of the CFC project, Ms. T., was conducted in the beginning of June 2007 at her office in the Broadmeadows Uniting Care. Through her introduction, I contacted Ms. B., the coordinator of an activity from the project called “Hume playgroup strengthening project” at the end of June 2007.

<sup>13</sup> The area receives “close to half of the total number of Centrelink payments (Parent Payment

Partnered and Disability Support Pensions) for the City of Hume.” (Broadmeadows Uniting Care 2007: 21)

<sup>14</sup> A playgroup project was first funded by the state government’s Best Start initiative and after the funding ended, federal funding was provided. Playgroups have been run by parents at community centers or Neighbourhood houses for more than twenty years before the state and the federal government started to support them. The Neighbourhood houses are places run by local organizations which “provide social, educational and recreational activities for their communities” (ANHLC 2002). In these areas, playgroups are usually held once a week for two hours, mainly at the Neighbourhood houses.

<sup>15</sup> An interview with a family worker of this project, Ms. C., was conducted in the beginning of June 2007 at Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne). A family worker is a social worker who works with children and their families to provide services for them including therapeutic programs.

<sup>16</sup> An interview with the program manager of this research program, Ms. M., was conducted in early May 2007 at her office in the Key Centre for Women’s Health in Society. With her support, an interview with Dr. R., one of the chief investigators of this program, was conducted at the end of June 2007 at her office.

<sup>17</sup> The criteria for the selection of families include the baby being healthy and the woman’s first child, and the parents are partnered and speak sufficient English to understand consent agreements and to be able to take part in the seminar.

<sup>18</sup> Along with the importance of the prevention and early intervention approach, Ms. M. mentioned the significance of providing prevention for all the population. She said that “the issue with prevention is [that] you need to provide it to the entire population,” not only to disadvantaged families.

<sup>19</sup> Ms. T. commented relating to a governmental funding for early intervention that “if you don’t have little more extra money to provide for administration..., then it’s very ad hoc and doesn’t run well.”

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