



Hill Notes February 2012 *For CSMG Participants Only*

Protecting Poor and Vulnerable People...In Budget Choices

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, over 15 percent of Americans live in poverty--46 million people. This is the fourth consecutive increase in poverty and the largest number in over 50 years. Almost 25% of all children live below the poverty line. *In the words of Cardinal-delegate Timothy Dolan, we are called "to focus public attention and priority on the scandal of so much poverty and so many without work in our society."*

In *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, we are reminded that "Economic decisions and institutions should be assessed according to whether they protect or undermine the dignity of the human person. Social and economic policies should foster the creation of jobs for all who can work with decent working conditions and just wages" (no.76).

Why are the bishops concerned about the federal budget?

The federal budget is a moral document that reflects our priorities as a society. In *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the bishops of the United States said, "economic decisions and institutions should be assessed according to whether they protect or undermine the dignity of the human person" (#76).

In advocating a just budget that fulfills the demands of justice and moral obligations to future generations while protecting the lives and dignity of poor and vulnerable people, the bishops have said:

1. Every budget decision should be assessed by whether it protects or threatens **human life and dignity**.
2. A central moral measure of any budget proposal is how it affects **"the least of these"** (Matthew 25). The needs of those who are hungry and homeless, without work or in poverty should come first.
3. Government and other institutions have a **shared responsibility** to promote the common good of all, especially ordinary workers and families who struggle to live in dignity in difficult economic times.

What is the Circle of Protection? Why do we support it?

The unprecedented initiative to form a "Circle of Protection" brings together a diverse group of Christian leaders from across the political spectrum to protect the lives and dignity of "the least of these" in budget choices.

The nation needs to substantially reduce future deficits, but not at the expense of hungry and poor people. Programs can be made more efficient, but they must not be cut.

The Church looks at every budget proposal from the bottom up--how it treats the poorest and most vulnerable in our nation and around the world. They do not have powerful lobbies, but they have the most compelling claim on our consciences and common resources.

Advocacy for the Jobless and Immigrant Children

Over the past year, Congress has operated from deadline to deadline, frequently consumed by partisan gridlock. Congress has a **February 29** deadline to extend unemployment insurance and pass a series of tax provisions. Essential programs that have a clear preferential option for poor and vulnerable people and are currently threatened include:

Unemployment

- The best way to overcome poverty and build a just economy is decent work at decent wages for all those who can work.
- There are currently 4 job seekers for every 1 opening. Clearly, the economy has failed to create sufficient work.
- Government has an obligation to provide assistance to jobless workers and their families as they search for work.
- Unemployment insurance (UI) benefits must be extended until the economy fully recovers, and must not include limitations and barriers that would harm the most vulnerable jobless and their families.

Child Tax Credit

- The Child Tax Credit (CTC) is pro-work, pro-family and is one of the most effective antipoverty programs of the federal government. In 2009, 2.3 million people, including 1.3 million children, were kept out of poverty by the child tax credit--Which the USCCB has long supported.
- The CTC is aimed at children in working families to ensure they can live in dignity. Current law requires a social security number for the child, but a parent can apply using a taxpayer identification number (TIN).
- Proposals to require a social security number for the taxpayer would leave out of the most vulnerable groups--children of working poor immigrant families. To exclude them from the CTC is unjust. Children of immigrant workers, many of whom are American citizens, did not cause the deficit--they should not be forced to pay for it.

Additionally, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (“food stamps”) is often at risk of being cut. As debate on the FY 2013 budget progresses, it is important to focus on protecting SNAP.

- Nutritional assistance is a vital piece of the safety net because it can respond to economic downturns rapidly.
- The food stamp program is both efficient and targeted, so waste and fraud are very low.
- It is wrong to target nutrition assistance to poor children to pay for deficit reduction.

We can just cut spending and reduce the deficit, right?

The other side of deficit reduction is what the government brings in. The bishops have called for “shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary military and other spending, and addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs fairly.”

Revenue is low because millions of people are out of work or underemployed. Putting people back to work in decent jobs must be a primary goal of any deficit reduction plan. As the Circle of Protection says, “restoring growth is a powerful way to reduce deficits.”

Another possible source of revenue is re-targeted agriculture spending. As the reauthorization of the Farm Bill proceeds, there will likely be attempts to reduce food stamp benefits. Instead of reducing food stamps, Congress should consider redirecting agriculture subsidies away from wealthy and industrial farmers to smaller farmers in need and to hungry people.

For more information:

Tom Mulloy, Policy Advisor, Domestic Social Development, 202-541-3445, tmulloy@usccb.org

Anthony Granado, Policy Advisor, Domestic Social Development, 202-541-3189, agranado@usccb.org