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Asking the Next Big Question on Social Inclusion

Many community groups lamented the lack of support for the unemployed and single parents in the Federal Budget, highlighting the need to improve Australia's performance in social inclusion.

But what do we really mean by social inclusion, and how do we best explore the possibilities and tensions related to social inclusion in the current context of the global financial crisis?

Professor Gail Whiteford, the first person appointed as Pro Vice Chancellor (Social Inclusion) at Macquarie University, will reflect on these issues at a breakfast forum to be held tomorrow*. As Prof Whiteford notes, "whilst the Federal Government has to be applauded for putting social inclusion on the national agenda, we need to be mindful of the ways in which social inclusion is implemented through policy and practice. She stresses that, "we have to allow for distinct social and cultural identities to thrive and for people to contribute in their own way". In short the challenge for Australia is to create spaces and opportunities in which people of all capabilities can fully engage.

She will be joined by Elaine Henry, CEO, The Smith Family who will comment on the role of NGO's in facilitating social inclusion. Ms Henry asserts that NGOs have a critical role as the connectors at a community level, as the enablers of relationships and as the coordinators of skills across all sectors of the community. 'Social inclusion is about NGOs building networks to advance others, sharing research & best practice, and collaborating rather than duplicating'.

In summary, Professor Whiteford's Next Big Question is: **How do we build an inclusive Australian society which respects a diversity of identities?** Elaine Henry will ask: **What is the role of NGOs in building social inclusion?**

This forum is part of Australia21's two year project – which asks Australians what they consider to be the next big question. To view the questions already asked by an Australian Nobel Laureate, and a former Australian of the Year go to <http://www.australia21.org.au/bigquestion.htm>. Australia 21 is an independent, non-profit organisation that builds networks of outstanding people to develop a sustainable and flourishing future for Australia.

* **Venue:** Wesley Uniting Church, National Crt, ACT **Date:** 19 May 09 **Time:** 8.00am.

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