

# Social inclusion: an agenda for citizen empowerment

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**A**t one level the quest for social inclusion seems the most straight-forward of public policy goals. Across the political spectrum virtually everyone espouses the need to provide equal opportunities for all Australians to meet their potential. It is widely accepted that barriers to social and economic advancement impose costs not just on those who lose out but on society as a whole. An inadequate supply of skilled

workers and high levels of welfare dependence (for instance) impose significant costs. Both workforce participation and workplace productivity are lowered.

The adverse impact is not just economic. People who feel politically disengaged fuel the growing lack of trust in the institutions of democratic governance. Those who are marginalised are less likely to subscribe to the values of civil respect, tolerance and orderliness which underpin legal authority and ethical conduct. Society fragments.

At one level Australia's 'excluded' are all too obvious. We can define the probabilities of being disadvantaged by income, race, ethnicity, age, disability or geographic location. Many of the overlapping symptoms of exclusion are apparent: inadequate education, unstable employment, poor health, unaffordable accommodation, risky lifestyle behaviours and higher rates of criminality and incarceration. Other characteristics are less evident but equally significant. The recent study of Sydney's social issues undertaken by Dr Debbie Haski-Leventhal for the Centre for Social Impact and United Way, *2009 Common Cause Report*, indicated the complex matrix of urban disadvantage. The 'excluded', she exhibited, are less likely to have access to the expanding world of social media (on the one hand) and less likely to volunteer their time to help others (on the other). Deprivation has many faces.

There is plenty of evidence on which to base policy. We can now define the incidence of social and economic disadvantage by postcode. We understand in a textured and granular way the diverse but related symptoms of poverty. Yet, in spite of good political intentions, it sometimes seems as if the creation of a socially inclusive society is as distant as ever. This much we know for certain: that the demands for the services of community based organisations, supported by philanthropic donation and social investment, are as great as ever. Today

many 'charities' are finding themselves squeezed between falling income and rising need.

Something is profoundly wrong. We need to recognise what the nature of the problem is and, having done so, assess how it might be overcome – to imagine a possible future in which the role of governments, public services, non-profit organisations and philanthropists is transformed. It is a world in which social inclusion is achieved less by traditional forms of state intervention than by community empowerment and individual control.

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A central problem with understanding the nature of social inclusion is the tendency to define it by reference to 'excluded' groups, the particularities of their disadvantaged condition and how the obstacles they face might be overcome. Most commonly the response to exclusion comes in the form of individual support payments (such as unemployment benefits, rent assistance or aged pensions) and programs (such as increased access to job training, social housing or home care).

There is nothing wrong with the fact that governments provide such transfer programs and services to those in need. However there is a great deal to fault with the manner in which those activities are undertaken.

Two aspects of implementation stand out. Firstly, that the governments who fund the programs, and the public services or non-profit organisations who deliver them, too often treat those they help as beneficiaries. Perceived as dependents, it is scarcely surprising that those who receive support see themselves as dependent. The very act of public provision reinforces the unequal relationship between government bureaucracy and welfare recipient, in which the individual learns helplessness and passivity. The system creates stigma and perpetuates isolation.

This is worsened by the fact that many public service agencies, importing language from the private sector, now treat those they serve as 'customers'. The explicit goal is worthy enough: to promote the importance of service quality. The unintended

consequence is to undermine the particular nature of government services – that they deliver rights and entitlements but, in consequence, carry responsibilities and obligations. The reciprocity of the relationship is fatally undermined. It is scarcely surprising that conditionality – such as the need to look for work, seek rented accommodation or care for one's children – is regarded by those in need as a form of penance or punishment.

Second, the complex plethora of financial support provided by the three tiers of Australian government – including payments, subsidies, concessions and rebates – often means that the individual is better off doing nothing (and keeping the benefits) than doing something (and seeing the benefits reduced). Effort goes unrewarded. The desire to return to education, access training or find a part-time job is often eroded if success brings little (if any) immediate financial reward.

In short, the dysfunctional framework within which governments deliver public support too often serves to reinforce the sense of social exclusion that it seeks to overcome. One need look no further than two generations of failure in Indigenous affairs to understand that the best of intentions can too often give rise to the worst of outcomes. 'Sit-down money' has undermined self-reliance and sapped the spirit of hope and enterprise. 'Self-determination', unmatched by adequately funded and governed community control, has trapped many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into providing themselves with second-rate services in third-world conditions. Despair and hopelessness stalk too many communities.

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Social inclusion, at its most fundamental level, will require the framework of political and civic engagement to be made over. The relationship between the state and its citizens, based on an implicit reciprocity between security and loyalty, needs to be reasserted. Individuals need to be actively engaged in the way in which governments provide them with support.

Citizens, given the opportunity to self-direct their own publicly-funded services, will be empowered to articulate their own destiny. Communities, given the chance to exert greater influence over their childcare facilities, schools, training providers, neighbour centres and public housing, will be able to govern their own institutions.

By enabling people to participate in the design of their own public support – by allowing them to become 'co-producers' of the services they need – an inclusive society can be built. Its fundamental premise is that individuals, acting separately or in concert, can be given the opportunity to be placed in control of their own future.

Already a possible future is starting to emerge. In Western Australia, for more than two decades, people with a disability (and their families and carers) have been given the opportunity

to decide on how best the State government can respond to their needs. Through a network of Local Area Coordinators the Disability Services Commission works with persons with a disability to organise their own budgets. The operating ethos, based on self-advocacy, is that people with disabilities are in the best position to determine their own needs and goals.

In Victoria the new vehicle for the training subsidy guarantee, Securing Jobs for Your Future, is firmly focussed on putting the user in control. Traditionally government has established fixed allocations for the training providers: in the future providers will be able to select their own preferences from the range of courses provided by TAFEs, private training providers and Adult Community Education organisations. The goal is to make the training system responsive to individual needs, rather than vice-versa.

Similarly, the Commonwealth's Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs has piloted a place-based, community-owned approach to improving outcomes for young children. It's called the Communities for Children program. Its aim is to provide as much latitude as possible to a community, through volunteering organisations, to develop innovative interventions. Early results to engage hard-to-reach families in 45 disadvantaged locations suggest positive impacts, not least on the belief of parents that they felt more effective, were more involved in community service activities and had more positive perceptions of social cohesion.

At the same time, Centrelink is trialling a Personal Services Brokerage for Young Refugee Jobseekers initiative in Fairfield (Sydney) and Broadmeadows (Melbourne). At present too many of those who are seeking employment feel helpless. "I feel like I'm wandering alone and lost in the desert," reported one young refugee. "(I'm) trying to improve myself but no-one is listening." The goal of the program is to help participants tailor their own individualised pathway of interventions and then to take responsibility for achieving them.

The advantages of co-produced services are clear enough. Asking people what they want, and allowing them to make decisions on their own behalf, provides a far better diagnostic tool than the most sophisticated analyses of public servants or management consultants. More importantly, by engaging people in the creation of their own flexible solutions – and by acknowledging the real-world experience and skills they bring to the task – individuals become active participants in planning a better future.

Co-production is not a panacea. The design, implementation and management of individualised funding models can raise complex and contentious issues. The vision of collaborative governance involves risks that need to be prudently managed. Some individuals will be less interested or less able to organise their own affairs. Money might be misspent. The danger, however, is that an abundance of caution will lessen the resolve of governments and the public services who work to them. It is entirely appropriate that public funds, delivered through individuals or communities, be accounted for in a transparent manner. The reality, however, is that citizens who 'own' the services funded and delivered on their behalf are likely to make more effective use of their budgets than bureaucrats making the decisions on their behalf.

The challenge is no less for the community organisations who frame their diverse missions in terms of helping those who are 'excluded' and who advocate on their behalf.

An increasing number have become more financially dependent on governments. Those non-profits that work in the area of emergency services and welfare provision are particularly likely to be in receipt of grants (effectively subsidies for the delivery of activities) or contracts (payments for the delivery of government services).

The danger is that such organisations, constrained by the service agreements imposed upon them by public services, become part of the problem. Too often the well-meaning professionalism of social workers and case managers can undermine the potential of individuals, learning from each other, to frame their own answers. Too frequently the interventions of benefactors, philanthropists and social investors can unintentionally direct assistance to those specific initiatives which they wish to fund.

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This does not need to be so. The Commonwealth's Personal Helpers and Mentors program seeks to direct professional support to help those suffering mental ill-health to make their own decisions. The program is premised on providing trusting, long-term relationships between mentors and those in need. The cornerstone is the empowerment that comes from assisting those who, in the words of a participant, suffer 'a cancer of the soul', to assist themselves.

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The social capital created by individuals as they work with others to tailor programs and manage budgets to their own needs, builds community engagement. Co-production gives citizens greater authority to participate in the design and delivery of government policies and, by doing so, encourages participatory democracy. A civil society is revitalised. The citizen becomes the centre of attention.

That, surely, should lie at the heart of social inclusion. ■

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# Social entrepreneurship at the heart of social inclusion

The School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE) was created on the basis that it is not enough to invest money alone in community initiatives. **Benny Callaghan**, CEO of SSE Australia, explains that for community projects and social enterprises to be successful and genuinely sustainable, they require investment in the people that are building them, through upfront and ongoing personal and professional development.

**S**ocial inclusion is about ensuring all people feel valued and actively engaged in all aspects of society and community life. The current focus has arisen from a recognition that traditional approaches to serving those Australians most disenfranchised from society simply have not worked.

While the term social inclusion may be relatively new, the act of reaching out to excluded groups in our communities whether they are people with disabilities, new migrants or our youth is at the heart of what drives social entrepreneurs.

Social entrepreneurs identify resources where people only see problems. Rather than seeing communities as passive beneficiaries of services, they see them as the solution to the problems that they are experiencing. Social entrepreneurs begin with the assumption that communities understand better than anyone what needs to be done, and then go about finding ways to harness resources to bring those solutions to life.



*The inaugural SSE cohort in Sydney with Alastair Wilson, centre back, CEO of the SSE in the UK.*