

Social Inclusion

Since the election of the Rudd Labor Government in November 2007, 'social inclusion' has been adopted as a key focus for social policy in Australia. The government has announced that it will seek to 'launch a new era of governance to mainstream the task of building social inclusion so that all Australians can share in our nation's prosperity.' To this end, it has established a Social Inclusion Committee of Cabinet, a Social Inclusion Unit in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the Australian Social Inclusion Board.

Social inclusion policies have been prominent internationally for well over a decade. Originating in France in the 1970s, the concept of social inclusion has played a significant role within European Union social policy discourse since the early 1990s. In the United Kingdom, following its election in 1997, the Blair Labour Government established a Social Exclusion Unit reporting directly to Cabinet. In Australia, a number of State governments, including in Victoria and South Australia, have previously adopted social inclusion policies, however, this is the first time that they have been introduced at the federal level.

Definitions of Social Inclusion and Exclusion

Social inclusion policies represent a challenge to older, purely material and economic interpretations of disadvantage. The focus is not simply poverty (defined as a relative lack of income), or deprivation (the relative lack of material goods), but, rather, the various and interrelated forms of social, cultural, and political exclusion that may or may not be a consequence of economic poverty or material deprivation. As Peter Saunders has noted: "The focus is on what people *do not do*, rather than what they *cannot afford*." For example, not having access to a local doctor or hospital, or the inability to access savings for use in an emergency have been described as indicators of social exclusion. A lack of regular social contact can also be an example of social exclusion: for instance, if a person

with a disability becomes socially isolated as a result of their inability to work and/or carry out other regular activities. As Tania Burchardt, Julian Le Grand, and David Piachaud have noted:

An individual is socially excluded if a) he or she is geographically resident in a society but b) for reasons beyond his or her control, he or she cannot participate in the normal activities of citizens in that society, and c) he or she would like to participate.

According to these authors, social exclusion can be measured against four key indicators:

- consumption: the capacity to purchase goods and services
- production: participation in economically or socially valuable activities
- political engagement: involvement in local or national decision-making
- social interaction: integration with family, friends and community

The Millennium Survey of Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain has also identified four dimensions of exclusion:

- impoverishment, or exclusion from adequate resources (for example, low income or deprivation);
- labour market exclusion;
- service exclusion (for example, a lack of access to public transport or child play facilities); and
- exclusion from social relations (for example, a lack of day to day social contact and support, or confinement in the home due to a fear of crime or a disability)

A key issue, then, is the problem of isolation, disengagement and non-participation, and that this can be caused by a variety of factors (for instance, geographic location), not just a lack of financial resources. Another important

feature of the concept is that exclusion can be experienced across a number of interacting dimensions, and that it can become concentrated in certain geographical areas. In this vein, the UK Social Exclusion Unit defined social exclusion as:

A shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown.

Similarly, the EU Eurostat Taskforce on Social Exclusion and Poverty Statistics has defined social exclusion as:

A dynamic process, best described as descending levels: some disadvantages lead to exclusion, which in turn leads to more disadvantage and more social exclusion and ends up with persistent multiple (deprivation) disadvantages. Individuals, households and spatial units can be excluded from access to resources like employment, health, education, social or political life.

Likewise, Levitas et al. (2007) have noted that:

Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in society, whether in economic, social, cultural, or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole.

This last point has also been emphasised in a report by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (2008). Social inclusion matters not only because of the way that it affects individuals, but also because it is 'linked to the important notion of social capital ... [that is] the networks of social relations that are characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity.' Societies with high levels of social capital are more stable and cohesive, and therefore also more peaceful and resilient. Social inclusion may thus be seen as supporting the wellbeing of all.

Debates

It has been argued that the concept of social inclusion offers numerous benefits, both for researchers and policy makers, over the concept of poverty. As Saunders has noted, poverty lines (which are frequently set as a percent-

age of the median income of the population) are seen to be problematic because the chosen limit can be difficult to justify. Secondly, poverty lines can provide information only about income; they cannot demonstrate if, or to what extent, low income results in deprivation. While deprivation measures do provide this information, they also focus only on the material aspects of poverty. Social exclusion measures, on the other hand, can further reveal the complex nature and causes of social disadvantage, thereby allowing for a clearer understanding of how to approach the problem. In this view, raising incomes alone is seen as an unsophisticated response that is not likely to succeed.

Others have argued, however, that the focus on the non-monetary aspects of social exclusion can be used as a way for governments to avoid providing appropriate assistance to the poor. For example, it has been noted that the social inclusion policies that have been adopted in the UK have focused too narrowly on the issue of employment or 'economic participation', without acknowledging the ways in which the economic system might itself be acting as a barrier to inclusion. Despite the official rhetoric, these policies have, in practice, shifted the burden of responsibility almost entirely onto the disadvantaged or unemployed, whose difficulties are seen to stem from their failure to conform to mainstream values and culture, particularly in relation to the question of work. In this context, targeting 'welfare dependency', and the broader cultures of 'non-participation', is seen as a key priority. Further, the removal or reduction of benefits is regarded as a useful method for achieving these aims.

A competing tendency within the thinking around social inclusion, however, is focused on the notion of citizenship rights, and looks at the different institutional systems within which these rights are given expression—for example, in the labour market, and the democratic and legal, welfare, and family and community systems. As Rob Atkinson and Simin Davoudi have noted: 'The crucial issue is the degree to which individuals and groups are 'embedded' within institutional systems and the effects these institutional systems have on individuals/groups.' Atkinson and Davoudi have further argued that the EU has (and probably will continue) to follow a path that is somewhere in between the two orientations:

A general consensus has gradually emerged regarding the desirability of developing a strategy for tackling social exclusion, albeit one which is largely

subordinated to the economic imperatives of improving competitiveness and reducing the burden on social protection systems.

Australian Approaches

A particular feature of the Australian government's approach, resulting from the need to address Australia's current skills shortages and the problems associated with an ageing population, is the emphasis on the importance of social inclusion to the economy. Thus, rather than needing to choose between social justice and economic growth, the government is suggesting that it is not only possible, but also necessary to have both. Thus the Minister for Social Inclusion, Julia Gillard, has described social inclusion as 'replacing a welfarist approach to helping the underprivileged with one of investing in them and their communities to bring them into the mainstream.'

The government has argued that in order to be socially included, all Australians must be given the opportunity to:

- secure a job;
- access services;
- connect with family, friends, work, personal interests and local community;
- deal with personal crisis; and
- have their voices heard

The following areas have been identified as early priorities:

- jobless families with children
- children at greatest risk of long term disadvantage
- focus on particular locations, neighbourhoods and communities
- homelessness
- employment for people with a disability or mental illness
- indigenous Australians

A social inclusion approach has important implications for the way government policy is implemented. It adds a valuable dimension to the concept of joined-up governance (the 'joining up' of services etc). The main benefit of a social inclusion approach is that it explicitly recognises the multiple dimensions of disadvantage that need simultaneous attention.

Despite the Australian Government's new focus on the link between economic growth and social inclusion (as described above), it remains to be seen how the Government will manage any potential conflict between the two, and whether or not its policies will be successful in fulfilling their stated aims.

Useful Sources

Atkinson, R. and Davoudi, S. 'The Concept of Social Exclusion in the European Union: Context, Development and Possibilities'. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 38:3 (September 2000): 427-48.

Australian Government, Social Inclusion Website. Available at: <http://www.deewr.gov.au/department/SocialInclusion/Pages/default.aspx>

The Brotherhood of St Laurence, Social Inclusion Down Under Symposium at the University of Melbourne Proceedings, 26 June 2008. Available at: <http://www.bsl.org.au/main.asp?PageId=6175>

See also Brotherhood of St Laurence website for other papers on social inclusion.

Hayes, A., Gray, M. and Edwards, B. *Social Inclusion: Origins, Concepts and Key Themes*. Paper prepared by the Australian Institute of Family Studies for the Social Inclusion Unit, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, October, 2008.

Levitas, R., Pantazis, C., Fahmy, E., Gordon, D., Lloyd, E. and Patsios, D. *The Multi-dimensional Analysis of Social Exclusion*. Bristol: Department of Sociology and School for Public Policy, University of Bristol, 2007.

Saunders, P. 'Measuring Wellbeing Using Non-Monetary Indicators: Deprivation and Social Exclusion'. *Family Matters* 78, (2008): 8-17.

See also other P. Saunders papers from Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales.

Author

Karolina Kurzak is a doctoral researcher at the Australian Centre, The University of Melbourne.