

Melbourne Citymission position paper: Social inclusion/exclusion

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Melbourne Citymission
Building Inclusive Communities

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This paper articulates Melbourne Citymission's position on the concepts of 'social inclusion' and 'social exclusion' as a means for understanding disadvantage.

It is a companion piece to the Melbourne Citymission foundation paper *Social in/exclusion: Mere words, or a key framework for understanding and addressing disadvantage?*¹

The foundation paper:

- summarised the conceptual shifts that led to the emergence of 'social inclusion' and 'social exclusion' as key metaphors for understanding disadvantage
- examined how the Rudd Government's National Social Inclusion Agenda has appropriated and interpreted these terms and shaped them into a policy agenda
- identified the opportunities and risks for non-government organisations like Melbourne Citymission.

This position paper:

- re-asserts Melbourne Citymission's stake in the policy debate
- provides a brief overview of the key frameworks for understanding disadvantage, including social inclusion/exclusion
- assesses the strengths and limitations of the Federal Government's National Social Inclusion Agenda — the policy framework for most of Melbourne Citymission's government-funded programs and services
- articulates Melbourne Citymission's framework for understanding disadvantage.

¹ Anne Pate, *Social in/exclusion: Mere words, or a key framework for understanding and addressing disadvantage?* Melbourne Citymission, 2009 www.melbournecitymission.org.au

Social inclusion/exclusion: why does it matter to Melbourne Citymission?

Every week, Melbourne Citymission provides services to more than 4,000 people across a range of program areas, including homelessness, disability and employment, education and training.

These individuals, families and communities are among the five per cent of Australians who are said to be experiencing 'severe disadvantage'. This is a group that includes high numbers of sole parent families, public renters, indigenous Australians, people who are unemployed and people with a disability.²

Disadvantage is a problem for everyone, not just those directly affected. It not only threatens economic prosperity and social cohesion, it can perpetuate exclusion and lead to the marginalisation of diverse voices and experiences. This is something that diminishes us all.

Currently, pathways into and out of severe disadvantage are variable and poorly understood.

Over the past 10 to 15 years, the concepts of '**social inclusion**' and '**social exclusion**' have emerged as influential metaphors for understanding disadvantage. Both terms have been defined in a variety of ways and used to justify a wide array of political agendas locally and internationally.

Melbourne Citymission has a critical stake in these philosophical and political debates. The way in which governments, community sector organisations and communities understand disadvantage is crucial in determining:

- what interventions are developed
- how the interventions are prioritised
- whether the interventions will be effective.

² Peter Saunders, Yuvisthi Naidoo, and Megan Griffiths, *Towards new indicators of disadvantage: deprivation and social exclusion in Australia*, Social Policy Research Centre, November 200, p.89

We know that public policy can itself **create** disadvantage. For example, macroeconomic policy can result in labour market restructuring, creating unemployment for some sections of the workforce. Poorly conceived public policy can also **reinforce** disadvantage, transforming it into exclusion.³ For example, as Melbourne Citymission's own research has shown, policy responses to unemployment based on rigid welfare compliance regimes can reinforce the disadvantage of young people who are homeless.⁴

How have the terms 'social inclusion' and 'social exclusion' emerged?

Research and policy to understand and address disadvantage has undergone a series of conceptual shifts during recent decades from a focus on income poverty, to deprivation and, more recently, to social in/exclusion.⁵

These shifts are detailed in the Melbourne Citymission foundation paper *Social in/exclusion: Mere words, or a key framework for understanding and addressing disadvantage?*

³ Andrew Mitchell and Richard Shillington, *Poverty, Inequality and Social Inclusion*, Working Paper Series: Perspectives on Social Inclusion, for the Laidlaw Foundation, December 2002, pp.10-11

⁴ Lucinda Jordan and Michael Horn, *Still looking for a break: Welfare to Work – So what's changed?*, Melbourne Citymission, August 2007

⁵ **Poverty** is a situation in which someone's income is so inadequate as to preclude them from having an acceptable standard of living. It exists when people's actual income is below a poverty line.

Deprivation exists when a lack of resources prevents people from accessing the goods and activities (items) that are consensually regarded as essential in a particular society. It is generally defined in terms of an enforced lack of these socially perceived essentials.

Social exclusion exists when people do not participate in key activities in society. Whereas deprivation focuses on what people cannot afford, what matters for exclusion is what people do not do. Crucially, the concept draws attention to the relational aspects of a process whereby people are excluded by the acts of others. Researchers are increasingly attentive to the processes which lead to people becoming excluded, and which prevent their escape.

Social inclusion is the other end of the same dimension as social exclusion, and has been variously defined. For example, Julia Gillard recently referred to 'meaningful participation in the mainstream economic and social life of the country'.

The key points to note are that:

- Internationally, researchers and policy makers have recognised the conceptual and practical limitations of relying on income poverty to define and measure disadvantage.
- The relative income approach has been sidelined in favour of multi-dimensional approaches, in which income is only one dimension of concern.
- The deprivation approach has been acknowledged as a more sophisticated approach than income poverty, but has been superseded by social inclusion/exclusion — a framework that encompasses social and economic factors.

The concepts 'social inclusion' and 'social exclusion' have appeared in research and policy since the mid-1990s, with 'social exclusion' rising to public prominence in the late-'90s with the political ascension of 'New Labour' in the UK.

In Australia, 'social inclusion' has become the dominant social policy framework since the election of the Rudd Government in late 2007.

Levitas identifies three different discourses in her analysis of European Union documents in the mid-1990s and public debate in the UK:

- **Redistributive discourse** — social exclusion is seen as a consequence of poverty, although it is understood to mean something more complex, relational, multidimensional and dynamic than is colloquially understood by poverty. The right to full social, economic and political participation is achieved through redistribution to ensure that all can exercise their rights as citizens.
- **Moral underclass discourse** — social exclusion is viewed as a moral failing, and the concern is with the moral hazard of 'dependency'. This discourse tends to focus on the consequences of social exclusion for social order, and to target particular groups, such as lone parents and unemployed young men. The goal of this policy is to reinforce traditional norms by dealing with problem groups.
- **Social integration or cohesion discourse** — the opposite of social exclusion is seen as social integration, with paid work represented as the primary or only legitimate means of integrating individuals of working age into society.⁶

⁶ Ruth Levitas, *The idea of social inclusion*, Paper to 2003 Social

Although the Rudd Government uses the term 'social inclusion' (rather than 'social exclusion'), many commentators have noted that the substance of the Rudd Government's approach is consistent with Levitas's third version of social exclusion: the social integration or cohesion approach in which social inclusion is achieved through participation in the paid workforce. Increasing employment — even in poorly paid jobs — becomes the goal.

Social inclusion/exclusion as a means for understanding disadvantage: strengths and limitations

Social inclusion/exclusion is a useful but incomplete framework for understanding disadvantage.

Social in/exclusion contributes to our understanding of disadvantage because:

- it highlights the processes by which people become excluded in a range of dimensions of life, and the relational dynamics which sustain this exclusion. These include the role of community networks and connectedness, social capacity, individual rights and the contours of inequality, which promote or prevent inclusion in both social and economic spheres
- it identifies and examines structural explanations for deprivation.

However:

- social exclusion may be less useful when it is used simply to label or describe empirical phenomena rather than to show how different social processes interact to produce exclusion⁷
- 'social inclusion' and 'social exclusion' are two ends of one continuum. While social policy theorists make a clear distinction between the two, inter-related concepts, policy makers are prone to using the terms interchangeably or inconsistently. The distinction is important. Melbourne Citymission believes that both social inclusion and social exclusion are necessary terms. Their value, use and emphasis depends on the purpose and context.

Both terms have limitations and advantages:

- Social inclusion places the onus on society to make sure that all people are able to

Inclusion Research Conference

⁷ Kathy Arthurson & Keith Jacobs, *Social exclusion and housing*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Southern Research Centre, AHURI Final Report No. 51, December 2003, p.17

participate as valued, respected and contributing members. It implies a proactive approach to wellbeing that invests in the conditions for inclusion, as well as removing barriers or risks. However, there is a risk that 'social inclusion' policies alone will overlook the need for specific, targeted policies and approaches to lift the most severely disadvantaged people out of exclusion.

- Social exclusion can encourage a stronger focus on the most vulnerable groups in society and the barriers to their inclusion. Unfortunately, where governments have used the term social exclusion, this has sometimes resulted in discourses and policies which stigmatise 'problem groups' in society.

Melbourne Citymission believes that:

- Income poverty and deprivation should be used **alongside** social exclusion to understand and measure disadvantage. Despite some overlaps, particularly between poverty and economic exclusion, the concepts of income poverty, deprivation and exclusion are distinct both conceptually and in practical terms.

An Australian model: strengths and limitations of the National Social Inclusion Agenda

Melbourne Citymission works with individuals, families and communities who are experiencing multiple, overlapping forms of disadvantage.

While we welcome the Rudd Government's commitment to a National Social Inclusion Agenda and acknowledge complementary initiatives running parallel to the Agenda (such as the new framework for employment services, the Nation Building — Economic Stimulus Plan and the emerging Youth Compact), Melbourne Citymission is concerned that these policy responses don't adequately meet the needs of those at the 'tail end' of disadvantage.

Specifically, Melbourne Citymission is concerned by:

- *The imbalance between economic and social goals*

The Rudd Government's emphasis on the economic returns of investing in social inclusion contrasts with early iterations of social inclusion which sought to elevate social objectives to parity with economic objectives on the grounds of social morality rather than economic rationality.⁸ If economic goals are dominant, there is a risk that social goals become optional and can be cast aside either in relation to particular groups, or in times of economic difficulty.⁹

- *The emphasis on workforce participation*

The National Social Inclusion Agenda and public statements by Government Ministers and the Labor Caucus emphasise workforce participation as the primary means of achieving social inclusion. Melbourne

⁸ Professor Paul Smyth, *Social inclusion and place based disadvantage: the Australian context*, BSL / DPCD Workshop Proceedings, p.8

⁹ Anglicare Australia, *Creative tension: Australia's social inclusion agenda*, and Anglicare Australia, *Discussion Paper: Social Inclusion*, http://www.anglicare.asn.au/documents/discussion_paper_social_inclusion.pdf, pp.7-9

Citymission agrees that paid employment is an important means of overcoming poverty and disadvantage. However, we believe there is a risk that people will be pushed into poorly paid jobs that have negative impacts on other aspects of their lives such as health and capacity to care for children. We also believe that while the Government has demonstrated a commitment to supporting disadvantaged populations to enter the labour market, it has underestimated the scale of the task. This applies particularly to people experiencing deep exclusion, such as those who have been long-term employed, or who experience domestic violence or substance abuse issues. Furthermore, the Government has overestimated the capacity of the labour market to make room for them.

We also argue that people who remain excluded from the workforce should be supported to live meaningful and valued lives. An overemphasis on workforce participation can perpetuate misrecognition of people who are not in paid work, especially in the absence of genuine pathways and opportunities. There is a distinct lack of policy initiatives which focus on the needs of people who may never participate in the workforce. This is particularly apparent in the case of people with a disability. There is a mismatch between the intention of policy to increase participation, and the opportunities available.

- *Insufficient focus on the most severely excluded people in our society*

The focus in the Agenda on 'mainstreaming' approaches to disadvantaged groups fails to recognise the distinct needs of the most disadvantaged people in our community. For example, if employment services are

restructured along the lines proposed, those who face multiple barriers — including people with a disability, and young people who are homeless — may receive insufficient support.

We believe that there are structural and systemic limits to this route out of exclusion for some groups which current policy recognises but fails to address.

- *Lack of attention to cultural justice*

The Agenda does not explicitly acknowledge questions of rights and recognition, discrimination, and inclusion in decision-making processes. Furthermore, government discourse may perpetuate the marginalisation and misrecognition of the most excluded people in our community.

- *Risks in the current economic climate*

In the current global economic slowdown there is a risk that the most disadvantaged in society will be further marginalised, and that responsibility will be shifted to individuals and the community sector.

Understanding and responding to disadvantage: key elements of a Melbourne Citymission framework

The starting point

Melbourne Citymission believes that severe disadvantage stems from:

- **personal and familial life circumstances**, particularly diminished person health, wellbeing and social connections, and impoverished family relationships due to inter-generational poverty, violence, neglect, displacement or trauma
and/or
- **living in a particular location**, where disadvantage may be perpetuated or caused by physical environmental factors, resourcing and infrastructure, and social environmental factors such as limited access and support to engage in education, health and employment facilities, or limited access to informal forms of support and connection
and/or
- **structural or political factors** including local, state and national policy, particularly in relation to education, health, employment and environmental infrastructure and resources.

Whatever the reasons for exclusion, the consequences are the same: lack of recognition and acceptance; powerlessness and voicelessness; economic vulnerability; and diminished life experiences and limited life prospects.¹⁰

Overarching social goals to inform the framework

Melbourne Citymission believes that the following social goals are critical if we are to construct a good society that promotes the wellbeing of its most vulnerable members:

¹⁰ Michael Bach, *Social inclusion as solidarity: rethinking the child rights agenda*, Working Paper Series: Perspectives on Social Inclusion, for the Laidlaw Foundation, June 2002, p.viii

- *Redistribution* — to confer equal, or more equal, rights to opportunities between richer and poorer members of our community;
- *Recognition* — equal respect for people with a range of different needs and abilities, recognition of these needs, and fostering of capabilities;
- *Encounter* — fostering supportive social relations between people.¹¹

Policies for a 'good society' should take into account the shifting patterns of dependency and interdependency throughout the life cycle.

Key elements of the framework

- *Valuing people*

Melbourne Citymission believes that all people have value, whoever they are, and whatever their life circumstances. We believe that respect and valued recognition should be extended to all members of our community. In our relationships with people we must reflect and demonstrate that they are valued.

There is ample evidence that people who are disadvantaged feel the lack of respect and recognition accorded to them and that addressing this is important alongside the need for income security.¹²

Social inclusion can be understood as a multifaceted process for constructing valuing forms of knowledge and recognition at the interpersonal, institutional and societal levels. 'Recognition' takes different forms at each of these levels: at the interpersonal level, mutual recognition is experienced through love; at the

¹¹ Professor Ruth Fincher, *Issues of scale*, Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Department of Planning and Community Development Social Inclusion and Place Based Disadvantage Workshop Proceedings, 13th June 2008, pp.6-9

¹² John Murphy and Mark Peel, *Poverty and respect*, 2004, p.33

institutional level, it is experienced through rights; and at the societal level, it is experienced through solidarity.¹³ Recognition also requires a redistribution of resources.

Solidarity involves valuing people's uniqueness and difference, through advocacy and through our responses to their needs. A social inclusion agenda should promote social solidarity across expanding social, economic and political differences.¹⁴

Another way of saying this is that the goal of policy should be to promote cultural as well as economic justice.¹⁵ Policies to prevent or address disadvantage which perpetuate negative stereotypes about groups or areas fail on this measure.

- *Social participation as a good in itself*

Social participation is as critical as economic participation. Social participation is both an end in itself and a condition for being a member of society. Those not able to obtain paid work (even in an ideal system providing extensive and appropriate support) should be supported to achieve meaningful and valued lives. The links between social participation and health and wellbeing are well-known. The economic costs of failing to create a socially inclusive society are also increasingly recognised.

Melbourne Citymission believes that the notion of 'workforce participation' should be expanded to include non-market based activities.

- *Supporting transitions to inclusion for the most excluded in our society*

A comprehensive approach to reducing and preventing disadvantage would pay far greater attention than is evident in current policy to the most severely excluded people in our community. The most severely excluded people in our society require specific actions to support their transition to inclusion, including a redistribution of resources. Rather than expecting that one-size-fits-all policies

and programs, or 'mainstream' approaches, will address deep exclusion, we need to develop much more creative, systematic responses.

Long-term support, accompanied by changes in society itself, is required to really address the deep-seated exclusion that some people experience and to make their transition to inclusion possible.

People who face multiple barriers to economic and social participation should be supported to overcome these. Society itself must also be prepared to change to remove barriers to inclusion. These investments need to be radical and sustained.

Melbourne Citymission believes that the key components of a response to social disadvantage and exclusion are:

- adequate income
- affordable and sustainable housing
- equitable access to education
- participation in employment
- opportunities for social connections.

Melbourne Citymission 'In Practice'

Melbourne Citymission works to promote social inclusion and prevent or reduce social exclusion for particular populations. We also focus on particular locations or under-resourced areas. This usually entails working in a targeted way with particular population groups and/or specific issues. For example, we might focus on newly-arrived families within a particular area. Prevention and early intervention are important to our work with both people and places.

Our work is also focused on key transitions, including from preschool to school, and from school to post-school options (employment, and education and training).

Melbourne Citymission's work with severely excluded populations and places is documented in the In Practice series of publications, available at www.melbournecitymission.org.au

¹³ Michael Bach, *Social Inclusion as Solidarity: rethinking the child rights agenda*, Working Paper Series: Perspectives on Social Inclusion, for the Laidlaw Foundation, June 2002, p.9

¹⁴ Ibid., p.2

¹⁵ Dr Zoe Morrison, *Place, social inclusion and 'cultural justice': reflections on the British experience – a place-based social exclusion policy case study*, Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Department of Planning and Community Development Social Inclusion and Place Based Disadvantage Workshop Proceedings, 13th June 2008

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