

Social Inclusion: Analysing an Imprecise Concept

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22nd February 2010

Introduction

In July 2009, Hon Maxine McKew, Parliamentary Secretary to the Federal Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, briefed recently appointed New South Wales Chairpersons and Deputy-Chairpersons of Regional Development Australia Committees (RDAC's) and underlined that one of their roles was to engage in social inclusion.

Until recently the term has had relatively little usage in Australian public policy dialogue and has been perceived as vague and inadequately defined and explained. The Australian government (Vinson 2009, p.1) has acknowledged that social exclusion is an abstract term. The intent of this Paper is to encapsulate significant recent scholarly work concerning social inclusion for the purpose of better understanding its meaning and how it may be addressed and encompassed in strategic planning and policy, as part of the role of RDAC's.

The Paper is divided into six parts. Part 1 introduces discussion on social inclusion and social exclusion. Part 2 outlines the origins and development of social exclusion in France, Europe, the UK and USA. Part 3 describes current Australian and state government approaches to social inclusion. Part 4 connects social inclusion to the concepts of social capital, social citizenship and capacity building and part 5 briefly explores other scholarly perspectives on the subject. Part 6 offers some concluding remarks in relation to how Regional

Development Australia Committees might articulate a policy position on social inclusion.

Social Inclusion and Social Exclusion

Current Australian policy discourse suggests that being socially included means that people have the resources, opportunities and capabilities to

Learn: participate in education and training;

Work: participate in employment, unpaid or voluntary work, including family and carer responsibilities;

Engage: connect with people, use local services and participate in local, cultural, civic and recreational activities; and

Have a voice: influence decisions that affect them (Australian Government 2008, p.23).

Whilst researching the subject, a definition of social inclusion could not be located in social science encyclopaedias. However, there were ample definitions of social exclusion, including “a process by which individuals or households experience deprivation, either of resources or of social links to the wider community or society. During the 1980s the language of social exclusion came increasingly to be used alongside, and sometimes to replace that of poverty” (Scott and Marshall 2005, p.204). These scholars acknowledged that each concept was controversial.

There are a range of important differences and politically divergent interpretations of social exclusion, of which the Social Science Encyclopaedia (2004, p.941-2) identified three

1. That which blames the individuals concerned for their lack of motivation and their self-exclusion from society as a whole, although the responsibility for this exclusion is placed at the doors of the welfare state;
2. That which sees the problem as a failure of the system to provide jobs, which leads to a situation of social isolation, where people lose

not the motive to work but the capacity to find work because of lack of positive role models; and

3. That which stresses the active rejection of the underclass by society through downsizing of industry, stigmatization of the workless and the stereotyping of an underclass that is criminogenic and drug-ridden.

Social exclusion has been defined in relation to social rights and to the barriers and processes by which people are prevented from exercising those social rights. A further usage of the term is as a state of social or normative isolation from the wider community, and to situations of extreme marginalisation, especially in the context of multi-cultural societies (Scott and Marshall 2005, p.205). Huxley and Thornicroft (2003, p.1) offer another concept of social exclusion as *Demos*, which has implications for citizens' rights. For these scholars, a nation-state can achieve the state of *Demos* when it is inclusive in its definition and realisation of citizenship, and when citizen status leads to equality of social, political and legal rights (Huxley and Thornicroft 2003, p.1).

Social exclusion has been described as a term that is flexible and somewhat amorphous in use, yet having core features that separate it from earlier notions of poverty or marginalisation. It can be multidimensional; involve economic, political or spatial exclusion; lack of access to information, medical provision, housing, policing or security. Social exclusion can also be conceived as not an individual or local problem but a social, collective, systemic problem and as a development that has global roots, because of factors such as rapid labour market changes, decline of manufacturing industries, rise of a more fragmented service sector and creation of structural unemployment (Kuper and Kuper 2004, p.941).

Hayes Gray and Edwards (2008, p.4) acknowledge that there is no generally accepted definition of what constitutes social exclusion. They suggest that discussions of social exclusion include three recurring main themes

1. Social exclusion is relative to the norms and expectations of society at a particular point of time.
2. Social exclusion is caused by an act of some individual, group or institution. A person may exclude themselves by choice or they may be excluded by the decisions of other people, organisations or institutions.
3. Social exclusion is not a result simply of current circumstance but also requires that the person's future prospects are limited (Hayes, Gray et al. 2008, p.4)

For Buckmaster and Thomas (2009, p.9) social exclusion is so ill-defined and elastic a concept as to possess little value as a policy framework. However, Saunders (2003, p.6) offers a more precise definition that

[A]n individual is socially excluded if he or she does not participate to a reasonable degree over time in certain activities of his or her society, and if this is for reasons beyond his or her control, and if he or she would like to participate.

Origins and Development of the Terminology of Social Exclusion

The concept of social exclusion first emerged in the republican political culture of France in the 1970s and was used to describe those social groups – the disabled, single parents and unemployed people without protection under social insurance, who were thus literally excluded from social support and the labour market. The concept came to be used to describe the condition of people excluded from mainstream society due to factors such as disability, mental illness and poverty (Buckmaster and Thomas 2009, p.3). The concept and broad approaches about how social exclusion should be tackled quickly spread through Europe. The European Social Inclusion Strategy had a strategic aim to “make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty by 2010” (Buckmaster and Thomas 2009, p.4)

The Blair Labor Government, elected in 1997, accepted the European Social Protocol. Social exclusion was made a key policy focus in the UK. The Blair government 'third way' politics favoured growth, entrepreneurship, enterprise and wealth creation, but it also sought greater social justice with the state playing a major role in that regard (Buckmaster and Thomas 2009, p.5).

The term social exclusion has not featured significantly in the USA policy debate, where related concepts such as the "underclass" have been influential. Underclass has been defined as

[i]ndividuals who lack training and skills and either experience long-term unemployment or are not members of the labour force; individuals who are engaged in street crime and other forms of abhorrent behaviour; and families that experience long-term spells of poverty and/or welfare dependency (Hayes, Gray et al. 2008, p.5).

Australian and State Government Perspectives

In 2002, the South Australian government established a Social Inclusion Initiative, based closely on the policy approach taken by the Blair government. A key difference was the use by Premier Rann of the words social inclusion in lieu of social exclusion, based on the view that "inclusion" was what his government wanted to achieve. The primary goal of the Social Inclusion Initiative was to develop new, innovative solutions to the problem of social exclusion and to ensure a coordinated, comprehensive government and community response to the needs of disadvantaged people (Buckmaster and Thomas 2009, p.5).

Other state and territory governments have since adopted policies to target social inclusion. For example, in Victoria the government framework for addressing disadvantage and creating opportunities is known as *A Fairer*

Victoria, under which cross-government work has been undertaken in relation to indigenous people, those with mental health problems and refugees (Hayes, Gray et al. 2008, p.2).

In 2007, before the Federal election Hon Julia Gillard MP and Senator Penny Wong launched the Labor Party policy document (Gillard and Wong 2007, p.1-2), *An Australian Social Inclusion agenda*, and signalled an intention to address social inclusion if elected to government. The policy highlighted social disadvantage in Australia, despite a period of 17 years of continuous economic growth. The social inclusion agenda aim was to launch a new era of governance to mainstream the task of building social inclusion, so that all Australians might share in national prosperity. The policy committed, inter alia, to ensure government programs maximised social inclusion; increased participation and employment; improved skills and job capacity; developed a national strategy for mental health and disability employment; closed the digital divide; and assisted the role of the community sector (Gillard and Wong 2007, p.5-10).

Australian Deputy Prime Minister Hon Julia Gillard MP is the Minister for Education and Minister for Workplace Relations. She also has the Ministerial portfolio of Social Inclusion, underlining the importance that the Rudd Government has placed on social inclusion policy. The Minister has responsibility for the Australian Social Inclusion Board (ASIB), an independent body established to provide advice to government on ways to achieve better outcomes for most disadvantaged Australians (Deputy Prime Minister's Press Office 2009, p.1). In July 2009, Minister Gillard released the Board's *Compendium of Social Inclusion Indicators*, which provided data on types of disadvantage, including access to work and services, social support, health, and how well local neighbourhoods were faring. The Deputy Prime Minister (2009, p.1-2) stated

To be socially included, Australians must have access to work, social support through family and friends, and high quality basic services like health and education. This enables people to deal successfully with adverse life events like bereavement or loss of a job, and be able to make their voice count as citizens and community members.

The Australian Government web site defines social inclusion as “about making sure that everyone has the same opportunities to learn, to work, to be involved with their community and to speak out about things that are important to them” (Australian Government 2009, p.1). This source nominates, that in respect of social exclusion, approximately five per cent of the Australian population aged 15 years or older experience multiple disadvantage, having a major impact on their ability to learn, work, engage in their community and have a voice on decisions that affect them. Such disadvantage can include “low income and assets; low skills; difficulty finding and keeping a job; housing stress; poor health; lack of access to services; substance misuse; mental illness; disability; family violence; discrimination and homelessness” (Australian Government 2009, p.1).

Principles for Social Inclusion have been adopted by the Australian Government (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2008). They state that to be socially included, “people 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 voice heard”. The Principles outline a range of aspirations, approaches and early priorities. In June 2009, as a social inclusion policy development, the Australian Social Inclusion Board released principles and ideas for building strong, inclusive and resilient communities with a key emphasis on need to build community resources and capacity. The Board emphasised that resilient communities had a high level of social capital (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2009,p.2-3).

During 2009, the ASIB (Faulkner 2009, p.1-9) outlined early government priorities, in respect of the *Australian Social Inclusion Agenda* as jobless families with children; children at risk of long-term disadvantage; locational disadvantage; addressing homelessness; employment for people living with a disability or mental illness and closing the gap for indigenous Australians. The Paper stressed the importance of communicating social inclusion and engaging communities with messages and values that had respect and empathy for vulnerable groups; provided positive identity in diverse communities; gave respect and dignity in service provision; and created awareness and understanding of social inclusion (Faulkner 2009, p.7). The ASIB was to compile a compendium (and possibly an index) of headline indicators to measure progress on social inclusion through targeting policy and information; seeking to understand what works; and through maintaining commitment and engagement (Faulkner 2009, p.8).

The ASIB (Whiteford 2009, p.4) was requested by the Australian government to focus, as a first priority, on jobless families and children at greatest risk of disadvantage, reflecting the fact that children were among the most vulnerable people in the community, and that family joblessness raised the risk that children may grow up to be jobless and reliant on welfare payments for a significant proportion of their income. The challenge will be to develop sound policies to promote and support employment for as many parents as possible; to provide adequate income support for those with the greatest difficulty in securing paid employment; and to assist those with the most severe disadvantage.

It has been suggested by Phipps (2000, p.63) however, that many excluded people may not be seeking employment because of age, disability or circumstances. Thus agencies addressing social exclusion will need to facilitate

access to skills for social purposes, self-respect, independence, and to build community capacity.

Social Capital, Social Citizenship, Capacity Building and Social Inclusion

The theme of social capital and capacity-building is common in scholarly opinion on social inclusion and exclusion. Social capital is a loosely used but fashionable concept, found to be helpful in elaborating what is meant by capacity-building in the collective sense (Shucksmith 2003, p.6). Perhaps the most influential use of the concept has been by Putnam (1993, p.167), for whom social capital

[r]efers to features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions.

Social citizenship is another term used in connection with social inclusion. Citizenship has been defined as participation in or membership of a community, as expressed through various rights, obligations and institutions such as universal voting and the rule of law. Modern citizenship can be understood in terms of equality of status across the social structure (Buckmaster and Thomas 2009, p.10). Social citizenship contributes to equality of status through helping to develop a common culture in which differences between social classes and other groupings are less sharp. Social citizenship underlines the need to look beyond formal legal or political rights and obligations in order to gain a fuller appreciation of what is required for participation in or membership of a community.

Central to a more inclusive, social citizenship approach according to Buckmaster and Thomas (2009, p.22), would be opportunities for citizens to participate in the design and setting of objectives and priorities of social institutions, such as public health and the education system. For these scholars,

whether the opportunity to vote, participate in a parliamentary or other inquiry or government consultation process, can be regarded as sufficiently inclusive or participatory is a key question.

The term social quality is also part of the social inclusion discourse and refers to the concepts of social inclusion but also socio-economic security, social cohesion and empowerment (Huxley and Thornicroft 2003, p.2). The concept of participation is central to attempts at defining and addressing social inclusion and social exclusion. Some authors suggest that participation rather than inclusion, should be the main focus of efforts to address social exclusion (Buckmaster and Thomas 2009, p.17).

Other Scholarly perspectives on Social Exclusion and Social Inclusion

Hayes, Gray and Edwards (2008, p.29-30) promote active and preventative policies to reduce social exclusion and suggest policy approaches that feature

- Enhancing the ability of services to address the multiple disadvantages that many of the socially excluded experience;
- Recognising that the most socially disadvantaged and excluded often do not access conventional services, so that services should target transition points;
- Centralised coordination to set targets and monitor whether they are being achieved, in terms of services reaching the socially excluded;
- Local coordination across government and non-government organisations to achieve an integrated approach to social inclusion;
- Social inclusion at multiple points across life cycles;
- Partnerships between government and the non-profit sector;
- Attempts to change attitudes, values and beliefs of those experiencing social exclusion and the broader community;
- The importance of identifying the extent of the problem and the underlying causes;
- The re-examination of the evidence base to identify new solutions;
- and

- Data performance measures and robust evaluation to capture disadvantage and measure the progress of policy interventions, particularly over the long term.

Buckmaster and Thomas (2009, p.8) suggest a concern with the social exclusion concept is that it tends to be couched in ‘top-down’ terms and is something that is done by the state to passive, socially excluded people, who are viewed and treated as having little or no agency of their own. These scholars also express a fundamental concern with the social exclusion concept, suggesting it tends to focus on the excluded, at the expense of consideration of the included. This raises the question of inclusion into what type of society and can serve to normalise and unquestioningly strengthen existing arrangements (Buckmaster and Thomas 2009, p.9).

Saunders (2003, p.3) identifies five potential benefits of a social exclusion framework

Broadening the analysis of poverty;
 Providing a bridge to discussions of equality and citizenship;
 Providing a basis for understanding the peculiarities of difference;
 Highlighting the spatial dimensions of exclusion; and
 Facilitating cross-national comparisons.

Brown (1999, p.8) has suggested that social inclusion requires conscious awareness and insight; personal choices and individual control; personal expression across life domains rather than program or policy domains, life span in orientation; empowering, accessible and non-discriminating societies; being non-hierarchical, and also accessible. Conversely, for Brown (1999, p.7) social exclusion has rules and values which are exclusive and hierarchical and can be physical, social or psychological; short or long term; individual or group (e.g.

gender or intercultural); inter-generational; institutional; within the community; or within the home.

In the context of expanding communication technologies, Phipps (Phipps 2000, p.62) states that many levels of politics, programs and initiatives have been developed to address social exclusion, and that the concept has expanded from that of 'poverty' to embrace the concept of role in society. Phipps maintains that lack of access to the means of communications increasingly used by the remainder of society, has the potential to worsen the relative position of excluded individuals and groups.

Writers such as Shucksmith (2003, p.2) maintain that modernity produces difference, exclusion and marginalisation, and it follows that attempts to address inequality and social exclusion, need to seek to alter the structures which constrain individual's actions, and also to build the capacity to act of those with the least power and opportunities. A central question for Shucksmith is how to build capacity at a collective, territorial level while at the same time positively redistributing power and building the capacity to act, of the least advantaged individuals (Shucksmith 2003, p.7).

A recent development has involved focusing on social exclusion as being "wide", "deep" or "concentrated" with *wide* exclusion referring to the large number of people being excluded on a single or small number of indicators; *deep* exclusion referring to being excluded on multiple or overlapping dimensions and being more entrenched and deep-seated than wide exclusion; and *concentrated* exclusion referring to a geographic concentration of problems and to area exclusion (Hayes, Gray et al. 2008, p.5).

Brown (1999, p.13) has observed that to solve society's problems there are two approaches; one is to exclude what is believed to be the cause of the problem,

the other to involve the people who experience the problems, and to recognise that the solution to their difficulties is an inclusive process which benefits the whole of society. This writer also notes that there is a genuine desire at management and frontline levels to change services so that there is much more direct input, involvement and discussion with those in need (Brown 1999, p.18).

Conclusion

Social inclusion policy undoubtedly will require refinement over time. Perhaps the key difficulty with social inclusion is that it lacks a clear conceptual core, which would provide the grounding necessary to ensure that exclusion could be addressed in a fundamental manner. Buckmaster and Thomas (2009, p.23) suggest that an effective means to bolster the social inclusion concept and agenda would be to locate it within a contemporary and reflexive social citizenship framework, because through its emphasis on equal membership of, and full and active participation in the community, a social citizenship framework could broaden the scope and vision of social inclusion.

In terms of practical mechanisms of fulfilling the Regional Development Australia Committee role of addressing social inclusion, it will be important that Committees effectively engage communities and educate and communicate the value to society of social inclusion and well-being. Addressing community disadvantage through acting in a facilitating role for economic, environmental and social enhancement will be a key task for Committees. All projects and initiatives of Regional Development Australia Committees should have a common goal of improving the lifestyles, amenity, well-being and social inclusion of citizens.

It would I believe, be appropriate for Regional Development Australia Northern Rivers Board to articulate as a key policy position, the intention of seeking to enhance social inclusion for the communities and citizens of the region. The policy should be based upon genuine community engagement and address

identified disadvantage by facilitating sound economic, environmental and social outcomes for the Northern Rivers region.

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