

Centre for Public Policy
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‘Partnering for a Purpose’
Speech delivered by Tony Nicholson, Executive Director
of the Brotherhood of St Laurence

It’s important to be clear about what the purpose of partnering is before we begin talking about the technologies of partnering. Otherwise we are at risk of putting the cart before the horse.

We are now at an interesting point in the evolution of social policy in Australia. Social Inclusion is all-pervasive. If you look at government department websites and non-government organisation websites, Social Inclusion is inevitably mentioned in the first paragraph.

But I submit that Social Inclusion is still contested. Despite governments’ articulated positions, there is not a commonly accepted definition. In recent months this has become very obvious in discussions about reforms to homelessness policy and to employment assistance.

It is clear to me that there is widespread rebadging of traditional ways of thinking and doing going on within the community sector and within various parts of government bureaucracy. For those with this mindset, Social Inclusion is seen rather cynically as another fad, that shouldn’t get in the way of business as usual.

On the one hand there are those that see Social Inclusion as the wolf of neo-liberalism in sheep’s clothing, which harks back to the one-dimensional poverty and welfare rights agenda of the 1970s and 1980s, and doesn’t require any wider economic justification on the part of government. And on the other hand there are those that see Social Inclusion as the wolf of neo-welfarism in sheep’s clothing, which harks back to a ‘work-first’ agenda from the mid-1990s.

Both seem to yearn for the past in a way that John Howard yearned for an Australian society of the 1950s. Neither view is relevant to needs of the contemporary world. Both long for an economy and a society that is simply not going to come back:

- one where the personal computer didn’t exist
- when decently paid jobs that didn’t need post-secondary qualifications hadn’t been destroyed
- where few children grew up in homes with parents who had never had a job
- where public housing wasn’t confined to people with multiple disadvantages
- where heroin wasn’t cheap and freely available and cheap designer drugs didn’t exist
- and where students from all backgrounds were more likely to rub shoulders in the school playground and live in the same postcodes.

Good social policy requires us to live in the world that actually exists – where these problems are an unfortunate reality.

In other words, Social Inclusion has to be an agenda that reflects the complex and multidimensional nature of disadvantage in contemporary Australia.

The Federal Government's Social Inclusion agenda is closely aligned, but not exclusively so, to its human capital agenda. The government wants to build a bridge between that agenda and certain geographical places of disadvantage and disadvantaged population groups such as workless families.

The states and territories have their own variations of tackling locational disadvantage and some particular population groups.

What they have in common is a moving away from an income-related safety net, to a more multidimensional safety net that gives emphasis to participation and the capacities for participation. Importantly, they recognise the premium the modern economy puts on education, skills and social networks.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence's working definition of Social Inclusion is this:

A social inclusion approach involves the building of personal capacities and material resources, in order to fulfil one's potential for economic and social participation, and thereby a life of common dignity.

It stresses *personal capacities* – health, education social networks; *material resources* – adequate housing, transport, income, access to information technologies and access to services; and fulfilling potential for *economic* – work – and *social participation* – cultural, political, recreational, sporting and everyday living activities.

PRINCIPLES

I wish to submit to you that we can derive from this sort of definition a set of principles that will be instructive of the type of partnering relationships that will be necessary to implement this type of Social Inclusion approach.

Firstly, Social Inclusion must be a matter for all Australians – involving business, all levels of government and the community sector. It's not just a matter for governments or the community sector or philanthropy.

Secondly, economic and social participation will be at the top of the hierarchy of outcomes we seek. Other outcomes, such as housing for example, will be shaped by the participation objective. The human right to be adequately housed isn't met in modern Australia unless it facilitates social and economic participation. For this over-arching objective to be achieved we can't have one-dimensional policy or practice.

Thirdly, the most effective Social Inclusion strategy will have 'prevention' as a main focus. If we are to be successful, we can't wait until exclusion occurs. If prevention is to be a main focus, then Social Inclusion has to be front and centre in the policy and practice of mainstream agencies delivering health and education for example. Social Inclusion can't be left to those picking up the pieces after the event.

Fourthly, joined up service delivery must be matched by joined up policy. All too often, in an attempt to integrate services on the ground, NGOs have to enter multiple funding and service agreements that don't align, are expensive to administer and struggle to be effective. Joined up service delivery will be matched by joined up policy that in turn is reflected in joined up arrangements for the procurement of services.

Fifthly, devolved governance structures are necessary to maximise the effective allocation of resources, and to integrate programs at the local level. We live in a diverse country. Each community has its own mix of economic base, cultural difference and social problems. Uniform national programs run out of Canberra (or Spring Street, for that matter) will not meet local needs and be effective at engaging and resourcing people at the margins. Only devolved governance structures can hope to maximise the effective allocation of resources and integrate programs at the local level without involving a labyrinth of bureaucracy.

I was impressed with Professor Geoff Gallop's recent speech to the ANZSOG conference. He made the point that in the decades ahead, strong communities and economic efficiency will go hand in hand. He argued that governments have to find new mechanisms for getting federalism working in new ways to solve the problems of the 21st century – by, for instance, using the principle of subsidiarity to promote decentralisation where appropriate.

So a precursor to designing partnerships for Social Inclusion has to be finding ways of actually getting governments out of the way and allowing local solutions to emerge, with public accountability for high-level outcomes rather than highly specified processes.

This is a big change to the way we are currently governed. And those in government will no doubt point to the risks. But I ask you to point to any endeavour that had major breakthroughs that did not involve risk?

NECESSARY PRECONDITIONS

What I conclude from these principles is that getting the necessary preconditions for partnering right is perhaps more important than the detail of the partnering that may take place between various organisations. Without the preconditions it won't happen, or it will be spasmodic and less effective than it could potentially be.

I suggest four important preconditions:

Firstly, that both mainstream and specialist providers of services need to have Social Inclusion measures as part of their key performance indicators. This is the surest way to ensure we don't just have lip service paid to the objective of joined up policy and practice.

Secondly, to tackle locational disadvantage we need to find new mechanisms for setting priorities and driving integration at the local level by constructing a funnel to capture resources from multiple sources – governments at all levels, business, philanthropy, and community organisations. This may involve building on existing governance arrangements for community renewal programs. It could involve a local government or a major NGO taking the leading role. Or it may involve the creation of a new entity specifically for this purpose – a community development agency that involves local people, local businesses, local service providers and local government.

Thirdly, because of the diverse cultures and ways of working of the worlds of business, government and community, there is a need for deal brokers – people who can work effectively across sectors. To be effective these need to be project-based and shouldn't be an end in themselves.

Finally, these principles should be reflected in a compact between the community sector and the national government.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH BUSINESS

All too often the focus of Social Inclusion rests on partnerships between government and the community sector. I want to finish with some reflections on partnerships with business. This is important because business has such enormous resources, networks and know-how to bring to the Social Inclusion task.

The Brotherhood has been involved in this area for some time. For example, along with Berry Street, The Smith Family and the Benevolent Society, we have partnered with the ANZ Bank to improve financial literacy, promote savings and make credit available to low-income households.

Experience suggests to us that there are a number of components that are critical to successful business involvement in Social Inclusion programs.

Firstly, businesses themselves have to take on board the Social Inclusion agenda. This is happening. Smart businesses 'get it' and go beyond a notion of charitable contribution or even corporate social responsibility, and are beginning to see it as an essential component of a sustainable business strategy.

Secondly, there has to be mutual respect between the partners, and a cooperative attitude. And there also has to be clarity about shared concerns and objectives.

Thirdly, businesses have to be in it for the long term and invest in it accordingly. ANZ has done this. They must be prepared to put in serious money. As in any venture, scale is crucial to success.

CONCLUSION

If the Social Inclusion agenda is to succeed, deeply embedded attitude sets need to be turned around. That will take time. And it will not be easy. Achieving radical policy change never is. Sometimes, however, it is thrust upon us. Both economic and social policies are likely to face major new challenges as a result of the turmoil in international financial markets that is unfolding around us at this time. Citizens are going to expect more of their governments, both in terms of regulating for efficiency and ensuring all Australians are able to participate in the mainstream economic and social life of the nation.

Thank you.