

The Challenges of Vulnerability, Disadvantage and Social Exclusion

By Angela Damianopoulos

As a Western nation, Australia enjoys a higher standard of living than most countries; however, not all families are thriving. Many families are struggling to make ends meet and the issue of child poverty is fast becoming a serious societal concern. There is an increasing acknowledgement that poverty is a consequence of the cumulative impact of vulnerability, discrimination, risk, a social exclusion across an individual's lifecycle and between generations. In these challenging global times where natural disasters and economic meltdowns have become part of our national and international landscape, some families will struggle more than others, especially those socially excluded due to poverty and disadvantage.

There are many definitions for poverty and individuals and families living in income poverty often go through various scales of disadvantage which are summed up in the concept of social exclusion. For the purpose of this paper, the definition of poverty adopted by the European Economic Community, "the poor shall be taken to mean persons, families and groups of persons whose resources (material, cultural and social) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life" will be used (European Economic Community (1985), Article 1.2).

Research shows that disadvantaged groups are likely to "clump together" (Jane Millar, Longitudinal Qualitative Study 2002-03 to 2007 in the UK) and interact with one another which result in poor outcomes for the children. This interaction with families of similar economic, social and cultural backgrounds is the experience of social exclusion.

Social exclusion experienced by disadvantaged groups in society encompasses

- a wide range of fundamental rights such as health, education, housing affordability, goods and services;
- a sense of alienation from society;
- lack of opportunities to participate in public life; and
- stigmatisation.

Inclusion in the labour market is important in ensuring social inclusion. Indeed, employment is not only a way of securing adequate financial means, it also allows us to participate and keep in touch with society. Employment represents a meaningful way to fulfil one's ambitions, obtain new skills and qualifications, achieve personal development and growth and keep up to date with life.

Vulnerable and disadvantaged families, like all other families are diverse and multifaceted and the reasons which have led to their vulnerability are exclusive to each family. A lifecycle approach to impoverishment reveals that social exclusion from growth is intergenerational. Young people living in poverty are most likely to repeat the cycle of their parents and are likely to be vulnerable to poverty in their adulthood. Failure to break this cycle will hold back economic growth and widen the gap between those that benefit and those who do not. Lack of education is often a major factor.

The focus on social exclusion has led governments to concentrate on the broad issue of child well-being, especially when considering the whole mesh of circumstances which have led to income poverty. For example, a report by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in 2007 went further than material deprivation as a main factor in contributing to a child's welfare, it also addressed areas

such as family and peer relationships, educational well-being, health and safety, behavioural problems (mental illness), and subjective well-being (UNICEF, 2007).

While Western countries have become wealthier, the gap between the well-off and the disadvantaged has widened which indicates that increasing prosperity in Australia and other developed countries has not advanced all its citizens equally. Although income poverty is associated with substantial disadvantage, such as inadequate food and housing and lack of access to medical care, it is not the sole measure of poverty. The importance on social exclusion opens up the door to personal and institutional barriers that are associated with low levels of income in Western society.

The Australian Government through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) is in the process of implementing a new Family Support Program (FSP), which focuses on making services easier to access and more supportive for Australia's most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families. The initiative is underpinned by the three principles of:

1. Building the capability and resilience of Australian families and children in their communities;
2. Working in the best interests of children; and
3. Responding to the vulnerabilities of families and children in their communities.' (Family Support Program, FaHCSIA, January 2011)

Although the implementation of new social policy reforms targeting the vulnerable and disadvantaged may entail higher costs initially, inaction will result in higher costs associated with poor outcomes for children across generations. As demonstrated in the research, the cycle of disadvantage is intergenerational and this is what policy needs to address. Investing in the early childhood of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families will bring about a significant, positive long-term investment.

In conclusion, the primary responsibility for a family's success or failure lies heavily with parents, but government policy has the ability to make a significant difference to a positive outcome. Recognising and understanding how disadvantage affects children's development and how government policies may improve some of the influences requires consideration of the social, material and institutional circumstances associated with poverty and disadvantage. While many facets of social exclusion may be affected by increased income alone, an endeavour to reduce social exclusion directs a range of policy strategies focused on the social and cultural conditions linked with poverty. To end the intergenerational cycle of social exclusion, policies need to address the gender, ethnic and racial foundations of social exclusion that go beyond income.

About the Author:

Angela Damianopoulos is the Deputy Director at the Family Relationships Institute Inc. She has a BA in the Social Sciences; and a Postgraduate Diploma in Public Policy from the University of Melbourne. Her areas of expertise are in the essential areas of funding, governance, policy, review and planning. Her passion is in investing in prevention and early intervention policies and practices particularly at the significant family transition points of getting married, becoming parents, as they have the potential to deliver more cost effective measures to government and communities in the long-term as they work towards prevention thus reducing relationship / family breakdown and the number of people in their early years entering the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage and poverty.

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