



NUMBER TWO

The way we talk about disadvantaged communities and why it matters

In 2000, a representative of the New South Wales housing department argued in a conference paper that large public housing estates 'have clearly been a significant failure', with a major factor contributing to their 'disintegration' being

the abnormal concentration of disadvantaged people in neighbourhoods which look different to the norm, where support services are limited and where the pathways to economic independence are non-existent at worst or an obstacle course at best. Residents are disempowered, feel trapped and do not have a sense of belonging.

He listed 'poor social mix' along with high levels of unemployment, crime, substance abuse, neighbourhood disputes, truancy, vandalism and family breakdown as problems experienced by such estates (Woodward 2000, p. 24).

The 'underclass'

In recent times, the policy and political focus has shifted away from the causes of concentrated poverty and towards the behaviour of the poor in response to concentrated poverty. For example, a lot of attention has been paid to the development on public housing estates of a culture of poverty and joblessness, place-based stigma and the way that the culture within a community or neighbourhood adds to the disadvantage already experienced by individuals living in the area. There is concern about welfare 'dependency' and people expecting to be in public housing 'for life'.

Part of this trend is the increasing focus on 'social exclusion' and 'social inclusion' as the framework for intervention in these areas. Influential research by Ruth Levitas, a British sociologist, identified three main ways in which the social exclusion framework was used in contemporary policy:

- a focus on poverty and the lack of full citizenship as the driver of inequality (the 'redistributionist discourse');
- a focus on individual morality and the behaviour of the poor (the 'moral underclass discourse');
- a focus on the role of employment in promoting inclusion (the 'social integrationist discourse').

Social mix and the explicit linking of social problems with public housing has been identified as belonging to the moral underclass discourse, which sees poverty as the result of the poor morals, behaviour and 'abnormal' culture of the poor.

94 definitions of 'community'

Alongside a focus on people's behaviour, policy-makers have seized on 'the community' as holding the answer where the state and the market have failed. Yet 'community' as used in public policy is a very ambiguous concept, and a number of researchers have criticised its use. They argue that it is used to prop up existing inequitable social structures, allowing governments to retreat from providing services or taking responsibility for acting on social problems. Even finding a single definition of community that everyone agrees on is difficult – one famous literature review identified 94 different definitions.

Despite this, the word 'community' is at the heart of neighbourhood renewal, with policy makers aiming to create 'sustainable' or 'vibrant' communities. The engagement of 'the community', through resident participation strategies, is seen to be a critical part of sustaining the gains of neighbourhood renewal.



It is important to analyse the use of terms such as ‘community’ or ‘social inclusion’ because they are central to the way in which policies are implemented. Terms like ‘social exclusion’ can be useful tools to help analyse social, political or economic processes, but they can also be used:

- as descriptive labels
- as justifications for particular policy directions
- to silence the voices of those most affected
- to denigrate and stigmatise
- to exclude people unfamiliar with the jargon of the moment
- as a ‘new’ and ‘innovative’ way to solve a chronic social problem.

And because they are so vaguely defined, they can be made to mean anything that people want them to mean. It is also hard to question policies that are based on them. How could anyone argue with a policy that aims to ‘strengthen communities’?

‘Us’ vs ‘them’

A lot of the terminology that is used in neighbourhood renewal is implicitly about dividing and labelling people: ‘home owners’ and ‘public housing tenants’, ‘middle income earners’ and ‘low income earners’, ‘us’ and ‘them’. If disadvantaged communities are to be ‘saved’ by the importation of private home owners and the middle classes, this implies that home owners and middle class people are somehow ‘better’ than low income earners and public housing tenants. Low income earners and public housing tenants are ‘abnormal’ and ‘inferior’, a problem to be solved. And it is the low income earners who have to adapt and change as part of this process. It is not a two-way exchange but a process of assimilation.

Reference

Woodward, R 2000, ‘Community renewal in south western Sydney: social inclusion: the quiet revolution in public housing’, *Proceedings of creative approaches to urban renewal: a conference on the redevelopment of public housing*, Shelter Western Australia, Perth, pp. 16-27.

This information sheet is based upon the discussion paper ‘There are people living here: exploring urban renewal and public housing estates’ by Kathleen Flanagan, published by the Social Action and Research Centre at Anglicare Tasmania. The discussion paper contains much more detail on this and other issues to do with urban renewal and includes an extensive list of references. The full discussion paper can be downloaded from www.anglicare-tas.org.au.