



NUMBER SIX

Social justice in communities: some ways forward

The research shows that reducing the amount of public housing in broadacre estates is not the solution to disadvantage and poverty, and that it may in fact make life harder for residents. But no one can deny that many communities lack the resources, infrastructure and services that every community is entitled to. So what should be done instead?

We need to work *with* public housing communities

The focus should be on existing residents. They deserve decent housing, long-term jobs, a safe environment and better services. The focus should be on bringing those things into the community in a way that builds on the community's strengths and assets rather than focussing on its weaknesses and deficits. Suggestions in the research include:

- improving the quality of existing housing and local community facilities, generating local employment opportunities, running projects to build tolerance of diversity, improving service provision, tackling crime and anti-social behaviour and providing more affordable housing to residents.
- genuinely engaging with residents: consultation projects should involve everyone in the community and allow people a say on things that matter, and people should be able to see that their input has had an influence on the final result.
- real community development, which means recognising the value of the process, not only the outcomes, and that the community has more to teach us than we have to teach them.
- addressing the source of the problem – for example, if the problem is poor-quality housing, then upgrades and maintenance are the solution, not social mix.
- allowing people to put down roots, whether in public housing or private, as long-term residence has been found to create greater integration within communities.
- investing in existing public housing estates *and* introducing public housing into suburbs with better amenities, to allow tenants to benefit from the better services in these areas without requiring the destruction of existing communities.

We need to open up the public housing system

The two main problems facing the public housing system are its chronic lack of funding and the targeting of housing to those most in need. The consequences have been the stigmatisation of the system and its tenants, reduced rental revenues and rundown and poorly maintained stock. These consequences have compromised the capacity for public housing to be a source of community connection, opportunity and support for its tenants.

There is also an inherent contradiction in governments targeting public housing ever more tightly to those most in need and at the same time wishing to create 'mixed communities'. Targeting is the opposite of mix.

Research shows that instead of a system that is restricted in its funding, supply, eligibility criteria and allocations policies, we need:

- increased investment in public housing – we should be building more public housing properties, not less.
- an end to targeting, which, if accompanied by an increase in the supply of public housing, means that those in need can still access public housing, but public housing can be housing for everyone, not a place of last resort.



We need to deal with inequality

The research is clear that when it comes to poverty and disadvantage, including concentrated disadvantage, the real factors causing this are structural and are to do with inadequate and inequitable incomes. Research shows that income levels are closely linked to health, education and employment outcomes and that taking action in this area would be the best way to tackle disadvantage.

But public housing authorities don't have the power to take action on income inequality. In trying to tackle poverty through community building alone, they are fighting a battle they cannot win.

Diversifying the types of tenure in public housing estates allows governments to hide the problem of poverty, dispersing disadvantage, unemployment and anti-social behaviour throughout the community rather than having it all in one, very visible, place. It saves governments from having to recognise and address the imbalances of power that reinforce social disadvantage. But dispersal just diverts attention from structural inequality, it doesn't fix it.

Housing and the quality of our communities and urban environment are important, but the best way to tackle poverty is to address the fact that many people in the community do not have enough money to live on.

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.