

## AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL POLICY CONFERENCE 2003

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The 8th Australian Social Policy Conference was held in July 2003 at the University of New South Wales, Sydney.<sup>1</sup> The three-day conference, sponsored and run by the National Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) based at the University's campus, has become a key biennial event on the Australian social policy calendar, with 600 attendees and over 250 abstracts submitted. Inter-sectoral commitment and interest was evident from the list of sponsors, including the Commonwealth and New South Wales Departments of Family and Community Services, The Australian Bureau of Statistics, Mission Australia and The Smith Family.

The over-arching conference theme for 2003 was the concept of social inclusion, and this was reflected in discussion about the ways in which social structures and policies work to exclude certain cohorts and groups from full social and economic participation. Other speakers presented views on the most effective ways of fostering and maintaining inclusion for people whose ability to access life opportunities is limited because of factors such as discrimination, poverty, old age, youth, disability and geographic or social isolation.

### EMERGENT THEMES

#### Social Capital Development

We found that a strong theme running through the conference was the concept of social capital development.

Numerous papers demonstrated that the ways that groups and individuals in Australia are excluded from "getting ahead" are diverse, multi-layered and often chronic. The geography of exclusion is both physical and human; the effects of the two often combine to create situations whereby disadvantaged people get locked into resource-poor environments from generation to generation.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Martin, Peter Carr, Maire Dwyer, Robin Peace and Anne Jackson attended the conference from the Ministry of Social Development. This review draws on their impressions of and reactions to the conference and its theme.

Speakers explored strategies to foster inclusion, looking to find ways to strengthen individuals and communities to the point where they could create improvements in social outcomes themselves with ongoing benefits to their own community. Many of the solutions that were presented combined two strategies: building up the resources of a community through specific intensive help strategies around education, and providing access to resources that acted as a “circuit breaker” to the cycle of disadvantage. Successful interventions were often supported by strengthening or linking up a range of social services appropriate to the needs of the community. Case studies ranged from community renewal schemes in poor inner city neighbourhoods through to financial management education and banking services for isolated indigenous communities in Northern Queensland.

The most inspiring aspect of the social capital studies was that they were very diverse, but had common threads. For example, the common starting point for the disadvantage circuit breaker is finding some asset or decision-making component of which the whole community could take ownership. Also encouraging was how willingly national and state government agencies allied themselves or backed non-government organisations to make interventions happen.

With whole-of-government approaches becoming more established in New Zealand, it was useful to observe and learn from the Australian experience to date.

### Active Participation in Employment, Training or Education

Another recurrent conference theme was the critical examination of Australia’s current “active participation policy”. Similar to New Zealand, Australia is trying to create better inclusion through having all working-age people either in paid work or in some form of training or development that will lead to paid work. Conference papers reported mixed successes.

A clear message was that compulsory participation for all working-age people on welfare, and accompanying sanctions for not participating, often appears to penalise the most vulnerable beneficiaries, such as those with severe or multiple barriers. The disproportionately high rate of sanctions imposed (partial or full loss of benefit), particularly on problem youth, and the low rate of employment outcomes were the subject of many case studies. Also of concern was the contrast between the numbers of benefit recipients reported by service providers for not complying compared to the much lower number that Centrelink case workers finally did sanction. It appears that the operational processes around appropriate sanctioning still require some thought and refinement.

Participation for participation's sake was also a recurrent issue. Non-government organisations who worked with the mentally ill and disabled expressed concern that the training or development that active participation entails should be tailored to the capability and aspirations of participants. Fear of losing entitlement and the lack of consultation on choices often led to their vulnerable clients participating in training and development that they did not want or understand.

A challenge for Australian welfare reformers seems to be to get the right balance of welfare levers based on assistance, incentives and participation requirements to optimise outcomes for all working-age welfare recipients. There are also signs that the Australian economy is softening; in numerous discussion sessions delegates suggested that reformists must develop levers that can quickly recalibrate in response to tougher employment times ahead.

Dr Kathryn Edin, one of the guest speakers at the conference, examined the effects of active participation in welfare reform in the American context. Her work drew on qualitative and quantitative analysis of the two planks of welfare reform in the United States: compulsory work and the formation and maintenance of marriage. Since the reforms, unprecedented numbers in the US have left the assistance rolls and gone to work. Overall, people in work were better off – just – due to economic recovery and time-limited transition payments. Some consider the reforms an unqualified success, others point to problems. These include the large number of former beneficiaries who remain poor or near poor; the inexplicably low uptake of childcare and transitional benefits among those workers who should remain eligible; and the large numbers who must work evening or night shifts, or in temporary or seasonal jobs.

Dr Edin predicted the “better off” scenario would not endure with the softening economy and when workers lost their time-limited supports. In-depth interviews with unmarried couples on welfare revealed a high prevalence of social problems such as mental health issues and offending. The couples were not getting married because they felt they could not achieve the basic requirements for marriage both in economic terms (assets and savings) and in relational maturity.

So what is the future for active participation as a pathway to social inclusion? Perhaps some of the answers lie with feedback from people it was designed to include.

The McClure report has recommended a major simplification to the income support system to better assist all working-age people. Extensive round-table discussions and focus groups are being carried out by the Welfare Consultative Forum with welfare recipients, community groups, service providers and academics about the principles that should underlie a fairer and simpler welfare system. A paper on feedback from recent consultation rounds indicates that active participation is recognised by

respondents as a necessary lever to better assist benefit recipients to engage economically and socially. However, activity should be consistent with a person's capability to engage, relevant to their labour market, and based on reward principles rather than compliance requirements. Many also felt that an improved welfare structure should encourage transitions from welfare to work by providing a fairer and more gradual abatement system and less loss of support concessions for low earners.

### Outcomes for Children

Improving outcomes for children was another recurrent theme. Many papers reported on the growing disparities between different groups of Australian children. One issue was the impact of family structures and income on outcomes for both children and parents. Another was the coincidence of poor outcomes for poor families – again for both parents and children. There was little optimism over the ability to get things right for the children and the parent in terms of positive labour force outcomes in single-parent families.

Conference guest speaker Fiona Stanley elaborated on some of these disparities. Professor Stanley is a noted paediatrician and current “Australian of the year”. She heads a national research organisation called the Australian Alliance for Children and Youth, which has been established to collect and disseminate the best information to bring about changes for improving youth and child outcomes.

Professor Stanley spoke about outcomes for youth and children, noting the paradox that increasing wealth in Australia's contemporary economy is accompanied by increasing social disparity and problems for children and youth. In particular, she presented data on the increasing disparity in health outcomes between aboriginal and non-aboriginal children and the young age at which alcohol, drug use, sexual activity, mental health and criminal problems affected aboriginal children. Professor Stanley's presentation also covered interesting pathways to poor outcomes, and also pathways to increased resilience, identified through statistical analysis undertaken by her organisation. Links to the Alliance are expected to be available on the SPRC website in time.

### CONFERENCE STRENGTHS

Many papers were the result of research collaborations between state and federal government, and between every possible combination of government, academia and non-government organisations. It was interesting to see the sheer scale of the research effort that is going on in Australia and the partnerships that have evolved. Organisations like the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth appear necessary to avoid research “silos” and ensure findings are shared with the sectors and organisations that can make use of them.

The conference engendered a feeling that the sectors work well together and critical debate is encouraged. The SPRC appears to be a good national vector for fostering debate across sectors.

The conference provided a good balance of Australian and overseas speakers. Different perspectives on the inclusion debate were represented, from macroeconomics to small case studies.

Lots of New Zealand's social policy concerns about inclusion were also present in Australia's debates. We can learn from what they are doing, especially in how to set up tailored funding and service alliances to help diverse communities.

The conference was extremely well organised. All of the forums and contributed papers allowed plenty of time for delegates to discuss and debate the themes and findings that were presented, sometimes vigorously.

#### CONFERENCE WEAKNESSES

The conference content was slightly skewed towards posing questions and raising issues, rather than proposing answers, especially in welfare reform papers. This left us wondering whether this meant that there were no answers yet.

There appeared to be some frustration expressed by conference delegates from non-governmental organisations that there were no papers addressing what was being done by government to create employment or halt declining employment availability. This gap was a serious one in the current context of a contracting Australian job market, and given the prevalent question of why people should be made to participate in employment-related training and development if there are decreasing job prospects at the end of it.

The conference covered the full range of exclusion-related concerns – except one. Justice issues were notable for their absence from the programme. Indeed, justice agencies were notable for their absence from the delegate list. This probably reflected in part the particular origins and history of the SPRC. However, it was a significant oversight that will, we hope, be corrected in future conferences. In the meantime, one wonders whether this points to a significant disjunction between Australian justice and welfare services.

#### WORTHWHILE?

For those from MSD who had attended previous Australian Social Policy conferences it was interesting to see the incremental increase of research and research interest in

what can be done for indigenous Australian communities and cohorts within those communities. It will be interesting to hear how these communities are progressing at the 9th ASP Conference.

On the other hand, while the research base has progressed, the core debates have not. For example, the dislike and suspicion towards mutual obligation theories is the same now as some of the MSD delegates remember it from 1999. It will be equally interesting to see if the 9th ASP Conference reflects any maturing of the debate away from merely reiterating favourite gripes and towards positing innovative solutions.

So, for the New Zealand delegate, what did the conference provide?

The 8th ASP Conference provided an insight into what is being achieved in a large country with a sizeable research budget. It also provided an opportunity to see that, at the policy and practice levels, money is not everything. The human element surfaced as significant in good programme design and delivery, something amply proven by the difficulties experienced by some of the well resourced but poorly conceived initiatives reported on during the conference.

For civil servants in a small cash-strapped country, this is a salutary lesson, and one well worth the trip.