

LEARNINGS IN SOCIAL INCLUSION

CHAIN REACTION FOUNDATION

**BY HON JOAN KIRNER AM
VICTORIAN COMMUNITY AMBASSADOR**

2 MARCH 2010

May I begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the country on which we are gathered – the Julin Nation and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Partnership in Social Inclusion

In 2001 I was appointed by the Victorian Government as Victoria's first Communities Ambassador. It is a great role in which I move around the State to converse with communities on the essential task of building stronger and more inclusive communities. As I fulfil my role I am both confirming my learning over 40 years work in advocating and building community participation, community ownership and social inclusion. I have the privilege of entering into new dialogue and sharing new learning with local communities and local, state and national decision-makers.

Learning 1: Passion and Will

It is very exciting for me to work again on social inclusion directly with communities, organisation, business and government. It is also rewarding to see that my passion and the passion of many in this room for social inclusion are again being seen, in this state, this nation and beyond, as the essential underpinning for building strong, inclusive and sustainable communities.

For me, strong and inclusive communities are those in which people feel that they belong, their contribution is valued, they can have a say, have an income, access lifelong education and housing and thereby can improve their lives and the lives of others. In short, inclusive communities are communities in which no one is left behind; every person can become what they are capable of becoming.

In my work, I am inspired by the words of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Muhammed Unus.

“Greeting poverty is a matter of free will. We wanted to go to the moon, so we went there. We achieve what we want to achieve. If we are not achieving something, it is because we have not put our minds to it.

I believe that we can create a poverty-free world because poverty is not created by poor people. Poverty has been created and sustained by the

economic and social system that we have designed for ourselves; the institutions and concepts that make up these systems; the policies that we pursue.”

Learning 2: A Sense of Purpose – Closing the Income Gap

In Australia, despite the economic growth we've enjoyed over the last ten years – there are some groups, some areas and some people who have been left behind. Too many people are missing out on the benefits of that growth. As an example, approximately 1,800,000 people in Australia are unemployed or under-employed. That has a huge impact on the human dignity, social cohesion and sustainable economic growth opportunities for our nation and State. It excludes thousands of single mothers and their children from full participation in our society together with many others.

In my work I keep asking myself “**How do we close the equity and inclusion gap?**” It is important to work at the individual and community level with effective anti-poverty schemes like low or no interest loans or saver plus community enterprise projects for low income people.

Beyond projects like that we all must ask ourselves about the bigger existence picture. What changes in our economic, social, cultural, environmental do nations need to achieve an inclusive nation?

I have recently found some pointers to the answer, a book by two inspiring authors: Richard Wilkinson and Katie Pickett “**The Spirit Level**” (Allen Lane 2009).

For me their research based evidence in their book expertly states the case on “**how societies with high average GDP, can make sustained improvement in the quality of life for the vast majority of the populations.**”

They clearly demonstrate that countries like Sweden, Norway and Japan with a greater gap between rich & poor, are more cohesive and inclusive than countries whose focus is only on increasing the GDP and measuring wealth.

The authors also suggest that in examining the social problems in these countries there is evidence to demonstrate that:

“if the United States was to reduce its income inequality to something like the average of the four most equal of the rich countries (Japan, Norway, Sweden and Finland), the proportion of the population feeling they could trust others might rise by 75 per cent – presumably with matching improvements in the quality of community life; rates of mental illness and obesity might similarly each be cut by almost two-thirds, teenage birth rates could be more than halved, prison population might be reduced by 75 per cent, and people could live longer while working the equivalent of two months less per year.

Similarly, if Britain became as equal as the same four countries, levels of trust might be expected to be two-thirds as high again as they are now, mental illness might be more than halved, everyone would get additional year of life, teenager birth rates could fall to one-third, everyone could get the equivalent of almost seven weeks extra holiday a year, and the government could be closing prisons all over the country.”

I would love to see that kind of analysis done on our country. Perhaps such an opportunity will be created by the forthcoming public debate on the recommendations of the Henry Tax Review and the Social Inclusion Plan subsequently public debate.

I hope we will all have the courage in Australia to carry out social inclusion values, knowledge and vision into that big picture debate on social and economic inclusion.

Learning 3: The importance of Place in Building Strong Partnerships

There is a great deal of evidence to show that many of the people who are missing out in our society are located in particular areas.

As Professor Tony Vinson has demonstrated in his recent report, “Dropping off the Edge”, a handful of postcodes account for the most of the disadvantaged communities in Victoria and NSW.

Three per cent of all communities in Australia – 68 in all – have double the rate of unemployment in comparison to the average of other communities, and two and a half times the rate of long term unemployment (much of it intergenerational).

In “Dropping off the Edge” Vinson talks about these areas experiencing “the piling of disadvantage upon disadvantage” and the harmful consequences for individuals and families and society that result.

Here today, and in society in general, we have two choices.

We can treat Vinson’s report as just another research report or we can use it as a call for arms for governments, business and community organisation to work with identified communities to overcome disadvantage and recognise that for society as a whole to prosper, every person, every community needs to be more productive, and more equal and thereby more socially inclusive.

There is some hope and some important social inclusion strategies that can be drawn from the Vinson report. The study demonstrates that if the right government business and community interventions are made over and sustained by continuing government investment and community ownership, many of the harmful effects from entrenched disadvantaged can be overcome.

There are some great examples of place based interventions in Victoria:

- There are the Victorian Department of Housing's 19 Neighbourhood Renewal Projects that have been working in public housing areas to involve local residents in decision making and rebuilding their communities – including Hastings, Braybrook, Collingwood, Broadmeadows, Morwell, Corio and Colac. I love the reaction of one Neighbourhood Renewal resident from Morwell of her renewal experience:

“Before neighbourhood renewal I was a rent payer now I am a citizen”

(A key quote in State of Neighbourhood Renewal Report 2009)

- And there are department of Planning and Community Development projects like Community Renewal and Best Start that are making a difference in areas of high socio economic disadvantage – Laverton, Whittington, Frankston North, North Bayswater, Chelsea, Hampton Park, Craigieburn and West Rosebud. Comments like Jennifer's, a single mum, an early school leaver with three kids in a Neighbourhood Renewal Program are becoming more common. Jennifer talked to me about her new Community Enterprise pathway to training and employment at a recent Community Enterprise Conference she said:

“Before no one bothered about us, now I feel I am an active member of my community and have a say in what's happening ... It's a great opportunity to be involved and for my children to see me involved.”

Now that's not a bad definition of social inclusion.

Learning 4: Local Community Partnerships

As we focus on place based action we need to concentrate on ensuring that the local communities who are affected by the decisions are included in the making of these decisions. We need to focus on their hopes, needs, talents and potential contributions. We need to include and empower people; Indigenous Australians and those who are newly arrived migrants or refugees, people with mental health issues and people with disabilities, single parents and people on low incomes who are often longer term residents.

In particular, it is important that social inclusion policy and action means that government, business and communities work in partnership with Indigenous peoples to close the poverty, resources and opportunities gap.

It's a huge challenge but it can be achieved. The Victorian framework includes a set of agreed key aims, indicators and outcomes that will measure progress in improving lives of Indigenous people – in justice; child health and safety; school participation, attainment and completion and employment outcomes. Progress in these areas is essential to building a

more inclusive society, which Aboriginal leader Paul Briggs defines as occurring when:

“Aboriginal people become visible across a range of activities in [Shepparton’s] social and cultural life; but particularly in the private sector (that is working in a chemist, as a store sale assistant etc).”

It is exciting that the work of the Government and communities is being augmented by business. For example: Shannon’s Way, a marketing company and the ANZ bank are currently working on a social inclusion project which aims to employ 300 young indigenous in the bank’s agencies.

If ANZ Bank can do it across its branches and centrally, so can the state and local government, business and local communities across Australia.

But social inclusion programs don’t have to be as big as the ANZ plan to be successful at increasing social and economic conclusion. Take the example the Horn of Africa Women’s Sewing and Learning Group in Braybrook.

The following elements were essential in the success of this program.

- **Identifying the Need:** In Braybrook, Melbourne Centrecare, the local church and wider community Somali and Sudanese women identified a need to be less isolated, to make quality, colourful, affordable clothes for their children, to learn English, to be trained for a job and to get a license.
- **Identifying the Assets:** Willing English speaking sewing savvy volunteers, a supportive Church auspice, the Centrecare Network and talented African women determined to improve their lives and that of their children, and DPCD small volunteer grants.
- **Linking the Partners:** Local Catholic church, Centacare, Human Services Department, volunteer tutors, childcare workers, and women themselves all work together to run a local English language learning, sewing and occasional child care group for African women and Australian born volunteers. The local university helped them to undertake Certificate Courses in ageing and childcare.
- **Shared Outcomes:** There was a decrease in social isolation for mothers and children, increase in women’s participation in local community life, and improved English and job opportunities for the African women. All this leads to greater social inclusion for African women and Australian born volunteers. All of these women who wanted a job now have one and there is now a waiting list for the sewing cum English classes from both new arrivals and long term residents of the area who have seen how to build a better future for themselves and their families and communities.

Learning 5: Working on the Big Picture

To achieve long term social and economic inclusion and environmental sustainability, we need genuine system of change. Including genuine whole of government, whole of community governances approaches.

There has been a perception in the past, in some quarters, that economic progress and efficiency and social inclusion are enemies. Action on one is often seen as potentially damaging to the other. In fact to achieve progress both areas need to be addressed.

For example, Australia is desperately short of skilled labour. An important section of the labour pool for addressing that shortage lies in people from disadvantaged areas. Victoria's national Reform Agenda points out that in terms of increasing productivity, accessing or improving in terms of those already trained has only a small contribution to make to skill levels of our workforce. It could provide about one to two percent growth in productivity over the next ten years. But the benefits from increasing the workforce participation of those currently excluded are much, much greater. In fact it has more than double the effect – it could provide anything up to a 68% increase in productivity.

So where should we focus our skilling Australia efforts. Looking at the specific groups' participation rate for men in the 24-54 year age groups is already around 91%. It is probably going to be hard to boost the figure a lot higher.

But the participation are in other groups is much lower.

For instance –

- Women's participation in the paid workforce is only about 57%
- For people with disabilities it is even lower;
- As it is certain geographic areas with lower education levels

To close the gap in Australia's skilled workforce and social and economic inclusion, Australia will need to:

- Add to the skills and thereby the economic growth of the whole country – by including the most marginalised, the most disadvantaged in education, training (including mentoring support) which will increase their personal and the nation's skill levels, productivity and innovation.

Close the gap between male and female wages, particularly for women employment is crucial – low paid services e.g. children services and aged care. This will require legislation to make pay and superannuation equity a requirement of Labour Laws. Women earn 20% less than male earnings. Closing that gap will make a huge contribution to a more inclusive Australian –.

- Improve education participation and achievement, particular in the early years where we know that early intervention through providing quality early childhood education services to children's services pays a huge dividend in improving children's life chances. For example the AEDI Report in areas like Whittington show large numbers of children at risk of falling behind in learning and coping socially. They show improvement when quality early childhood services and care are made available and parents are informed and involved.
- We need to provide improved and better targeted support for people at the transition points in their lives – children moving from home to primary school, primary school to secondary school or from secondary school into education, employment or entering retirement. We know greatest indicator of children's lack of achievement in education is the mother's education level.
- Introduce better preventative health strategies which enable people to tackle the causes of disease like diabetes through prevention.
- Ensure the building in disadvantaged communities of quality community infrastructure, for example: early childhood hubs, schools as community centres, sporting and cultural facilities; and safe and attractive public spaces. Of course for such infrastructure to strengthen social inclusion, the local communities need to be part of the describing the challenge and owning the solution.

Learning 6: Partnerships in community ownerships

Programs like Landcare, best Start, Transport Connections, Community Renewal and Neighbourhood Renewal demonstrate that increase community participation, community ownership and community partnerships do help build stronger and more inclusive communities.

Their success really reinforces in my mind two essentials in building stronger communities. First is the need for government, businesses and not for profit organisations to change their operational culture from working on communities to working with communities in developing and implanting their own community building programs. Research is now clearly demonstrating that government and bureaucracies and organisation who practice inclusion and participation internally are more likely to be successful in building participation externally out in communities.

In building stronger communities we often talk about the need for community capacity building. To my mind it's often government and business and even some in the non government sector that need to have their capacity built – rather than, or as well as, communities. Part of that capacity building means learning how to genuinely respect, identify and maximise the expertise and contribution of the community and to share risk with that community.

Wendouree West Neighbourhood Renewals way of working dose just say that. They say:

“Nothing done to us – without us”

And:

Everyone who works on building this community will be required to respect each other’s contributions and work co-operatively to make a difference in the lives of this community”

And the process is working. For example, parent involvement in the planning for the new school appears to be encouraging greater student participation and retention in schools and parents having the confidence to schools and parents having the confidence to undertake second change education themselves.

CONCLUSION – UNDERLYING VALUE ENHANCING OUR HUMANITY

If we are serious about closing the equity and inclusion gap we need to be clear about the values underpinning our commitment to social inclusion.

In that vein my I leave you with the words of a great woman – Lillian Holt, an indigenous women who has taught me a great deal about putting my values of equity, community ownership and inclusion into action. Lillian told me more than a decade ago that Australia should celebrate the Centenary of Federation by talking about tough issues, including the often hidden issues of exclusion – racism. When I questioned the wisdom of this approach in terms of maintaining community agreement and cohesion, she replied calmly:

“Joan for communities talking about racism is an act of healing. When people understand that what diminishes me as a black women diminishes all women, then we will enhance the humanity of all Australians”

Isn’t “enhancing our humanity” our collective responsibility as partners in closing the social and economic inclusion gap in Australia. When we do that a better future is ahead for all Australia.