

Macro Melbourne Initiative: A response by Donald Hirsch, international consultant on social policy based in the UK, special adviser to Joseph Rowntree Foundation and consultant to OECD

Macro Melbourne has made an ambitious and impressive effort to give a first overview of disadvantage in this city-region. Such an attempt to formulate a strategic vision, for such a wide range of social agendas, in an area with such a complex array of characteristics, is fraught with difficulties. The most important of these is to find the right balance between breadth of vision and detail, and between generalised analysis and practical ideas for solutions. A report like this, full of interesting ideas and tangible threads of evidence, is an excellent first step in the process. Its impact, however, will depend on how it is followed up.

An important contribution of the report is to acknowledge some realities about disadvantage that must be borne in mind when designing solutions. One is that disadvantage is complex in nature: a lack of money can be crucial, but never tells the whole story; access to services and to community networks are essential features of modern life whose presence or absence can make the lives of two people on the same income very different. Another is the potential importance of place: in any one locality, multiple disadvantages can be mutually reinforcing, as for example when an area's overall lack of economic resources limits opportunities to find gainful employment in the local economy, or when low educational expectations or a lack of successful role models affects the attitudes of disadvantaged children as they grow up.

Yet a very welcome perspective, not often articulated and more rarely still operationalised in approaches to local disadvantage, is the report's desire to look for and build on the positive features in each community, rather than only looking for "problems". This may be critical to developing solutions that do not simply bring external resources into areas with a large number of social difficulties, but also engage local people in helping them to meet their aspirations. Encouraging and helping people to build on their strengths is more appealing than simply offering resources to correct their weaknesses.

How then can the many ideas in this report be brought forward? How can it be used to bring tangible improvements in local neighbourhoods, while still maintaining a coherent perspective on Melbourne's development as a whole? How can the exercise avoid the fate of many grandiose visions that I have encountered in cities around the world – to become a talking shop that makes its participants feel good but has little further impact? And if it does succeed in mustering the voluntary and philanthropic sector to pursue new and co-ordinated purposes, where can these efforts make a real difference to people's lives, and how will this interact with the contribution made by public intervention and the influence of private commercial activity on where and how people live in the city?

These questions need to be resolved in relation to local circumstances: the answers will depend on local power structures, on who are the movers and shakers, at where existing initiatives and expertise can be fruitfully developed and on many other factors. This

contribution by an outsider cannot therefore give a prescription about a way forward, but rather offer some perspectives that may be useful in the process. Specifically, I suggest below three perspectives, each of which suggests a possible step in taking this project forward.

1) Understanding the precise geography of disadvantage would help in the design of solutions

The analysis in this documents starts to think about the geography of disadvantage in the Melbourne region. It takes a first look at which parts of the city have the least favourable scores on various indicators. But it does not yet nail the issue of how various disadvantages combine in particular districts or neighbourhoods to produce certain consequences.

In the United Kingdom, the last few years have seen a revolution in our understanding of multiple disadvantage at very local area level. This owes a lot to the production of large new datasets, gathered from administrative rather than survey data. Information needed for administrative purposes, such as who is claiming a particular social security benefit or how many children get poor grades at school, has been put onto a large database that allows analysis at a very small area level – down to a neighbourhood covering a few hundred households. This makes it possible to get breakdowns that cannot be made on the basis of sample surveys. Not only does it allow us to see which neighbourhoods are the most deprived, but also it allows us to analyse the extent to which different kinds of disadvantage are concentrated in certain areas.

This new evidence has revealed an extremely high degree of correlation between different indicators of disadvantage within small neighbourhoods, showing the extent to which multiple problems feed of each other and guiding the implementation of multi-faceted solutions.

Yet the geography of disadvantage is not always straightforward. In a city-region like Melbourne, it is possible that the profile of a disadvantaged inner-city area is considerably different from one in a remote outlying suburb. Indeed, in Europe we see contrasting patterns of urban deprivation, with for example most of England's large cities characterised by inner-city deprivation while in for example France and Scotland, many of the worst problems are on large sink estates built in remote outlying areas and cut off from services. Within Melbourne, as acknowledged by this report, some of the growth corridor suburbs face a different set of problems from those deprived areas within the traditional city.

Within the data presented in this report, it is already clear that patterns of disadvantage are not monochrome. For example, the Yarra Ranges district is shown as having the lowest level of economic resources (page 98), but it does not have nearly such bad scores on other indices covering matters such as educational level and relative disadvantage. The reasons for this kind of difference need to be probed further. One possibility is that outer districts do not see the extremes of poverty and disadvantage, but on the other hand

in these areas there are fewer resources nearby in terms of the wealth that lives side by side with poverty in more heavily urbanised areas. This has implications for the development for both kinds of area.

To know what is really going on, it would help to have data at a smaller area level: local government districts often tell one limited amounts about what life is like in specific neighbourhoods. But even if such data are not available, it may help to probe further the sources used in compiling this report and other available sources, to consider the patterns in which different kinds of disadvantage combine in different kinds of area. Some places might for example have reasonable housing and schools, but limited transport opportunities that constrain employment opportunities for some residents. One possibility may be to look more closely at the components used to compile the indices shown in this report.

A first step in following up the report, therefore, may be to compile a set of local area indicators based on available qualitative evidence that allow a profile of various districts to be produced. In analysing this data, a further step would be to characterise a number of types of disadvantaged areas that might then become the focus of subsequent activities. Specifically, it would be useful to develop a rough description of two or more contrasting types of area, in inner and outer city, with different profiles of disadvantage. The outlying areas in particular are likely to have distinctive situations that cannot be analysed within common models of urban deprivation. These “growth corridors” are certainly unlike the “peripheral estates” built around cities such as Glasgow and Paris in the 1970s, characterised by high density public housing. There may however be an emerging literature in Australia about social problems in these growth corridors, and if so this should be interrogated.

2) People in the areas affected can help identify problems, local strengths and priorities

Having used whatever quantitative data are available to identify how particular disadvantages combine in some named districts, a next step would be to use qualitative investigations to look more closely at the needs of these areas and at the potential for voluntary effort to be deployed strategically to meet these needs.

At the heart of such work, it would be useful to include a process for consulting local people about what are the aspects of their communities that they would most like to see improved, and what are the strengths that could be built on.

One way of doing this, which the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has tried in various forms, is to hold community forums. These could bring together professionals, voluntary organisations and service users in “brainstorming” meetings to talk about what would make a difference locally. One risk with such events is that one ends up with a long wish-list of detailed improvements that people would like to see, some of which have no clear-

cut solutions (less crime), some involving political choices over which the voluntary sector has no direct influence (higher social security benefits) and others are about the day to day administration of public services (more responsive/friendly local bureaucracy). A priority in mediating such events therefore would be to direct discussions towards *strategic* improvements that would have knock-on effects for communities and ones that could be organised in a relatively straightforward way with modest resources by voluntary organisations.

Another interesting model, pioneered in East London by an organisation called Community Links, is a “what if...” exercise. This involves talking to a wide range of individuals to imagine what changes would be needed to make their community a better place. A distinctive feature of this project was that even though it was run by a voluntary organisation, its starting point was to think about how it might be possible to deploy the millions of pounds spent by government programmes in that community in ways that better served the priorities of those living there. While much of this money is spent in budgets whose priorities are determined centrally, the exercise helped open up ideas and debates about future public sector priorities as well as informing the work of the voluntary sector in the area. One example is the setting up of a benefits support service, initially piloted by the voluntary sector and then taken up by the public employment service. A fuller account of this process, and how it fit in with an idea called a “Social Enterprise Zone”, is summarised at:

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/KNOWLEDGE/FINDINGS/housing/pdf/734.pdf>

3) Early action in pursuit of achievable goals can help create a visible process

For a long-term vision for the city like Macro Melbourne to have impact, it needs to become ingrained in the thinking of people in the city over a sustained period. One reason why major sporting events such as the Olympics and the Commonwealth Games have in some cases helped cities to coalesce around broad strategies for improvement (has this been the case for Melbourne?) is because they are recognisable as symbols that bring people together. They create enthusiasm.

For this reason, it may be wise to start thinking very early on about some tangible flagship initiatives that carry the Macro Melbourne identity. These are likely to be simple projects that do not in themselves embody complex plans for regeneration, but demonstrate how some well directed action can start to make the city a better place, especially for people living in disadvantaged areas. Some such projects have already been suggested in the “ideas file” boxes, such as retrofitting and combating digital exclusion. Two important criteria for the development and selection of such “flagship” projects would be to make them highly visible and to demonstrate how they respond to some key problems that symptomise the disadvantage felt by people in certain areas.

For example, if the difficulties experienced by people in remote “growth corridors” is to a large extent linked to transport and to service access, it may be possible to come up with

imaginative solutions that at least mitigate some of these disadvantages. These might include car-pooling or minibus schemes or the development of new forms of local service based on a co-op model. Such solutions would do well to look at ways of using the skills and other resources of those people already living in the area, rather than supplying solutions from outside, applying the idea of building on an area's strengths rather than just looking at its weaknesses. In this way the help that the voluntary sector can give may well be more a matter of enabling action and bringing people together, rather than supplying the solution.

Conclusion

Like all large cities, Melbourne contains a complex mixture of privilege and disadvantage. In order to develop strategic responses to disadvantage in the city, it will be important to understand the specifics of what factors underlie the relative disadvantage of individual communities, and what is lacking in those communities that could start to be put right. The answer will not be the same everywhere, but there will be common features of solutions that could be replicated across the city. Creating an active and inclusive dialogue about these solutions will be easier if some highly visible initiatives can be implemented at an early stage, showing that this is more than just a talking shop. The organisations behind this initiative have set out on a highly ambitious task, and may initially have to be content with relatively modest progress towards their goals. But a long-term perspective, if it can be maintained, offers the chance to build gradually in achievements and enthusiasm, can serve as a vehicle for those committed to improving their city to work together.