

Response Paper

'MacroMelbourne Initiative: Developing Strategic Responses to Disadvantage in Melbourne: Today and in 2030'

Nicola Brackertz

Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology

PO Box 218, Mail H 53, Hawthorn VIC 3122

nbrackertz@swin.edu.au

Thanks also to:

Kath Hulse

Michael Liffman

Hellene Gronda

Affirm value of the MacroMelbourne Initiative

The ‘MacroMelbourne Initiative: Developing Strategic Responses to Disadvantage in Melbourne: Today and in 2030’ is a valuable report which maps the current research on disadvantage in Melbourne with a view to the future. The aim is to stimulate strategic thinking on issues of disadvantage and consider possible courses of action. At this stage the report is aimed broadly and is intended to promote discussion prior to a confirmation of the Initiative’s values, vision and strategic focus, as such it has an important contribution to make.

The strength of the initiative would lie in its independence from political vagaries and fads and its ability to provide a sustained and pragmatic contribution to addressing disadvantage. In this context I applaud the reports emphasis on the multidimensional, structural and distributive elements of disadvantage and support the focus on resilience, connectedness, accessibility and place.

The real challenge will be to engage philanthropic and corporate donors to engage with the issues in an effective way.

Thinking about disadvantage

The report recognises that disadvantage is multi-factorial and that narrow definitions only further contribute to the problem by excluding certain groups and discounting the lived experience. Consequently, focusing on traditional economic measurements of disadvantage (income poverty) would be limiting unless seen in a wider context that considers the circumstances, relationships and barriers contributing to disadvantage (social exclusion approach).

This gels with the Victorian government’s current policy push to increase community health and wellbeing through a range of community strengthening, capacity building and neighbourhood renewal projects – an approach the report succinctly describes as ‘top down measures and indicators of community health coupled with ground up local approaches to tackling the issues’. The community wellbeing approach recognises the importance of relationships, networks and location as important contributors to community health and the ability to gain access to resources.

The social exclusion and community wellbeing approaches are intermeshed. While the former emphasises the linked factors that can contribute to disadvantage – unemployment, low skill levels, poor health, substandard housing, discrimination, family breakdown, crime, lack of access to resources – the latter assumes that these factors can be mitigated if the community and its networks are strong.

The community wellbeing approach is founded in theories of social capital. The difficulty in applying the concept of social capital to governmental and community practices is that it lacks a broadly agreed definition, context and application¹. While it may be measured² and while there are numerous policy studies applying the concept, what is lacking is a clear causal argument about how social capital is *created*. Social capital may lead to enhanced social and economic wellbeing. However, it appears just as likely that economic and social wellbeing may enhance social capital³.

Successful community development requires commitment over an **extended period of time** and depends on the quality of the formal institutions and relationships⁴. In other

words, **active** encouragement, good governance and long term strategies facilitate successful community development. This would be an opportunity for Macro Melbourne to make a significant contribution.

Researching and measuring disadvantage

The Initiatives emphasis on research and evidence based understanding of disadvantage, coupled with a focus on locality and access provide the foundations for pragmatic approach to the problem.

Understandings of disadvantage are closely linked to indicators and measurements of the problem. Indeed it is difficult to talk about disadvantage without ‘proving’ the status with statistics. Consequently indicators and measurements abound, but as the report rightly points out, ‘debates over measurement are frequently underpinned by disagreements at the more fundamental level of social values and vision.’ Indicators and statistics can be reductionist and ‘sanitise’ the problem due to their distance from the source. Furthermore disagreements as to their validity can undermine the ability of ‘facts and figures’ to get the message across.

Disadvantage is a very personal experience that can also be explored through community perceptions. Research into community attitudes along the lines of the Combat Poverty Agency’s ‘Combined Income Deprivation Measures’ (Table 1.2.3) and that of the Rowntree Foundation (outlined in Ideas File 1.2.2) would compliment existing measures and fill a knowledge gap.

Describing a person as being disadvantaged may further exacerbate their status. This begs the question of how stigmatization and labeling contribute to disadvantage and its persistence and/or resistance in spite of assistance strategies. Identifying with disadvantage can be a barrier as well as a survival strategy. What are some of the reasons why people may find it difficult to leave disadvantage – e.g. social connections, what do you have to give up to move on, what are the risks of moving on? Which factors contribute to resilience and what are the sources of strength and survival – even happiness?

I would comment that a strategic response must take care to balance negatives and positives of disadvantage to avoid negative reinforcement. This kind of investigation goes beyond the identification of causes, measurement and indicators and extends to the lived experience.

It is important to understand, measure and map disadvantage, as this provides that basis for advocacy, evidence based policy initiatives and successful intervention and support programs. As the report rightly points out, there is already a lot of research into disadvantage going on.

Perhaps one of the roles of the initiative could be to keep track of research being undertaken and the various philanthropic and government initiative taking place. It could act as a clearing house and network for successful programs and case studies; identify resources available; identify approaches and combination of approaches that help break cycle of disadvantage

Local government would seem an ideal locus to address and implement projects to address disadvantage because of their ability to shape the geography of the

neighbourhood and their local knowledge, and they sustained presence in the area. Local focus and continuity would appear to be critical to the success of many initiatives. However, local governments are also prone to wilful political decision making and the electoral cycle.

Personalising disadvantage

While it is important to focus on structural factors one should not lose sight of the personal experience of disadvantage. MacroMelbourne could contribute by doing long term background research that could move beyond the current obsession with statistics, indicators and measurements and extends to qualitative research and giving a voice to the disadvantaged. The long term experience of being disadvantaged or a sudden (often traumatic) change of circumstances has personal aspects and is linked to issues of self esteem. A focus on issues of resilience, and strengths and supporting these is critical to breaking the cycle.

There is scope for MacroMelbourne to pilot and establish successful and innovative initiatives that build on community strength, such as:

- Innovative transport solutions along the line of Germany's / Europe's 'Mitfahrzentrale' (<http://www.hitchhikers.de/index.html>), which is a type of carpooling that uses the Internet to link people wanting to travel with others driving that way for a share of the petrol cost.
- Funding business enterprises through micro loan schemes
- Fostering self-esteem and providing early intervention for young people through programs such as Cirque du Monde, the social arm of Cirque du Soleil. (<http://www.nica.com.au/outreach>) (<http://www.cirquedusoleil.com/CirqueDuSoleil/en/company/socialaction/sevenpgrms/artsocial.htm>)

Housing and homelessness

In general the report competently summarises research on the contribution of housing issues to patterns of disadvantage in Melbourne.

The impact of recent changes in housing markets in affecting levels of *wealth* (as opposed to income) distribution in Melbourne is of major importance in understanding levels of advantage/disadvantage in Melbourne – this is not sufficiently highlighted in the report (eg in discussion of dimensions of disadvantage pp 46-48).

One of the big issues with disadvantage related to housing which is not really drawn out is the increase in sole person households who have particular difficulty in accessing housing – and also the supply of housing is not geared to their needs.

A lot of housing research has been on social housing tenants particularly those living in inner urban areas. We need to know a lot more about the way in which housing reinforces disadvantage for private renters and some home purchasers in older industrial suburbs (eg Springvale, Dandenong) as well as some of the outer urban municipalities where there is predominantly private housing. The proposed focus on 'interface municipalities' is welcome (p58).

There needs to be some discussion of the impact of rising petrol prices including on access to housing and patterns of advantage/disadvantage.

The potential for the corporate sector to address housing-related dimensions of disadvantage lies mainly in contributing to improving the supply of below market price housing, whether this be ownership or rental. Part of the MacroMelbourne Initiative could well include identification of mechanisms by which this could occur.

Affordable housing must be supplemented by support for people at the high end of disadvantage (e.g. those who have experienced homelessness) and face complex issues around reintegration, shame and trauma. Traumatic experiences increase a person's vulnerability to future housing breakdowns. Therefore merely providing housing is not sufficient if the requisite support services are lacking. This again points to the need to understand disadvantage as a complex set of circumstances that cannot be addressed with a quick fix.

There is also real concern about policy directions that focus on affordable housing while continuing to ignore the need for supported, social housing; small and large investors do not cope with the risks of high 'agency costs' – tenancy break downs etc. The opportunity here is to provide a range of support services that address a number of issues, not just the immediately apparent (and measurable) housing need.

The increasing proportion of 'lifetime renters' who face uncertainty about length of tenure leading to an inability to 'put down roots', also calls for coordinated and targeted changes to private rental markets – ensuring strong tenancy laws, rental rise protection and recognition that renting is not a transition but about making a home.

Recommendations (Ideas Files)

The Ideas Files cluster around the three main areas of strategy, projects and research. Clearly an interlinked programme of activities addressing each of these areas will allow MACRO Melbourne to leverage its resources to maximum benefit.

- ➔ (1.2.10) Define values: undertake a consultation project to clarify the values and vision of the Initiative as a first stage in strategic thinking.

I strongly support this idea and would add **focus** as a third component to values and vision. The current report is a very broad canvassing of the issues of disadvantage. It will be important for MACRO Melbourne to identify areas of priority where a tangible and sustained contribution to addressing disadvantage can be made. This will allow resources and advocacy to be targeted most effectively. This would also seem a prerequisite before resolving to take on a 'leadership role in exploring the changing welfare needs of Melbourne' (1.3.10) and 'Identify(ing) core policy priority areas, (and) develop(ing) policy headings' (1.2.13). Decisions on which projects to initiate and which research to pursue will also depend on clarification of strategic focus, values and vision.

- ➔ (1.2.15) Research: exploring the lived experience

I strongly support this idea and would suggest that it be extended beyond the scope suggested in the report, which appears to be tied to the experience of locality. In addition, qualitative research into the lived experience of disadvantage could

provide insights into how people cope with and strive to overcome disadvantage and give voice to their struggles. What expectations of support do people have? What are their experiences in trying to access available services? Are they able to get help when they need it? Are they aware of the avenues open to them? Where do they go for assistance if official channels fail? What resources are available to them?

This could not only form part of the Initiatives program evaluation, but could also assist to identify gaps in services available. After all, those who are most aware of where services fall short are those who rely on them.

Research into the lived experience of disadvantage, (especially longitudinal studies) can provide insights into high-risk **combinations** of social exclusion factors. What combinations trigger a crisis or contribute to long term disadvantage for particular groups?

- ➔ (1.1.1) Research: think beyond the region & (1.1.3) Strategic giving: how to use the knowledge of local councils

It is very important to think beyond regional or catchment eligibility. Especially people at the high end of disadvantage are often highly mobile and this clashes with the service delivery criteria/structure of local councils and place of origin. E.g. what is the impact on access to health services for homeless or transient households seeing as local governments have statutory responsibility for health services?

In addition local government areas that have high levels of disadvantage often struggle to provide adequate services. One of the strengths of local government is their knowledge of the local 'microcosm', however, they don't always have the resources (or willingness) to address the issues.

Local government would seem an ideal locus to implement projects to address disadvantage because of their ability to shape the geography of the neighborhood, their local knowledge and their sustained presence in the area. However, local government is also prone to willful political decision making and the electoral cycle.

- ➔ (1.2.12) 'Strategy: how to avoid the 'it's all too big' problem in strategic development'

This touches on one of the issues critical to the success of the initiative. The file outlines a proposal to define and package problems (and perhaps link them to localities or issues of interest) to allow potential donors to choose from a 'menu' of options and link them to issues most of interest to them. This raises the question of who the audience for the Initiative and how will they be targeted? How will the Initiative look from the point of philanthropists and corporate citizens? How will they be informed about the Initiative's strategy and projects, how will they be encouraged to contribute? This also has implications for the philanthropic sector accepting responsibilities once borne by government despite evidence that 'despite all the talk of economic rationalism and neo-liberal reforms, people have not given up on the importance of government as an agent of social and economic control.'

(75) And ultimately, what will be the indicators of the initiative's success in five or ten years?

Finally, it is important to give a voice to those termed 'disadvantaged'. A lot is written about them and their needs and what constitutes disadvantage, however, their voices are conspicuously absent. Listening to people who experience disadvantage and responding to their needs in a pragmatic and constructive way is perhaps one of the most important contributions this project can make.

¹ (Hopkins 2002: 7; Department of Victorian Communities 2005)

² There are numerous studies attempting to measure social capital. A few recent Australian examples include (Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services 1998; Onyx and Bullen 2000; Salvaris and Wolcott 2002; Stone and Hughes 2002).

³ (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002: 9; Mowbray 2005)

⁴ Woolcock, M. and D. Narayan (2000) 'Social capital: implications for development theory, research and policy', *The World Bank Research Observer*, **15**(2): 225-249.