

THE MEANING OF DISADVANTAGE IN TERMS OF THE BROTHERHOOD'S FUTURE FOCUS

1. What this paper does - and does not - aim to do

The purpose of this paper is to assist the Brotherhood in its discussions about the definition of disadvantage which should be used by the organisation over the next five to ten years. The question which it addresses therefore:

‘What should be the principal determinant of disadvantage for use by the Brotherhood
. as a criterion or trigger for providing a service or undertaking research or policy work?’

This paper is not going to enter into the debate about the best way to serve the interests of the disadvantaged (however defined). That debate revolves principally around the question of whether the Brotherhood should be running universal services in such a way that they meet the needs of the disadvantaged, or whether it should be running targeted services solely for people who are disadvantaged.

This paper is also not going to enter the debate about the purpose of running the services (however conceived). Here the debate covers, among other things, the issue of whether the Brotherhood should run innovative and ongoing services which continuously refine the best ways of meeting the needs of the disadvantaged, or whether it should demonstrate new ways of meeting their needs and then hand the services over to disadvantaged people themselves or to other groups or agencies to run as ongoing concerns.

Both of these are important debates which need to be held. But they cannot be aired and resolved until the Brotherhood has a clearly articulated definition of disadvantage which is agreed upon across the organisation. This paper is designed as an aid to this process.

2. What has been meant by ‘disadvantage’ at the Brotherhood in the past?

In the early days of the Brotherhood's work Father Tucker and his colleagues focused their efforts on ‘the poor’, and in particular on those affected by the Depression who had no jobs, poor housing and very low incomes. This emphasis has remained an enduring one; the focus has stayed on those with low incomes and particularly those who are outside the labour force, as a result of either unemployment, pensioner status, or parenting roles.

The Brotherhood's vision statement reads that the organisation is ‘committed to a just society through the identification of and involvement with the poor and disadvantaged’. The organisational mission statement reads even more explicitly that ‘the Brotherhood works for the well being of the poorest members of the Australian community to improve their economic, social and personal circumstances ...’ There is currently, however, some discussion within the organisation around whether this fundamental focus on the poor, (or the more commonly-used term, people on low incomes) needs to be restated, re-emphasised or re cast.

3. Why the impetus to rethink or rediscuss the focus of the Brotherhood's work now?

There are a number of reasons why the issue of what is disadvantage has recently come up for discussion. These include the impetus given by the Aged Services Review, which has been asking some similar questions over the last year. In February of this year the Review's first discussion paper 'What should be the focus of Brotherhood services?' canvassed the issue of what the term disadvantage may actually mean in relation to services for older people. A number of different possible interpretations were suggested: disadvantage as low income and low assets, or as vulnerability because of increasing frailty, dementia or isolation; or disadvantage as medical need.

Another reason why the issue is current is because, with the regionalisation of Brotherhood services, it has become clear that there is some tension between, on the one hand, the traditional focus of the Brotherhood on low-income people, and, on the other hand, a regional focus which seeks primarily to respond to local needs as articulated through a community development process fostered by Brotherhood staff. This is reinforced by a growing recognition in Australia over the past few decades of the need to support and assist people with a range of needs including physical and intellectual disability to participate in community life. Thus the range of attributes which can be classified as 'disadvantage', and to which the community is perceived to have an obligation to respond, has increased.

A further influence on the debate about the nature of disadvantage can be described as the influence 'market forces' are having in subtly changing the focus of the Brotherhood's work. It has been suggested that the effect of these forces has been part of a process of losing sight of the organisation's mission, which now needs to be reaffirmed. A number of factors are included under this heading of market forces.

- . First, the Brotherhood relies to a fairly large extent on funding from government sources for its services, and some people feel that this has led to the development of services that are dictated by or at least steered by government priorities rather than reflective of the Brotherhood's focus on low income people.
- . Second, the issues which are in the public eye, and which tend therefore to appeal to funding bodies, donors, policy makers and staff members, are not necessarily ones which match the Brotherhood's traditional focus. The current upsurge of interest in the situation of people with a disability is an example of an area where the Federal Government is placing a good deal of emphasis, funds are becoming more available, people's awareness and expertise has burgeoned and the pressure is mounting for the Brotherhood to become more involved in policy, research and service development for this group.
- . Third, the influence of beliefs about which issues are likely to appeal to those who support the Brotherhood with donations (for example the provision of supported accommodation for older people) can have the effect of driving service development, programme provision and policy work away from the focus on low income and assets as disadvantage.

All or some of these market forces may have played a role in the formation of the view held by some people within the Brotherhood that disadvantage can no longer be equated with low income. This view holds that other factors such as disability or vulnerability have now overtaken or superseded poverty as the key arbiter of disadvantage, and that these other factors can and should

act as the determinants of decisions about which groups and individuals should be the focus of Brotherhood service, research and policy work.

A final issue which makes this a debate timely is the current discussion around the future structure of Australia's population in terms of income distribution. Some commentators are suggesting that in around 30 years, we may be facing a society where the top 30% will be high income earners and high asset holders, while the bottom 70% will be on low incomes with low value assets. The middle stratum of our society will have 'disappeared'.

While these projections are uncertain and the timeline is beyond the scope of this paper (which concentrates on a 5-10 year time frame), there is still the question of whether over the next coming years, as the number of people on low incomes (and in poverty) with remains very high or increases, poverty or low income will be a sufficiently discriminating definition of disadvantage for the Brotherhood.

Even if this is so, there is still the question of whether other forms of disadvantage, apart from income, have such an impact on people's lives that the Brotherhood should respond to these also.

4. Disadvantage and poverty (low income)

In a recent workshop at the Brotherhood, one of the participants, David Green, suggested that 'exclusion' may be the key factor in defining disadvantage. One implication of this is that 'exclusion' may be an alternative to income as criteria for disadvantage.

Exclusion is certainly a critical factor to consider. People who possess attributes which exclude them from participation in society will be disadvantaged in the sense that they are denied the opportunity to contribute and to develop their potential.

However, a focus on exclusion as disadvantage is compatible with a focus on poverty, as the definition of poverty in affluent countries has tended to be equated with exclusion. Thus according to the definition of poverty put forward by Peter Townsend which has been frequently used by the Brotherhood, 'Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities.' (Townsend 1979, p.1).

In essence then, it is the exclusion from everyday normal life which is experienced by people who lack the resources (in our society primarily meaning income) to participate in the ordinary activities of daily life which constitute the disadvantage to which the Brotherhood has traditionally responded: lack of resources, or low income and poverty is critical to exclusion and therefore to disadvantage.

Of course there will always be some people who manage to live on a low income and experience minimal disadvantage. There is the minority of people who decide to live on a low income as a lifestyle choice, rejecting the individualistic and materialistic values of our society. Others may not live on a low income by choice but can be rich in non-monetary resources: in relationships, in personal skills, in emotional and material supports to an extent that they do not experience the

relative deprivation that a low income can bring. They are not so deprived of resources in the broadest sense that they are excluded from the normal activities and patterns of life of our society. However, people in poverty do not, as a group, have greater supports in comparison with those who are not in poverty, and therefore, as a group, people in poverty are still more disadvantaged and excluded than those who are not.

There may be other factors which alleviate or dissipate the excluding effect of low income. One example can be found in relation to older people who, despite having a low income, may in fact be able to live in a way that meets the norms of our society for people at that stage of their lives. They may, by virtue of the concessions, subsidies and services made available by government and private enterprise, and because of the assets that many possess, command a level of resources which is sufficient to enable them to adequately participate in customary activities.

5. Disadvantage and factors other than income

However, there are also a number of other factors apart from poverty and low income which can disadvantage people in a number of ways. These can include factors which cause mental distress such as unhappy relationships; factors which cause either mental or physical distress such as ill health, disability and violence; and factors which inhibit people's participation such as race, ethnicity, gender and disability which can either directly or indirectly contribute to alienation and exclusion.

The personal distress experienced by people who have any of these disadvantages may be extremely severe, and in terms of responding to individual need and disadvantage, the Brotherhood could validly respond to a number of these disadvantages.

However, while they are valid disadvantages in a broad sense, there are number of reasons why the Brotherhood should stay with its traditional focus on low income and poverty.

The first is that the focus on low income and poverty is seen to be a legitimate and enduring focus of the Brotherhood, from which the Brotherhood maintains a great deal of its legitimacy and credibility and which contributes to its distinctive role. It has been synonymous with the Brotherhood's approach to social justice.

The second is that other organisations are either equally able or are more equipped to respond to disadvantages such as family violence, disability or ill health.

The third is that poverty will continue to be a more problem for Australian society for the next decade (at least) and the Brotherhood will have enough on its hands responding to problems of poverty let alone branching out into other disadvantages.

However the Brotherhood may still wish to respond to some disadvantages which are connected with poverty and low income. Factors such as ill health, certain types of disability, low levels of education or marginal participation in the labour market, sole parenthood or large numbers of children can be associated with living on a low income (although with some, such as ill health, it is impossible to be certain at present about what is cause and what is effect).

For example, having a physical, intellectual or a psychiatric disability is often associated with poor access to the education system and the labour market leading to reliance on the social

security system or to low wage or intermittent employment and hence to living on a low income. Disability could thus be seen as causing low income status. At the same time, living on a low income can result in people having poorer educational opportunities, less access to physical, dental and mental health services, having to put up with more hazardous living and working conditions, all of which can result in poorer physical and mental health and in a greater likelihood of having a disability. That is, being on a low income can be seen as causing disability or at the very least as compounding the impact of disability.

The Brotherhoods response to these disadvantages would be a 'low income plus' response, i.e. disability plus low income or unemployment plus low income.

6. Who are and will be the people who are disadvantaged?

Current trends in the pattern of low income and disadvantage are likely to continue over the next ten years. Unemployment, including long term unemployment, will continue to be a feature of the labour market. Those most affected by unemployment will be those with fewer skills and less training. Women will continue to move into the labour market, but the wives of unemployed men will be less likely to find work than the wives of men in employment. Retention rates in education and training for young people will continue to rise but only marginally so. The factors which are influencing the youth homelessness trends will not lessen significantly. Employment opportunities for young people do not look like expanding greatly and again the young person with little formal training will find it difficult to find full time, full year employment. Increases in jobs are likely to continue to be at the low wage, part time and casual end of the labour market.

The trend to a decline in home ownership will continue especially among single income families, and many low-income households, apart from aged pensioners, will continue to rely on rented accommodation. Public housing is already inadequate to meet the demand, so reliance on the private rental market is likely to extend with the attendant higher costs.

There is an overall tendency towards increased inequality in income, both for families and for individuals, at the same time as the pressure is on to reduce taxation for higher income earners and to cut back on the availability of community and public services. Deinstitutionalisation, reduced government funding and contracting out of support services for people with a disability, and increasing pressure on families to provide support to disabled family members will place more economic and emotional pressure on families, particularly on women who still do most of the caring work despite their growing participation in the labour market.

This somewhat depressing picture implies that those who are currently disadvantaged will be more so, and that there may be a larger gulf between the well-off and the not so well-off, with those at the lower end of the income scale comprising families and individuals both in and out of the labour market.

7. Is low income then going to be an adequate basis for determining the Brotherhood's future focus?

Facing this potential expansion of the sector of our society which can be termed disadvantaged, the Brotherhood may need to make choices (as it always has) about where it should concentrate its efforts. Even using low income as a basic predictor of disadvantage, checked against exclusion from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities, the Brotherhood will probably

also need to apply a number of other criteria so as to help in the decision at any one time about whether to focus on the situation of a particular individual, group or community.

A series of questions are proposed here as those which should be asked when consideration is being given to the Brotherhood embarking on a particular area of work. These are laid out below.

- . Is this individual, group or community living on a low income?
- . Are they disadvantaged in the sense that they are excluded from the ordinary living patterns, customs and activities of our society by virtue of their lack of resources?
- . Do they have any other additional factors which are exacerbating their level of disadvantage? These may include age, gender, ethnic or health status, disability or poor health, size, type and age of family, labour market status, etc.
- . Who else is providing services, undertaking advocacy, research or policy development with or on behalf of these people, and how adequate is their work? Does the Brotherhood have the skills, experience, credibility and capacity to work in this area?
- . Is there a unique contribution that the Brotherhood can make in this area, and does this contribution fit in with the Brotherhood's goals as regards how and why it undertakes action?

Asking these questions will enable the Brotherhood to retain a sense of having a coherent focus on a clearly defined basis. The fundamental benchmark of disadvantage as low income can thus be placed against the unique expertise and role of the Brotherhood as the organisation which places an emphasis on the most disadvantaged in our society, and does so in a way which results in fundamental social change in their interests.