

The Senior Government Officials' Meeting: “Social Inclusion for an Ageing Population”

Hosted by the

International Federation on Ageing

We wish to thank you for showing an interest in the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) to be held May 3rd, 2010 in Melbourne, Australia. Designed to bring together senior government officials from developed and developing countries, the meeting is an informative forum, examining current ‘social inclusion’ trends, policies and programs that engage and include older people. It is a unique opportunity for dialogue and interaction among senior government officials.

Introduction

Over the past three decades, ‘social inclusion’ has been moving stealthily from the pages of social and economic theory texts to the agendas of many organizations and desks of policy developers first in Europe, then Oceania and now North America. This progress has now almost catapulted social inclusion to the forefront of political platforms and international discussions. Although the origins of social inclusion trace back to conventional social exclusion, social inequality and poverty frameworks, its meanings are new and distinct. According to the Laidlaw Foundation, a Toronto based social justice agency, social inclusion is a multi-dimensional concept that broadens goals of poverty reduction to goals that call for equal opportunity, strengthening capability and increasing participation. Therefore, social inclusion not only encompasses income poverty and inequality but also physical, social, economic, human asset, social asset and political involvement dimensions.

Since there is no concrete and widely accepted definition of ‘social inclusion’ this paper will strive to analyze proposed definitions of ‘social inclusion’, ways in which ‘social inclusion’ may be operationalized for ageing persons and how ‘social inclusion’ policies affect ageing populations.

Defining Social Inclusion

Social inclusion and social exclusion are highly contested terms and it is difficult to define one without describing the other. Many credit Lenoir’s description of those excluded by France’s social insurance system as the contemporary naissance of the terms social exclusion and inclusion. Those excluded, also known as *les exclus*, were the persons with a disability, single parents, unemployed persons, marginalized youth and isolated individuals. Since then many European, Australian and more recently, North American agencies have sought to construct a tangible definition of social inclusion.

According to the UK Social Exclusion Unit (1997), social exclusion describes what can occur to individuals or populations that suffer interlocking sources of oppression such as joblessness, low educational attainment, poor housing, high crime rates, ill health and the disintegration of family structures. The Eurostat Taskforce on Social Exclusion and Poverty Statistics adds that social exclusion is a “dynamic process” through which disadvantaged individuals are excluded from essential resources like employment, health, education, social or political life, which ultimately perpetuates greater disadvantage and exclusion. The Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) states that social exclusion occurs when a member of society, due to extenuating circumstances, cannot participate in the normal activities of that society or in activities that he or she would like to participate (Burchardt, Le Grand, & Pichaud, 1999, p.229). Therefore, social exclusion may be viewed as a process caused by intersecting socioeconomic and political agents that prevent certain groups from accessing resources and acquiring the skills necessary to fully participate within society.

Social exclusion has been mainly targeted by anti-exclusion policies that seek to integrate marginalized populations through employment and other forms of labour market attachment. Therefore, social exclusion implies that a marginalized group exists and that it is in need of assistance in order to join mainstream society. Herein, lies the difference between social exclusion and social inclusion.

Like social exclusion, social inclusion is also defined as a multi-dimensional concept and process with many mitigating factors. However, unlike exclusion, it invokes greater action than the removal of obstacles or risk factors in order to bring low access populations from the periphery to the centre of society. Instead, social inclusion requires investment and organized participatory action to create conditions for inclusion that validate and recognize all persons. Social inclusion is not merely a solution to social exclusion, but goes one step further by proposing that the onus is on society to adapt in order for socioeconomic distances to close and ensure that all are included.

The Laidlaw Foundation’s Five Dimensions of Social Inclusion

According to the Laidlaw Foundation¹, there are five critical dimensions of social inclusion: valued recognition, human development, involvement and engagement, proximity, and material well-being. Valued recognition involves acknowledging and respecting individuals and groups as well as supporting a common worth through universal programs like health care. The human development dimension requires fostering the skills, capacities and choices of individuals to live a life they value and one in which they are able to contribute in a manner they and others find meaningful. Involvement and engagement involves having and being able to exercise the right to be involved in decision making and other activities that directly affect oneself, one’s family and community. Proximity includes reducing social distances between people by sharing physical and social spaces that facilitate interactions. Material well-being calls for the necessary material resources in order to participate fully in community life.

¹ Laidlaw Foundation, www.laidlawfdn.org

Although the Laidlaw Foundation explores social inclusion through a youth-focused lens, the same cornerstones can be applied to ageing populations. For example, valued recognition involves conferring recognition and respect to individuals as they age and not pathologizing elderly populations. Human development may include ensuring that older persons have the resources and autonomy to age in a dignified manner. Making sure that older persons have the right and necessary support to make decisions in their own health, housing and well-being is a critically important aspect of involvement and engagement. Proximity would facilitate closing social and physical distances between older persons and their community and may in turn reduce isolation, marginalization and depression. Ensuring that older persons obtain the financial assistance and housing necessary to allow them to participate fully in society is also a significant component of the material well-being dimension of social inclusion.

Policy Implications: Ageing Persons and Social Inclusion

Many countries have implemented policies to combat social exclusion, but fewer have adopted a social inclusion framework. The UK, Ireland and Australia are some countries which have delineated a clear action plan to promote social inclusion. For example, in Australia, the government has listed five opportunities for social inclusion: the opportunity to attain employment, access services, connect with others through family, friends, community and various social mediums, to deal with personal crises like illness, bereavement, and the loss of employment, as well as the opportunity to be heard.

Social inclusion priorities have been identified in Australia and include the following: addressing the incidence of homelessness, closing the gap for Indigenous Australians, employment for those living with a disability or mental illness, addressing the incidence and needs of jobless families with children, focusing on particular areas, neighbourhoods and communities to ensure that services are reaching those most at need, and delivering effective support to children at greatest risk for long-term disadvantage.

The Australian social inclusion agenda is child, youth and family focused, mainstreaming ageing issues, which is consistent with the approach adopted by the United Nations and its agencies. However, mainstreaming may not be sufficient to address the needs of a rapidly growing ageing population. In developing social inclusion policies some countries such as Ireland and the UK explicitly address issues and concerns specific to older persons, such as access to health services, transport, financial protection, and also other resources which promote psycho-social wellbeing.

While governments have not sought agreement on a definition of 'social inclusion' some now see 'social inclusion' as more or less equivalent to 'social exclusion' as referring to individual circumstances involving poverty and other multiple disadvantages; and 'deep exclusion' in reference to the most disadvantaged which takes concerted effort across government agencies to address. In shaping policy as it relates to older people, governments identify the problems and issues.

For governments in developed countries it is often more about evaluating where the policies are currently addressing or meeting needs and refining policy to build on and re-energize/re-focus what is in place, consistent with the political direction of the government in power and what is possible at the time.

For developing countries and those in transition the same principles apply, however they are often dealing with much broader issues as basic as access to housing, health care and financial protection.

For example, the persistence of poverty in many countries, and in particular old-age poverty, has led to new approaches to dealing with old-age security. While most people receive pension income as a result of having worked and made contributions to a pension scheme, governments increasingly realize that economic systems may preclude this possibility for some segments of society.

Most countries have some form of basic non-contributory pension for certain social groups, but eligibility criteria for the pension may differ greatly. An increasing number of countries have instituted, or are considering the introduction of, a non-means-tested pension as a way to mitigate poverty and provide at least a minimum level of subsistence for older people.

Conclusions

In many countries, committees, non-governmental organizations and government agencies are promoting social inclusion. Observing increasing trends in ageing and associative poverty and discrimination demonstrates that social inclusion frameworks are of utmost importance to curb this destructive cycle. The demographic trend of population ageing has many socioeconomic implications for governments and policy makers across the world. In one sense, the reality of global ageing represents a triumph of medical, social, and economic advances. In another sense, population ageing produces a myriad of challenges to social insurance and pension schemes, health care systems, and existing models of social support. It affects economic growth, disease patterns and prevalence, and tests fundamental assumptions about growing older.

Population ageing may fuel opportunities for economic growth and spur countries to develop new fiscal approaches to accommodate a changing world. While some governments have begun to plan for the long term, most have not, and reform becomes more difficult as the pace of population ageing accelerates.

Poverty reduction as a goal is not the only solution to remedy this situation. Although, social inclusion will not be the only solution, it will be a step towards closing social and economic distances that force people to the margins of society.

Notwithstanding the substantial differences between developed and developing countries and those in transition, there is a common misperception that government and family will

remain traditional providers. Rather than being a direct provider, more often than not, governments will facilitate initiatives in the areas of housing, health, and care.

However different or similar the landscape of a country is with its neighbors, governments across the world play an important role in the status of their older populations and each has much to share by way of policy and practice trends. It is both relevant and important for government officials to reflect on the subject of social inclusion systems, related financial incentives and the government role. It can be of great value to meet with colleagues from other countries and engage in peer discussions, comparing each other's experiences and perhaps even identifying best practices.

In a recent publication launched by the Australian Government, "*The Australian Public Service Social Inclusion policy design and delivery toolkit*", Commonwealth (Federal) agencies will now be required to use a six-step social inclusion method of policy design and delivery. This requires change to how policies and programs are designed, developed, coordinated and delivered and applies to policies designed primarily to meet the needs of the whole population and those that are focussed on meeting the needs of particular disadvantaged groups. It applies to all major policy areas from health to education through to infrastructure, the law, financial services and other economic areas.

<http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au/Documents/SIToolKit.pdf>

Being socially included means that people have the resources (skills and assets, including good health), opportunities and capabilities they need to:

- Learn:** participate in education and training;
- Work:** participate in employment, unpaid or voluntary work including family and carer responsibilities;
- Engage:** connect with people, use local services and participate in local, cultural, civic and recreational activities; and
- Have a voice:** influence decisions that affect them.

Whether we use the term 'social inclusion', 'social justice', 'social exclusion' or 'social cohesion' what we are talking about in the context of this planned Senior Government Officials Meeting is how do governments respond in meeting the needs of their older citizens through policy and programs that ensure they remain valued and supported, today and into the future.

Meeting Purpose

The purpose of the Senior Officials Meeting is to provide a forum for senior government officials and Ministers to examine current trends in policy and practice as they relate to 'social inclusion' in the face of increasing population ageing. The meeting programme will be based on mutual interest of the participants, and designed to promote dialogue and interaction among delegates, some of whom may represent countries who are well advanced, others from countries who have not yet been able to tackle the problem. Governments are creating socially inclusive societies through a range of initiatives focused towards older people. The planned Senior Government Officials meeting will provide the

opportunity for government officials to showcase programs, policy, leading practice and to hear first hand how other governments are responding to similar issues.

It will enable them to:

- Review the development of social inclusion policy and practice that for many countries has been in situ for over a decade; to confirm successes, failures and learning; and to explore the challenges they and their governments face, both now and into the future.
- Hear, question and challenge acknowledged world experts on key policy and program design developments that enable older people to remain active and contributing members of our societies.

Senior officials attending this event will also have the opportunity to register and fully participate in the IFA's 10th Global Conference on Ageing by contributing to a number of symposia and paper sessions designed to appeal to all conference delegates, covering issues central to social inclusion policy and practice. The conference website is: www.ifa2010.org

Outcomes

By the end of the Senior Officials Meeting, delegates will have:

- **met colleagues from around the world**, exchanging views and experiences in developing policy and programs that define social inclusion in the context of older people
- a greater awareness and **understanding of the key factors** that underpin social inclusion successes
- identified some of the **challenges and obstacles** to implementing social inclusion strategies from different countries
- greater **transfer of knowledge and expertise** through potential partnering relationships
- established a **global network** of colleagues and experts from whom to obtain advice
- created knowledge and skills export opportunities across borders

Delegate Requirements Prior to Meeting

All Senior Officials attending the forum will be asked to provide a standard formatted summary describing social inclusion policy and practice which will form a final report to be published by the IFA for wider distribution to delegates and interested governments.

The summary should be no longer than 4,000 words and be in a 'word document format'; tables and graphs can be over and above the maximum word count. Please forward this summary directly to **Mr. Greg Shaw** (gshaw@ifa-fiv.org) at IFA by the **15 March 2010**:

Format and contents as follows:

1. **Country** – Identify the country specific to the report.
2. **Responsibility** – Identify if the report is specific to National and/or Provincial/State policy and programs.

3. **Governing Body** - Administering Department/Agency with contact details including an email address.
4. **Legislation** - Identify the key (only) legislation / policy that supports social inclusion for older people and provide URL links to key documents where possible (could be placed in contents of section 5 and 6).
5. **Mainstream Program Summary** - Provide a summary of the policies and programs where social inclusion for older people is a key component. You may choose to dot point the range of programs and provide a more detailed summary on 1 to 3 programs that focus on supporting social inclusion of older people to remain active and in the community longer.
6. **Pilot Program Summary** - Provide a summary of any pilot programs that are intended to encourage social inclusion including a brief description of financing arrangements.
7. **Future Directions** – Identify current government social inclusion directions or thinking that will support the increasing older people population demographic.
8. **Summary and Conclusion** – A short summary should include key messages for social inclusion strategies targeted towards older people...

Note: Recognizing that in some cases there is a lack of legislative frameworks, governments may choose to focus on any one particular policy element or choose to provide a report on the practical challenges and issues faced in meeting the needs of its older populations.