

Social Change and Social Sustainability: challenges for the planning profession

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Abstract:

Rapid and escalating changes across the globe are impacting on the economy, the environment and communities in ways that are detrimental to the vast majority of people, but are arguably potentially disastrous for the most marginalised and disadvantaged in societies. The rate and scope of change threatens the very fabric and sustainability of our societies as we know them.

Rigorous efforts have been, and continue to be made by policy-makers and planners in Australia and other economies (particularly OECD countries) to combat the 'flow on' effects of globalisation – such as urban densification and the need to engage with new understandings of the built form and the use of space; the economic downturn, and the looming environmental crisis. However, far less policy and planning effort has gone into combating the rising tide of social costs that are threatening to engulf communities.

This paper will explore the issues that social planners need to engage with now in working toward a future that will be characterised by factors such as increasing density and diversity of populations; an ageing population; growing disparity in wealth which sees a widening gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' in society; disproportionate rise in housing costs, and contested use of public space – all of which have the potential to fracture communities and undermine social capital and social sustainability.

Introduction

This paper uses as its organising principle the Planning Industry of Australia's (PIA) definition of social planning, that is:

Social planning involves planning for the needs and aspirations of people and communities through strategic policy and planned actions that integrate with urban and regional planning, management planning and other planning processes. Social planning is founded on the principles of social justice (ie equity, access, participation and rights) and

is directed towards enhancing community well being through processes that increase the effectiveness of communities to achieve greater long-term control over their circumstances (Planning Institute of Australia 2003).

A key to achieving social justice and enhancing community wellbeing lies in the concept of 'social inclusion', which has gained much popularity in recent years, being seized upon by all levels of government as a kind of panacea to the increasingly turbulent times faced by many individuals and communities in this time of phenomenal social change. Planners are urged to 'plan for inclusive communities', but what these will look like, the issues that must be addressed for inclusion to occur and – indeed – what is meant by 'inclusion' remains somewhat ill-defined. In social policy, we can see the rise in popularity of the term social inclusion from the Blair Labour Government in the UK, which launched its Social Exclusion Unit in 1997, the two over-arching aims of which were to achieve settled accommodation and employment for all, with a vision of 'A home and a job'. The South Australian Rann Labor Government followed in 2002, with the establishment of a 'Social Inclusion Board', which '...aims to assist in the creation of a society in which all people feel valued, their differences are respected and their basic needs – both physical and emotional – are met'. More recently, the Rudd Federal Labor Government established a 'Social Inclusion Unit' in 2008, which states '...all Australians will have the resources and opportunities to: Learn by participating in education and training; Work by participating in employment, in voluntary work and in family and caring; Engage by connecting with people and using their local community's resources; Have a voice so that they can influence decisions that affect them'.

The aims of the UK's Social Exclusion Unit are clear and give planners a relatively clear understanding of the areas in which the government seeks to see greater social inclusion – that is, housing and employment. In South Australia, there is little beyond 'motherhood' statements to give direction for action. The Federal government's inclusion initiative does give some planning direction around education, work, community connection and community participation in decision-making. These are all areas that generally fall within the remit of social planners – but they certainly do not encompass the scope of work that social planners can, or arguably should undertake, as per PIA's definition of social planning.

Social inclusion/exclusion and social sustainability

If we adopt the PIA concept of social inclusion, we accept that the work of social planners has a profound effect on the extent to which people are included or excluded from their social world. The United Nations offers an expanded understanding of social exclusion, stating that this occurs when people experience: poverty; deprivation; low educational qualifications; labour market disadvantage; joblessness; poor health; poor

housing or homelessness; illiteracy and innumeracy; economic precariousness, and incapacity to participate in society. The arguments are then that, in order for people to be included in society, barriers – which may be in the form of access (for reasons such as transport infrastructure, poverty or variables such as age or ethnicity) to services such as education, employment and health – must be removed, and that sound planning is an integral factor in removing them.

The links between social inclusion, social cohesion and social sustainability have been widely demonstrated in the literature (Mason and Fredrickson 2009; Pomagalska, Putland, Ziersch, Baum, Arthurson, Orchard and House 2009). These links show that when people are included in the economic and social life of a society, when people feel valued by and feel they belong to the society, and when they participate in society, then social sustainability will follow.

Social sustainability has been defined by the Hawke Research Institute at the University of South Australia (2009) as:

Social sustainability is: a positive condition created by particular *social institutions and policies*. The following features define the condition:

- equity of access to key services (including health, education, transport, housing and recreation)
- equity between generations, meaning that future generations will not be disadvantaged by the activities of the current generation
- equity within generations, so that all sections of the community have access to the services described
- a system of cultural relations in which the positive aspects of disparate cultures are valued and protected, and in which cultural integration is supported and promoted when it is desired by individuals and groups
- the widespread participation of citizens not only in electoral procedures but also in other areas of political activity, particularly at a local level.

In looking at this list of features from a planning perspective, we argue that – as with social inclusion – these are all within the remit of social planners, working in conjunction with other planning disciplines and with all three levels of government and the non-government sector. However, as many commentators have noted, achieving this state of inclusion and sustainability is increasingly difficult in an era of unprecedented and rapid social change. In Australia as elsewhere, this scope of change has led to challenges raised by a future that will be characterised by factors such as increasing density and diversity of populations; an ageing population; growing disparity in wealth which sees a widening gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ in society; disproportionate rise in housing costs, and contested use of public space – all of which have the potential to fracture communities and undermine

social capital and social sustainability. This paper will not attempt to cover all these factors, but will limit the discussion to the role of social planning in two key areas, namely the disproportionate rise in the cost of housing and the increasing cultural diversity of the population – as a result of recent immigration policies. We use initiatives adopted by the City of Salisbury as examples of our arguments.

Social planning and social change: achieving sustainability.

The City of Salisbury is a large metropolitan council in the northern region of Adelaide. The population, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, was almost 120,000 in 2006. The area is characterised by low income earners, working in semi-or low-skilled occupations. The population is ageing, with a high proportion of ‘baby boomers’ who migrated from the United Kingdom and Europe in the early 1960s to take up the abundant jobs in the burgeoning manufacturing sector. This cohort is now retiring, or will be in the near future, which will see a three-fold increase of over 65 year olds within the next 20 years. This then leaves a shortage in the labour force, as the fertility rate has dropped and young families have not been attracted to the area in recent years. This is a problem for the region in terms of social sustainability and also economic sustainability as the local economy is growing and there is a need to balance the supply and demand sides of the labour market equation.

One of the reasons young families have not been attracted to the area in the numbers needed is that, although the area is still ‘affordable’ by many standards, the rising costs of housing now put home ownership out of reach for many low-to moderate income earners. For example, the median salary in 2006 was \$49,300 (ABS 2006), but the median house price was \$296,000. For many, to embark on home purchase would be to place themselves in housing stress. From a social justice and equity position and from an economic perspective, both of which are necessary for social sustainability, the City of Salisbury implemented an affordable housing program, which was driven by the social planning staff.

To develop the City of Salisbury’s affordable housing program a project team was formed comprising staff from Strategic Planning, Finance and Marketing together with representatives from South Australia’s state government’s HomeStart Finance and the Affordable Housing Innovations Unit. The establishment and commitment of these partners was critical in the development of an innovative and transferable model which benefits council, the project partners, homeowners but most of all the Salisbury community.

Key objectives council is meeting in its affordable housing program are:

- Providing increased affordable housing ownership options in Salisbury by using some of the surplus land in the city as a form of shared equity in the property;
- Developing affordable housing for families and young singles (with limited income) seeking to buy their first home, which is to be within a mixed housing environment to encourage housing diversity;
- Providing affordable housing using a sustainable model that does not involve public subsidy but uses public assets to facilitate entry into the housing market for lower income groups;
- Housing must achieve high standards of aesthetics, environmental outcomes, and low ongoing maintenance costs;
- Purchaser is able to share in the appreciation (or depreciation) of the property value in a way that is commercially fair to all stakeholders, and
- Priority is to service the needs of existing Salisbury residents and workers first and investors are to be excluded from participation.

Brahma Green Housing Project in the suburb of Brahma Lodge was developed as the pilot project for the affordable housing program. The project assisted first home buyers who would otherwise be unable to enter the housing market by converting surplus Council land into a form of shared equity in the property. Council's 'equity' contribution to the project enables the purchaser to significantly increase their borrowing capacity. When the property is sold, Council will recoup the value of its stake, plus a share in the property's appreciated value. Alternatively, the purchaser can choose to buy out Council's share.

Working in partnership with HomeStart Finance a unique legal and financial model, a shared appreciation/deferred payment mortgage has been developed. Affordability does not mean 'cheap' housing rather it has been achieved through the innovative financing structure and sound social planning, taking in to account the social and economic needs of low-income earners.

As the key to council's intended outcome of providing an affordable home purchase solution, the project sought to achieve high standards of aesthetics, environmental outcomes, energy efficiency and low ongoing maintenance costs to further assist the home buyer. This has been achieved with the construction of 11 homes with two to three bedrooms in a low to medium density development, all with a 7-star energy efficiency rating and access to recycled stormwater for garden watering and toilet flushing.

The affordable housing initiative was available to those who live or work in the City of Salisbury, have an annual household income of less than \$59,000pa and are first home buyers.

The Brahma Green Housing Project has been highly successful, with intense interest in the project being followed by over 98 eligible applications for the 11 dwellings as well as enquiries for the model coming from councils across Australia and even New Zealand. The innovation and leading practice of the project has received recognition as it has won a number of awards including the 2009 National Local Government Award Category for Managing Community Assets, the 2009 South Australian PIA Social and Community Based Planning Category Award and the 2009 South Australian PIA Presidents Award for planning excellence.

Brahma Green housing project is the first of many similar projects for the City of Salisbury with sites being identified and preliminary planning commencing on the development of other areas. Council has also commenced developing an affordable retirement village option in partnership with Helping Hand, an aged care provider. This avenue is being pursued as our research identified that many of our older residents can no longer maintain their home and would prefer to move to a retirement village but they can not afford to buy into a retirement village at the current market value.

The other change factor we wish to highlight here is the increasing cultural diversity of Salisbury. While Salisbury has a strong history of becoming home to many thousands of migrants, it is only in recent years that these have come from countries that are vastly different in relation to cultural and spiritual backgrounds, and in the experiences they had in the country they left. In brief, the early 'wave' of migrants were from the United Kingdom and Europe, so their appearance, values, life experience in terms of education and so on were very similar to 'main stream' Australians. They also came in large numbers and were able to offer each other support and assistance to become settled in their new environment. The second 'wave' were from Vietnam and Cambodia and, while their appearance, language and experiences were different from the 'mainstream' (for example they were generally escaping as refugees from war), they had quite strong educational and work backgrounds and also came in large numbers, so, as with the previous wave, were able to provide a lot of support for each other.

The scenario now is quite different. Over the past 5 years or so, the new arrivals to Salisbury have been from a wide range of countries and most of them have come as humanitarian refugees escaping war, trauma and starvation. Although the overall number is large, they have arrived in small groups (sometimes a single individual or family) from over 23 countries including Afghanistan, Bhutan, Iraq, Iran, Burma and various African Countries. These new arrivals face many obstacles in relation to social inclusion, not the least of which is the lack of support networks – both in terms of informal supports from other migrants from their own ethnic group, and formal

supports designed to assist settlement. Other significant obstacles include access to education, understanding new cultural norms, gaining employment – especially when they may never had worked before, having spent most of their lives in refugee camps. Obstacles such as all these threaten community cohesion and social sustainability, as there are structural and attitudinal barriers which work against the new arrivals. As Markus (2009) noted, social sustainability is more difficult to achieve in areas where low socio-economic status and high numbers of migrants come together – particular when migrants are from cultural backgrounds very different from the 'norm' in an area.

In an attempt to overcome the barriers noted outlined and to work toward enhanced social inclusion and sustainability, the City of Salisbury developed “*New Communities, New Connections, New Friends*” program which is jointly funded by the City of Salisbury and external funding we have obtained from the Commonwealth Government of Australia’s Department of Immigration and Citizenship. The program uses a community development model where the settlement support and integration needs of new arrivals are addressed at a 'grass roots' level by local community members - not just by agencies and paid workers. The aims of the program are:

- For participants to learn about each other’s culture, values and beliefs, which promotes a greater understanding and tolerance of diversity;
- To develop opportunities for participants to integrate into the wider community, enabling them to become more familiar with Australian values, especially concerning democracy and freedom of speech;
- To foster greater acceptance of diversity, breakdown barriers between people and promote feelings of community cohesion and safety;
- To reduce the new arrivals’ fear of public spaces and places and breakdown some of the stereotypes new arrivals have formed of police and authorities in their countries of origin;
- To increase the skills and knowledge of participants’ understandings of local level democracy and equip them to participate more confidently in community life, which will in turn expose the wider community to the contribution the new arrivals can make to community life, and
- To extend community engagement and social networks and enhance participants’ sense of belonging.

To achieve these aims the *New Communities, New Connections, New Friends* program uses a mentor system to link Salisbury residents who are already active in the community with members of new and emerging communities who have recently settled in the City of Salisbury. The program undertakes a series of workshops, information sessions and outings where participants and the mentors work together to learn about council services and facilities, key community services facilities,

opportunities within our community for recreation, social interaction, learning and employment, and other topics identified by participants.

Key to the success of the program is that it creates connections for the new arrivals with the broader community. As a part of the program participants go with their mentors to the mentors' club or other social activity, hence building greater connections to the community. The group visits community facilities, sporting clubs, libraries, community centres, community attractions and other service providers hence increasing linkages to the broader community.

Since its beginning in 2008 the program has engaged over 260 participants and their families from seven different countries; Burma, Bhutan, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi. Also, we have conducted celebration events which have engaged over 900 participants. The program has had flow on benefits to new arrivals and the broader community with additional service provision and programs being established, ongoing relationships between council and new and emerging communities and continuing positive outcomes beyond the end of each program. These include unanticipated outcomes such as new arrivals who participated in the original program now volunteering as mentors in subsequent programs; gaining employment; enrolling at university or TAFE, and forming friendships with their mentors that now include whole family groups. All these fulfil the aims of incorporating social change in a positive way, welcoming diversity and using it as an opportunity to plan for greater social sustainability.

Conclusion

The examples above illustrate the extent to which social planning can ameliorate the impacts of rapid social change and threats to social sustainability at the individual and wider community level. These are projects which can be transferred and duplicated in other jurisdictions where similar problems with housing affordability and the challenges and opportunities afforded by escalating cultural diversity are experienced. They are relatively micro-level initiatives but, coupled with the macro-level issues such as the push to increase Australia's population via immigration, the need for a change in thinking regarding housing density, and the necessity of considering these within the context of climate change with which planners at Salisbury and elsewhere are grappling, offer scope for innovation and a new era for our profession.

References:

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