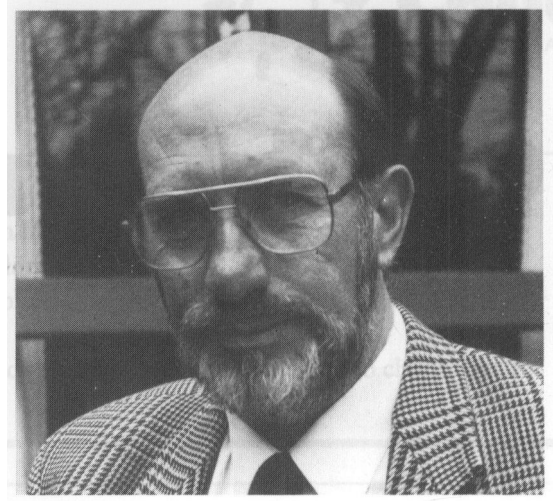


Editorial



Lloyd Owen

As we move toward the end of the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty it may be useful to revisit some of the themes which emerged from the 1995 World Summit on Social Development. The conference identified a number of challenges facing the global community. They were poverty and inequality; employment and unemployment; social integration and social conflict; the role of aid and social services; and issues related to habitat and human settlement. Professor David Cox from La Trobe University recently reported back on some discussion of these issues which had taken place at a series of international social welfare conferences in Hong Kong.

In brief, drawing on information from the UNDP Human Development Report, it was noted that the absolute number of people in poverty is increasing and that, despite economic growth, 89 countries are worse off than they were 10 years ago. Poorer countries still have higher birth rates. The share of global income being placed in the hands of the top 20% approaches 85% and the ratio of unfairness has doubled in the decade. The Commission on Social Development has responsibility in Australia for a national viewpoint and effort in the decade for the Eradication of Poverty which commences in 1997.

On the issue of employment and unemployment, various observers are beginning to paint a scenario of a three strata society: an elite, many of whom are over-employed; a shifting strata of marginalised workers; and an underclass not productively involved. Again economic growth has done little to improve employment. Jobs continue to disappear in the face of globalisation and technological change. If countries retreat from policies of full employment, fail to find workable income security measures, reduce the subsistence capacity of the general population through land alienation and modernising market forces and fail with wealth distribution, social cohesion and capacity must surely deplete in the direction of the survival of the unscrupulous. Is this the world we want for our children? Effort appears to be needed at all levels of interest. The best hope for the future appears to lie with efforts to improve local resilience and a better balance of wealth distribution. This may need a redefinition of activities accorded social and economic value. For example, what value do we place on environmental

preservation and what value can be withdrawn from the manufacture and sale of arms? To what extent should we financially support caregiving, given the opportunity costs to the community of failure?

Social disintegration is a cost of not attending sufficiently to such issues. The review suggests that there is now more conflict in more areas. Internationally there is a pressing need for the rule of law to prevail over the rule of force. Civilian casualties of military conflict have risen from 15% in World War I and 52% in World War II to 95% now. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council account for 85% of the world arms trade. Two-thirds of the manufactured arms are sold to the world's poorest countries. Again we need reform of our international institutions. The Commission on Global Governance has recommended reforms to the Security Council, the International Civil Service and UN financing. Suggested is the need for a second security council to deal with economic security. To include the activities of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, it might oversee trade and structural adjustment. Given the ascending importance of regional entities such as the European Union, their political and economic influence and the volume of resources enmeshed in transnational business institutions, international systems of accountability seem imperative. As an example of the speed and volume of resource movement made possible by the application of technology, Laurie Cox, former Chairman of the Australian Stock Exchange, reported in the *University of Melbourne Gazette* (Autumn 1995:5) that Australia transacts some 40 billion dollars of business a day in the globalised foreign exchange market. It is imperative that the power of technology is also used to capture the knowledge and resources needed to address inequality and other social and environmental ills.

From our conference source it was reported that in 1995 official development aid of OECD countries fell by 10%. It also fell as a proportion of GNP in fourteen countries. Funds going into social services are diminishing rather than increasing. So much for the 20/20 vision of the 1995 Summit which sought to have 20% of aid money directed to that end. Interestingly many of the countries spending little on welfare spend much on defence. Habitat 2, the most recent

international conference on human settlement, which was held in Istanbul, pointed to the continued growth of cities to a size which exceed their capacity to be serviced. Squatting populations and economic deterioration are features in many of them. The notion of a secure home seems not to be a possibility for many and it is estimated that by the year 2000 the present 44 million displaced persons will have grown to 100 million.

Internationally, nationally, in our respective States and Territories, at the level of local government and in our neighbourhoods we appear to be increasingly using the language of the market place. Purchasers of service, providers of goods or service and customers are roles rapidly being defined in service agreements and tender documents. In theory the consumer is being empowered in the competitive process. Government is retreating from direct service delivery, assets are being converted to working capital, functions are being outsourced or privatised and a range of brokers are appearing whose role, sometimes as case managers, is to facilitate the right combination of services to meet the need at the right price. Many of those enmeshed in these processes are debating the question of price. Should it be fixed for a term or variable and competitive. Often it seems to be derived from an averaging process applied to the current service system, re-engineered to fit new policies and distribution patterns and sometimes offered after a productivity saving has been extracted. The process is sometimes used to force change which in many areas appears to be constant and rapid. It is likely that these events will generate innovations and creative responses. Likely also are fearful, defensive and demoralised responses. As much as ever we need caring, supportive and responsive community ethos as well as a high degree of accountability. I suspect that we can't afford to waste any talent or energy in responding to the challenges of the mid-nineties. Solutions to these social, economic and environmental challenges are unlikely to be either simple or cheap.

The contributors to this issue of *Children Australia* challenge us with the practical day-to-day, the realities of tough social problems and some ways of responding to them. We are also confronted with the need to review our thinking about the inclusiveness of our society especially in relation to our young people.

From New South Wales, Marion Gledhill from the Family Support Services Association writes about family resource programs; she discusses the range of activities they may represent and argues for the retention of their primary prevention and universal role in strengthening families and communities. At times of fiscal austerity family support services are always in danger of being conscripted into narrow secondary or even tertiary roles, especially as a result of pressures from overburdened child protection systems. The full spectrum however is important; timely and appropriate advice, help and mutual support can do much to reduce costly intervention into unnecessarily compounded problems. Family support in Australia is a classic example of the often unproductive buckpassing which goes on between our spheres of government and sectors of resourcing and responsibility. Sound communities to underpin a sound

society should be served by clear access to primary, secondary and tertiary family services.

Margaret Yandell and Lesley Hewitt with their article 'Confirming common sense' point to ways in which relief day care assists parents of pre-school children. They report on a small exploratory research study involving families referred for relief day care. Their results suggest confirmation of the common sense view that relief day care can meet a number of needs for a variety of families and family circumstances. Not the least of these is the reduction of stress which can often lead to or exacerbate other problems.

Margaret Hodge, from the vantage point of Families First, a Victorian form of family preservation program, shares her experience of dealing with statutory child protection in cases involving substance-abusing parents. Policy expressed in a protocol of harm minimisation is often not adhered to in practice. Many workers pursue an abstinence goal which is less attainable and may be less productive.

Anne Markiewicz reports on one set of findings from an evaluation of Children's Court Family Division pre-hearing conferences conducted under provisions now embedded in the Victorian Children and Young Persons Act 1989, as amended in 1992. Her article focuses on the role of the pre-hearing convenor. Skills of mediation and conciliation are highlighted in an interesting blend of approach and activity designed to create a climate for the parties to find informed solutions guided by the values underpinning the Act. The role described is that of a professional drawing on particular knowledge, values and skills. The use of mediation and family group conferencing has extended in a range of Australian jurisdictions. Evaluation research of this kind is most welcome.

Finally, Judith Bessant stretches our thinking to the post-industrial society and the resurgence of interest in concepts of citizenship. She points to the absence of the interests of children and youth in the citizenship debates, a silent consensus based on conceptions of childhood and adolescence which fail to challenge the abrogation of many important rights. The framework offered by the philosophical concept 'politics of difference' allows us to see more clearly the marginalisation of 'youth'. Judith provides some clear practical instances of categorisation and marginalisation to the extent of oppression. She closes with some positive points which could serve to overcome this lack in the ongoing citizenship debate. ✪