

Dropping off the Edge 2015

URGENT ACTION NEEDED TO ADDRESS DISADVANTAGE

A small number of communities experience persistent and entrenched disadvantage. We believe this must be turned around. It is not the responsibility of individuals alone to solve but for governments to work with the community to provide real opportunities for economic and social participation, and a cohesive community life.

A new approach is needed so we don't continue to fail the 3% of communities that bear the greatest burden of disadvantage. A sustained long term commitment across the government, community and business sector to resolving this complex problem is desperately needed.

We call on government, business and the community to urgently give priority to changing this unacceptable situation and provide for a better future for these communities through

1. Sustained and long term commitment to change
 - minimum of 20 years
 - multiparty agreement across electoral cycles
 - at all levels – national, state and local

2. Addressing economic and social disadvantage at the
 - individual
 - community and
 - macro level

3. Developing local solutions that are targeted, tailored and agile
 - bringing together community, business and government
 - harnessing resources, innovative ideas and strengths
 - agreeing feasible local action plans -setting priorities, targets and allocating adequate resources
 - establishing local governance mechanisms tailored to the circumstances of the communities
 - providing expert assistance and guidance as required

4. Integrating government services to support local solutions and effectively drive change
 - establishing a lead agency with authority nationally and in each state and territory to integrate and coordinate activity
 - establishing performance targets for departments setting priority actions and resource allocation
 - allocating adequate funds over the required period to deliver change
 - monitoring and evaluating effectiveness and developing the knowledge base of what is successful

What does DOTE2015 tell us?

Dropping off the Edge 2015 shows clearly that complex and entrenched disadvantage is experienced by a small number of communities in each state and territory across Australia and that such disadvantage is persistent over time.

What does it mean?

The *Dropping Off The Edge* research does not exist in isolation – the report builds on a foundation of national and international research about the entrenched, concentrated and interconnected nature of disadvantage and should be read in that context.

Previous reports in the series have been undertaken in Victoria and NSW in 1999 and 2004 by Jesuit Social Services, and nationally in 2007 in partnership with Catholic Social Services Australia. It is clear from the analysis of these previous reports that many of the same communities continue to experience entrenched disadvantage and that the current approach – though it may largely work for the majority of the population – is not working for the communities at the edge.

High levels of unemployment, low levels of income and education, housing stress, high incidence of family violence and criminal offending are consistently present in these communities. These factors coalesce to form a web of disadvantage severely limiting life opportunities over generations and accruing significant social and economic costs to the broader community.

A new approach is needed, particularly in the 3% of communities that bear the greatest burden of disadvantage within each state and territory.

Our position

We believe this persistent and entrenched disadvantage must be turned around. A sustained long term commitment across the community to resolving this complex problem is desperately needed. This is not the responsibility of individuals alone to solve but for governments to work with the community to provide real opportunities for economic and social participation, and a cohesive community life.

A new approach targeted at reducing the most severe deep-seated disadvantage is needed.

We need a multi-layered, cooperative and coordinated strategy that is owned and driven by the community. It must involve all layers of government and the business and community sectors, reflecting shared responsibility and joint commitment to resolve this entrenched problem.

The strategy must take account of the unique characteristics and circumstances of local communities and must be sustained over the long term.

Targeted

The response must be targeted or concentrated to specific areas that meet the most severe criteria for disadvantage – in the *DOTE2015* report the communities experiencing the most severe disadvantage represent approximately 3% of localities nationwide.

Tailored

The policies, programs and approach to dealing with disadvantage in a community must be unique to that community's needs, tailored to their particular circumstances, based on the unique linkages between indicators in that area and supplemented by informed audits of the existing programs in that locality.

Integrated and cooperative

The response needs to acknowledge that disadvantage in one dimension of life (eg unemployment) reinforces disadvantage in other areas (eg household income).

Effective responses to reducing disadvantage must address the multiple and interrelated causes and exacerbating factors that underpin the entrenched nature of disadvantage experienced by communities. Effective responses therefore involve cooperation between government and departmental portfolios, integrated community initiatives and coordination between different levels of government.

A long term horizon

DOTe2015 demonstrates that not only is entrenched disadvantage persistent across time but that short-term policies do not work in addressing the experience of disadvantage among communities. A long-term, bipartisan commitment is vital to prevent communities from dropping off the edge.

Community owned and driven

Community leaders must be engaged to drive sustained change. A new approach must recognise the strength within communities and work with them to build capacity, generate action, attract external resources and maintain direction and energy. There is a well-documented history of the benefit of 'aid', disconnected from the strengthening of specific community capacities, tapering off and disappearing once external inputs cease.

Call to government and the community

Experiences of disadvantage in Australia are not evenly distributed across the community: they are geographically concentrated, complex and persistent. A new approach is needed, particularly in the 3% of communities that bear the greatest burden of disadvantage within each state and territory.

The *DOTe2015* report calls for a **Centre for Community Strengthening and Program Evaluation** within the Commonwealth Government, and matched state and territory units, to coordinate and evaluate community strengthening strategies.

Governments must also immediately commence a conversation with the community about how to turn this around and take concerted action to provide equal and fair opportunities in life for residents of these communities.

In order to do this, Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia calls on national and state governments in partnership with the community to act immediately and put in place appropriate structures, plans and resources targeted to the communities and finally begin to break the web of disadvantage.

Without such action there is a significant risk that some of the country's most severely disadvantaged communities will continue to 'drop off the edge'.

How can we best respond?

The major challenge we face is how to respond effectively to this "wicked" entrenched problem. In our view we need:

Sustained and long term commitment to change

Commitment from all political parties to working on shared solutions that are implemented across electoral cycles over the long term (up to 20 years).

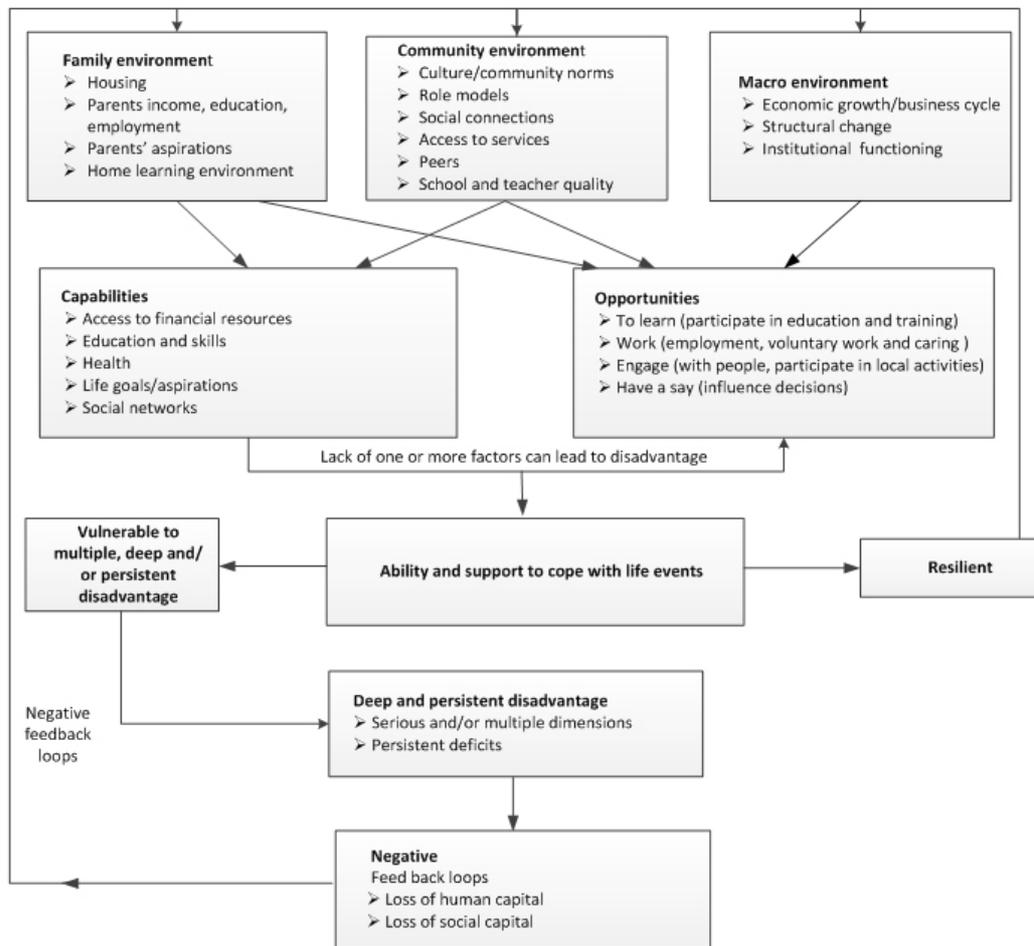
We call for a multi-party agreement committing the major political parties at National, State and Territory levels to the proposed approach.

Working for change at an individual, community and national level

Research into the outcomes people experience in life demonstrates that individuals are affected by their own capabilities and opportunities, their family circumstances, their community, and the broader social and economic environment.

Any effective change in the outcomes for individuals must therefore include action across these three domains of life: individual, community and macro environment. The diagram below provides a depiction of the intertwined nature of these domains.

Factors influencing life chances of experiencing disadvantage ¹



Local Solutions – targeted, tailored outcomes and an agile approach

Communities, supported by governments, should develop *feasible action plans* defining their aspirations and desired outcomes across four areas covering:

- Economic development- providing jobs in local communities;
- Physical and environmental sustainability – providing adequate housing, community amenity and infrastructure;
- Social equity and cultural vitality - fostering communities that live together well, where individuals are treated fairly, community strengths and differences are celebrated and valued; and
- Service system effectiveness – providing the right services in the community working in a coordinated way to support individuals.

Immediate, medium and longer term goals should be established but also revisited at key milestones to assess effectiveness and refresh direction to take account of successes, shortcomings and changed conditions or opportunities.

¹ Productivity Commission: Deep and Persistent Disadvantage 2013 pg14

A *mechanism and process* that brings the local community, all levels of government, the business and community sector together to discuss the challenges faced and priorities for the immediate, short and longer term must be in place. This could build on existing arrangements or entail the development of new structures.

The *area span for "local"* may vary i.e. could include a regional/ local approach depending upon viability and capacity of local area. For example this might involve a regional approach in a rural and remote community and a local government area within the Metropolitan area. This would be determined by the priority issues to be addressed with the community.

Many communities have significant resources and ideas within them that should be harnessed to respond to these problems in a targeted way. *Expert assistance should be available to assist these communities* to do this: to facilitate a community conversation, to stimulate ideas and innovation, and further build community capacity to plan and deliver a better future.

A *staged approach to a national rollout* allowing for selected piloting of approach, lessons learned to be incorporated and then subsequent roll out in other communities. Ideally there would be a project in every jurisdiction and projects would have an urban, rural, remote mix and include communities with perceived different, existing "capacity" levels.

Government should:

- Assist the development of a change agenda for the targeted communities integrating tailored deliverables across economic, physical, environmental and social spheres of community life;
- Develop change plans with immediate, medium and longer term objectives and be developed and implemented. These should be reviewed and refreshed at key milestones in the light of experience and new opportunities;
- Identify effective mechanisms relevant to the circumstances and priorities of that community to drive this change agenda;
- Enable expertise and resources to be available to the communities to enhance community capacity, stimulate discussion, ideas and solution development; and
- Select a number of communities to pilot this approach and then plan for broader roll out incorporating the learnings and experience of the pilots.

Examples of local solution/partnership approaches and models

- Better Futures - Local Solutions
- Collective Impact
<http://www.collaborationforimpact.com/collective-impact/>
- Empowered Communities Approach
<https://www.dpmc.gov.au/pmc-indigenous-affairs/publication/empowered-communities-report>
- Stronger Communities for Children
<http://www.dpmc.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/grant/stronger-communities-children-scfc>

Integrating government to support local solutions

In order to drive this change agenda national and state/territory governments should establish units within a nominated lead agency with authority to:

- Develop and oversee implementation of strategic frameworks for the local solutions change agenda defining cross government activity and deliverables;
- Integrate activity within and across state and national government;
- Facilitate, resource and support local solutions;
- Assess new and existing government initiatives and programs to maximise benefit to the targeted communities; and
- Participate in the development of better understanding and the knowledge of the effectiveness of local solutions.

Each government department should have a set of deliverables to support the local solutions agenda including:

- Allocating sufficient resources and expertise to better support and assist targeted communities; and
- Development of initiatives in conjunction with the community to support local solutions.

Local Government must be a key player in driving the local solutions agenda, targeting initiatives and resources accordingly.