

# A Just and Fair Society: The Benevolent Society's thinking and beliefs

## 1. Introduction & core concepts

The purpose of this paper is to set down The Benevolent Society's core concepts and beliefs about a just and fair society. Framing these beliefs helps us build firm foundations for our work, by directing our focus to the most important social issues for Australia, and helping us to make decisions regarding our priorities for research and advocacy. We seek to determine how best to achieve enhanced economic and social wellbeing for our nation and all of its people, especially those at greatest risk.

*Cumulative disadvantage<sup>1</sup> and social exclusion<sup>2</sup>*: There are a number of social, economic, environmental and structural factors that affect the lives of individuals and their communities. These factors often overlap and have multiplier effects, so that those living in disadvantaged communities can experience the cumulative effects of social exclusion throughout their lives. Both locational disadvantage, i.e. where disadvantage is concentrated in certain areas, and intergenerational disadvantage, are of growing concern in Australia. As The Benevolent Society works with people, young and older, we have opportunities to both understand the impact of disadvantage as it is lived and experienced throughout the life-cycle, and to work to find ways of overcoming it. We can also work to breakdown the conditions that enable poverty and disadvantage to become entrenched within certain communities and families over time.

*The social and economic divide*: In recent years Australians have experienced significant changes in the way we live due to the global economy, technology and social shifts. These changes are impacting significantly across populations and communities with increased affluence and material wealth for many in Australia. Whilst living standards for all income groups in Australia have risen, those already well off have reaped the greatest share of those gains. The wealthiest 10% of Australian families own 45% of household wealth, while the bottom 50% own only 7% of this wealth (Kelly: 2001). Figures released by the United Nations Development Programme show that 14.3% of Australians subsist on less than 50% of the nation's median income (UNDP 2006). See attachments A and B for further detail. There remains an unacceptable imbalance in terms of wealth, income and opportunities within our society. This weakens the social fabric within society and causes increased stress for those at the margins of society. In day to day life, people on low incomes can struggle with the costs of basic necessities such as housing, transport, utilities and health care (for further detail see SPAR Background paper on Social Exclusion). The World Health Organisation has found that people living in poverty are two times more likely to experience serious illness or die prematurely than those who are wealthier (Wilkinson and Marmot:

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<sup>1</sup> We find the Brotherhood of St Laurence's indicators of childhood disadvantage helpful for understanding disadvantage generally. These complex and interrelated indicators include: poor physical and mental health; housing stress or homelessness; exposure or risk of exposure to physical harm; poor literacy or low educational attainment; unemployment and poverty.

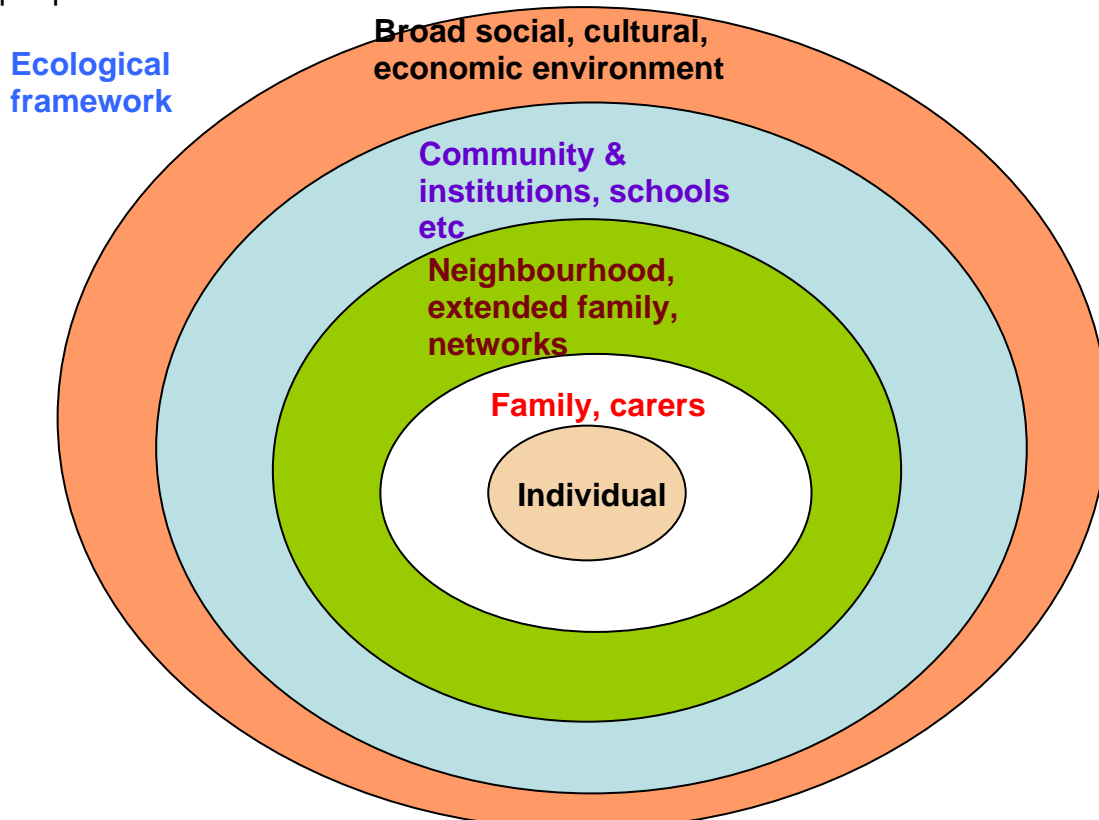
<sup>2</sup> The term social exclusion was coined by Jones and Smyth in a 1999 article. It is a more complex and holistic view of poverty, and differs from traditional explanations of resource poverty in that it is not just a characteristic of individuals, it is multi-dimensional and reflects a combination of inter-related factors, and it focuses on causes, outcomes and processes rather than a snapshot of resources available at a point in time (Saunders: 2003, pg 7).

2003). Clearly this gulf between the living standards of Australia's wealthiest and poorest citizens is of great concern.

*Wellbeing:* Today there is a much richer understanding that the prosperity of a nation and its people can not simply be measured in terms of economic growth or more precisely increasing living standards as measured by increases in per capita GDP. It is important to examine the overall wellbeing of people and the nation state. Wellbeing is in part reliant on access to economic resources and to secure income. It also includes factors such as the quality of housing, one's level of health, the ability to have some control of one's own life and destiny and level of engagement with others. Wellbeing is also affected by the environment in which we live. The inability to fully participate in the economic and social aspects of society reduces one wellbeing.

Studies have shown that people living in more equal societies live longer than those in less equal societies, so community wellbeing contributes to personal wellbeing and longevity (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky: 2006). This inclusive approach to public good reaps social, economic and environmental benefits and reduces consequent costs to communities.

*Individuals in context:* The ecological framework of human development is a useful model for understanding these dynamics as it shows how individuals, families and communities are subject to complex interactions at different levels of an ecological system. This framework demonstrates how individuals are profoundly affected by both direct relations with others, by decisions and interactions in their local communities as well as by decisions at the societal level through institutions and other structures which drive the distribution of resources and people's access to them.



The ecological framework of human development places the individual in the context of their family, neighbourhood, community and broad social environment. It provides a complex holistic context through which to explain the life-cycle of an individual and the many impacts and influences on their life. This provides a framework for understanding the individual in the real context of their social world and can encompass: children, parents, caregivers and family; extended family, friends and peers; neighbourhoods, community, community organisations; workplaces and economic organisations; institutions like parliament, the legal system, police; and cultural contexts and influence.

The Benevolent Society seeks to enhance the economic and social wellbeing of people through the promotion of inclusive communities. In turn this creates the foundations for a prosperous and inclusive society which values fairness, and justice.

## **2. The Benevolent Society In Action**

*We work life-long and community wide:* Our contribution to a fair and just society involves using our resources to work for change with individuals throughout their lives, and our influence to raise awareness and advocate for change at both the community and societal levels. In these ways The Benevolent Society seeks to overcome economic and social exclusion in Australia and create a more just and fair society. We define a fair society as one in which all members, regardless of age, gender, race, religion, wealth, status, appearance or ability have equitable<sup>3</sup> access to social, economic and political resources.

*Working in partnership:* The big social, economic, environmental and structural factors affecting communities are arguably the hardest to tackle. Alone, The Benevolent Society has little control over major policy initiatives and decisions. A way for organisations like us to tackle the big ticket items affecting the most disadvantaged Australians, such as inequalities in access to health services, education, income, housing and access to transport, is to work in partnership with others who are also calling for a fairer Australia. The Benevolent Society collaborates with other non-government organisations, government, as well as working with those in the corporate sector who embrace a sustainable agenda for enhancing the economic and social wellbeing of all Australians, especially those most vulnerable or at risk..

*Tackling the big issues:* The rationale for our focus on the big social issues and striving for social change is that the most disadvantaged Australians are missing out on experiencing the good health, education, secure housing and employment prospects which are now a given for most of us. The Benevolent Society is already working at the front line of service delivery, ameliorating some of the direct results of disadvantage. However, we know that we must also strive for social policy change so that we are offering more than a band aid to our clients and their communities by working towards the elimination of the structural causes of economic and social exclusion.

*Our priorities:* We are especially concerned about the disadvantage and exclusion experienced by people on low incomes and with low employment status; significant numbers of Indigenous Australians; those Australians living in particular neighbourhoods or regions; and those experiencing housing stress.

## **3. Our beliefs about a just and fair society**

Most people would agree that they wish to live in a just society, but more difficult is to reach a consensus on what is meant by a just society. The question “what is justice?” has been asked by numerous philosophers, community leaders and legal minds, and their answers differ greatly depending on their ideological context.

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<sup>3</sup> Equity is defined as justice according to fairness rather than the mechanical application of rules of justice. Inherent in this is the understanding that justice and fairness of access must be actual, not just theoretical or paid lip service to. Justice begins with structural and bureaucratic protections but it then needs to be applied and administered sensitively and with regard to individual circumstances, thereby ensuring fairness in practice not simply justice as written in law.

Utilitarian conceptions of justice emphasise outcomes that produce the greatest overall amount of welfare (Hinman: 2003, 251) or the greatest happiness of the greatest number. This theory of justice cannot work for us as it is exactly those people who are not in “the greatest number” to whom we have a responsibility to achieve justice for. Similar concerns are raised by market-based approaches to distributive justice which favour those who own property and are able to compete in the market. John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* comes closer to our approach when he states that “each person has an equal<sup>4</sup> claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic rights and liberties” but where social and economic inequalities can be justified if “they are to be the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society” (Hinman: 2003, 247- 248).

So then our aim for a just society is at least one in which all people with no exceptions have the rights, freedoms and capacity to access services and resources to enhance their wellbeing, and where the most disadvantaged and marginalised members of society are given extra support to ensure such access. Or, stated in a different way, Isaac Prilleltensky frames justice as the intersection and equilibrium of needs, merit and equality (Prilleltensky: 2006), leading to community wellbeing<sup>5</sup>.

### *Our history*

The Benevolent Society has grown from a long tradition of seeking to ensure the basic rights and liberties of all people, and more recently, from a position that questions actions and policies which accentuate and exacerbate inequalities of access and opportunity in Australia. The stated aims of The Benevolent Society when it was established in 1813, were “to relieve the poor, the distressed, the aged, the infirm”, the most marginalised and disadvantaged members of colonial Australian society. The Society’s guiding principle was that “the community at large had a moral obligation... to those fellow citizens who, through no fault of their own, were in need ... (that) destitution should be the concern of the whole community and should be the subject of public provision” (Rathbone: 1994, 44).

As The Benevolent Society grew, its goals expanded to encompass not just aid and relief for the most disadvantaged members of society, but to advocate for structural policy change from the government. Examples of this are the Society’s advocacy against forced labour, for women’s and children’s rights, and for the Old Age Pension. From its earliest days The Benevolent Society sought justice and fairness in Australian society but the Society’s founders were also clear from the outset that the fairness they advocated for in the public arena should be reflected in the Society’s own conduct.

In the present day as we seek to extend our knowledge and influence in the push to create a more just and fair Australian society, we can take inspiration from our history. A history of ameliorating the affects of marginalisation and disadvantage; the long-standing belief that the eradication of poverty is the responsibility of government and the community; ongoing advocacy for just and fair social policies and our commitment to organisation-wide transparency and accountability.

We believe the most important elements of a just and fair society are:

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<sup>4</sup> We take our definition of equal from the International Declaration on Human Rights: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, that the right to liberty and equality is man's birthright and cannot be alienated.

<sup>5</sup> Wellbeing is a positive state of affairs, brought about by the simultaneous satisfaction of personal, organizational, and collective needs of individuals and communities. Signs of community wellbeing are: social justice and equality, liberation from oppressive forces, quality education, adequate health and social services, economic prosperity, adequate housing, clean and safe environment, support for community structures (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky 2006).

### **1) Respect: recognising the intrinsic worth of all individuals**

Every human being has a unique worth and all people are entitled to be treated with honour and respect. Respect is a corner stone of justice. Injustice and unfairness can only flourish where respect for others is absent.

### **2) Participation: opportunities for active participation**

There are three key features of active participation:

- people have choices about how they live, and have the means to make those choices;
- people perceive themselves as active agents rather than passive beneficiaries;
- people are active participants in decision-making in social, economic, cultural and political life.

People must have the right, freedom and capacity to take responsibility for their own destiny, as fully engaged members of their community.

### **3) Community: a collective focus**

People are interdependent. What affects others affects us all. Building trust, connection and understanding between people is important for our collective health and wellbeing.

### **4) Wellbeing: our quality of life**

Personal wellbeing cannot exist in the absence of community wellbeing and vice versa. That is, individuals and communities experience the greatest quality of life when all members feel safe, healthy and have access economic and social resources and opportunities. Wellbeing is essential for and contributes to a just and fair society. And justice and fairness are essential to a sense of personal and community wellbeing.

### **5) Fairness: equity for all**

Everyone has equitable access to social, economic and political resources, without distinction of any kind. People have fair access to information and communities value difference and are inclusive of diverse groups. Fair and equitable access extends to those of all ages as well as future generations.

### **6) Just social structures**

Government, institutions of civil society and service providers are accountable, democratic, open and transparent. People receive equal treatment and protection under the law.

## **4. If this is what we believe, then what do we do about it? What drives our social issues, research and advocacy agendas.**

The Benevolent Society has a role to play in reducing the current imbalances and inequalities in our society that undermine our collective individual and national prosperity and wellbeing. It has a vital role in seeking to reduce economic and social exclusion that is growing in our society and to strive to improve the quality of life of those most vulnerable or disadvantaged.

It does so through both service and advocacy, alone and in partnership, now and into the future.

Many Australians enjoy good education, health and have a good income and we aim to raise the bar so that more Australians can enjoy what is available to many of us.

Our contribution is multilayered and includes:

- understanding how inequalities manifest through the life course and promoting understanding of how they can be reduced with a particular emphasis on prevention and early intervention;
- understanding what works and what the research says for tackling inequality and calling for and putting strategies in place to reduce inequality;
- delivering strategies and services to targeted groups who are at risk of poor health, educational, economic and social outcomes;
- promoting understanding and debate about some of the underlying structures that perpetuate inequality locally, state-wide, and nationally;
- working for change to make communities more inclusive and to make social structures and institutions fairer.

The processes we use to do this include:

- advocating and influencing for positive change for individuals, communities and society at large through activities targeted across the ecological spheres;
- research;
- implementing evidence- based services and strategies that are known to reduce inequality and improve wellbeing;
- modelling new forms of partnership, inclusion and governance that actively promote participation in decision making of socially excluded groups.

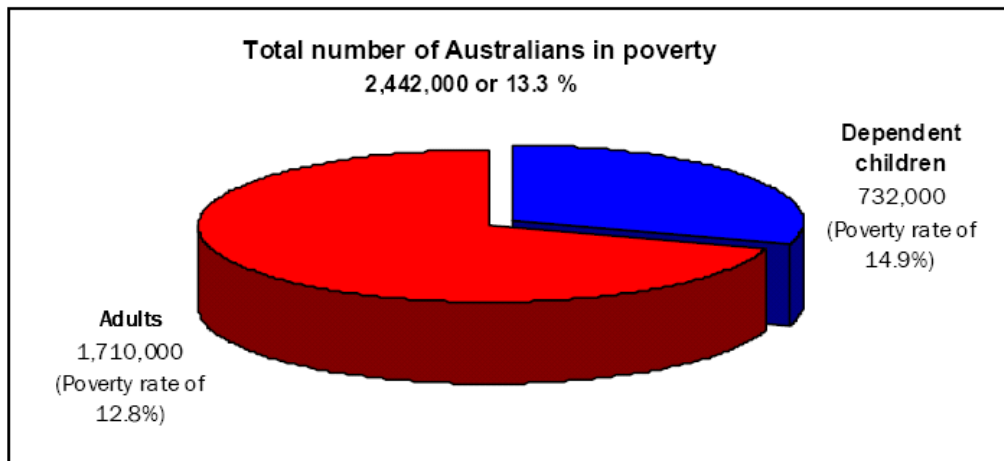
As Australia's oldest charity and one of our nation's most innovative social enterprises we are in a privileged position to make a difference in the lives of individuals and in shaping the future of our nation, both through services and advocacy.

Infused with a strong set of values, understanding the economic, social and environmental conditions of our time and having a unique insight into the needs and aspirations of those at greatest disadvantage we can help shape a more just, fair and prosperous society.

**July 2007**

Attachment A:

Figure 1: Estimated number of Australians in poverty in 1999 (half average income poverty line)



Source: ABS, 1997-98 Survey of Income and Housing Costs, updated by NATSEM to May 1999. The definition of dependent children and adults is in Part B.

Attachment B: This table shows the level of child poverty for the latest available LIS (Luxembourg Income Study) years using the relative and absolute poverty indicators. The countries are sorted by descending child poverty rate, using the half overall median poverty line.

Table 1. Child poverty rates

Country	Year	Poverty rate using different poverty lines			
		50% of overall median		US poverty line	
		Rate	Rank	Rate	Rank
Russia	1995	26.6	(1)	98.0	(1)
United States	1994	26.3	(2)	18.5	(12)
United Kingdom	1995	21.3	(3)	28.6	(10)
Italy	1995	21.2	(4)	38.1	(9)
Australia	1994	17.1	(5)	20.7	(11)
Canada	1994	16.0	(6)	9.0	(16)
Ireland	1987	14.8	(7)	54.4	(6)
Israel	1992	14.7	(8)	45.3	(8)
Poland	1992	14.2	(9)	90.9	(3)
Spain	1990	13.1	(10)	47.3	(7)
Germany	1994	11.6	(11)	12.4	(14)
Hungary	1994	11.5	(12)	90.6	(4)
France	1989	9.8	(13)	17.3	(13)
Netherlands	1991	8.4	(14)	10.0	(15)
Switzerland	1982	6.3	(15)	1.6	(24)
Taiwan	1995	6.3	(16)	4.3	(20)

Luxembourg	1994	6.3	(17)	1.1	(25)
Belgium	1992	6.1	(18)	7.9	(17)
Denmark	1992	5.9	(19)	4.6	(19)
Austria	1987	5.6	(20)	5.4	(18)
Norway	1995	4.5	(21)	2.8	(22)
Sweden	1992	3.7	(22)	3.7	(21)
Finland	1991	3.4	(23)	2.6	(23)
Slovakia	1992	2.2	(24)	95.2	(2)
Czech Republic	1992	1.8	(25)	85.1	(5)

Source: Bradbury and Jäntti (1999) cited in Bradbury (1999).

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