The *wicked problems* of Western Sydney's older suburbs

Abstract: Since the 1970s Australia has been dominated by urban living, hence the scant attention paid to urban policy and practice by governments is remarkable. Issues of poverty and unemployment are considered seemingly intractable problems and, while a more integrated approach to reducing urban social disadvantage is regularly recommended, it is rarely achieved. Through a case study of the challenges facing urban regeneration of the older suburbs of West-Central Sydney my PhD thesis explored the appropriateness of the 'social inclusion' concept in guiding housing, employment and transport policy actions in this disadvantaged sub-region. The empirical data drew largely from semi-structured interviews with key regional stakeholders, supplemented with census statistics, information from government and development industry reports and my own long experience as an architect/urban planner advocating for more socially responsible outcomes in Western Sydney. Containing Australia's highest number of new migrants, large proportions of West-Central's households have low employment and education participation rates and are highly car dependent. Yet NSW government targets for a massive population increase will further stress the area's limited resources. Social polarisation is increasing, the economy is struggling to undergo transformation following de-industrialisation and housing has become unaffordable. Ideally, individuals should be able to participate in the relevant institutions of society without having to confront the manifold consequences of poverty and inequality. The plurality of urban life requires combining urban theory with analysis of quantitative and qualitative methods, drawing on multi-disciplinary studies to describe socio-economic inequality across space, with Governance arrangements embracing a social inclusion agenda coupled with new skills in sustainable urban management.

Keywords: regeneration; social inclusion and exclusion; governance.

Introduction

Unlike other parts of the Sydney metropolitan area that have benefitted from globalising city processes, the West-Central Sydney sub-region—defined here as comprising the five local government areas of Auburn, Bankstown, Fairfield, Holroyd and Parramatta—has undergone demographic shifts, suffers multiple deprivation leaving communities in stress, but has not attracted public policies or planning interventions to provide appropriate solutions for its older suburbs. So West-Central has a place problem. Hence there is a need to develop greater understanding of how the concept of place can translate into better policy outcomes, requiring a deeper understanding of the intricacy of urban issues.

Figure 1: West-Central Sydney sub-region Source: NSW Department of Planning, 2007: 6

Cities remain prime locations for revolutionary social change, with technological, economic and cultural innovations forged in urban centres (Brugmann, 2009:28). Thus the primacy of the *urban* in economic growth is widely recognised. Yet processes of global economic change are rendering many parts of cities economically redundant, while at the same time mobilising processes to produce new roles for specific urban places.

More than any other country, Australia is a nation of suburbs (Forster, 2006; Randolph and Freestone, 2008). Nowadays three quarters of Australians live in eighteen major cities (containing over 100,000 people) in predominantly suburban configurations, generating about 80% of Australia's GDP and employing three quarters of the national workforce (ABS, 2010). However, research from York University, Toronto stresses:

> *...we need to move away from the idea of suburbs as subordinate to the inner city...by looking at them not as pristine, semi-rural, seemingly non-urban extensions…but urban constellations that have developed a dynamic of their own (Keil, 2013:1).*

Hence this paper focuses on the urban dynamics of West-Central's older suburbs in their own right, rather than as outcomes of grander happenings elsewhere, especially areas often tagged *global Sydney* to the east. Like many disadvantaged places these suburbs are:

> *…stuck between a gentrifying inner city and an upwardly mobile periphery, as a liminal zone of social disadvantage, poor quality housing stock, high unemployment and ad hoc physical change (Freestone, Randolph and Butler-Bowden, 2006:xiv)*

The role of urban places

Cities are never the same and lack a single identity or structure. Rather than a city built on consensus there remains:

> *...the crucial role of disagreement and conflict, but within a framework of universal rights designed to build disciplines of empowerment (Amin and Thrift, 2002:6).*

Arguing that consideration of the *urbanism of the everyday* as a mechanism of *knowing the multiplex city* requires integration with systems of regulation, the application of technologies and the role of spatially stretched and distant connections (ibid:9), Amin and Thrift described cities as not what they are but what they are becoming. They reinforce the case for the use of multiple methods to understand cities while avoiding over-generalising from a policy viewpoint. A landmark UN report on social inclusion, stressed that measuring social inclusion required a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods from a range of disciplines (Atkinson and Marlier, 2010:2). This paper draws from city planning, urban studies, geography, local government and sociological literature, attempting to embrace the possibilities emerging from both diverse theoretical and policy approaches and engage with the political dimensions of research. An examination of government and sustainability in Australia exposes the research hurdles confronting the social analyst leading to a disengagement of the public with the political process:

> *Social levels of harm are often interpreted and informed by quantitative data such as employment statistics, level of debt, home ownership and waiting times in emergency departments of hospitals...Few of these social indicators, however, have much meaning for the average citizen...Social threshold levels of harm need to account for more (Smith and Scott, 2006:124).*

When urban regeneration research focuses at a metropolitan level of analysis it often ignores the fine-grained, local perspectives and bypasses concentrations of severe socio-economic disadvantage masked at a regional scale (Fingland, 2003). Census data averages for individual LGAs can be described as:

> *...a poor proxy for neighbourhood scale and can hide pockets of both deprivation and wealth (Syrett and North, 2008:17).*

Social policy uses terms such as social inclusion and exclusion, polarisation, diversity, social capital and social mix—all describing the presence of socio-economic inequality across space. These concepts have a relationship to place, comprising spatial units ranging from states and territories, to regions, cities, towns, suburbs and neighbourhoods. This guides the understanding of issues confronting West-Central's older suburbs currently ill-equipped to deal with increasing locational and social disadvantage, with no representative process to ensure their well-being or establish effective regeneration programs based on much-needed social interventions.

Overseas regeneration policies

For decades UK poverty and unemployment issues have been considered seemingly intractable problems. Finn, Atkinson and Crawford (2007) adopted the terminology of *wicked problems* (coined by Rittel and Webber, 1973) when such problems appeared almost impossible to resolve. They traced the conceptualisations of poverty and unemployment in different ways over time, from the *social pathological approach*—wherein the poor were deemed responsible for their own problems—to the *structural approach* in which they were the victims of wider forces, or a combination of both. Nineteenth century terms such as the *deserving* and *undeserving poor,* including the derogatory term *underclass,* were echoed in late twentieth-century politics with conservatives mobilising poverty and unemployment as reasons for attacks on so-called welfare dependency (Labonte, 2004:117; Finn, Atkinson and Crawford, 2007:1).

In Britain from the 1970s neo-liberal thinking asserted that poverty could be overcome by economic growth, better resource allocation and the unleashing of private enterprise. Urban policy under New Labour from 1997 concentrated on short-term economic development, yet the problems needed long-term action to address social and environmental issues. A transition from industrial to post-industrial capitalism occurred through de-industrialisation of the labour force and a rise in the information economy, in the absence of macro-political engagement in the process as a whole (Byrne, 2005:153). Yet urban regeneration does not happen in isolation from wider changes affecting cities and their relationship with each other, but it looks more impressive when governments appear to be tackling difficult urban problems (Tallon, 2010:31). A central strategic policy concern for New Labour was maintaining place-based regeneration interventions in a context of wider social and economic processes and change, set both nationally and internationally (Pacione, 2005). Syrett and North (2008) argued that the renewal focus should not be on place *per-se*, since only in limited instances was urban decline localised in character and required more than local action for a solution. Making a locality responsible for its economic problems was also absolving national governments from taking action (ibid).

Gough, Eisenschitz and McCulloch (2006:xi) demonstrated how advanced capitalist countries had widened the focus to examine the creation of poverty and social exclusion by economic, social, cultural and political processes in space, arguing that social exclusion is not just caused by a lack of money, but *a whole set of qualitative problems*, all contributing to social isolation becoming a key issue (ibid:1) operating at the individual, household or community level. Exclusion was considered in terms of housing, employment, access to welfare services, social attachments and communal solidarities which could be transient, endemic or permanent. Importantly, transport disadvantage was recognised as a factor in generating social exclusion, particularly if it prevented participation in employment, education or recreation opportunities—limiting individuals' abilities to realise their full potential (ibid:120).

Characterised as a political strategy, urban regeneration used a plethora of planning regulations and policies to encourage private sector developer investment in run-down and derelict urban areas. Yet many regeneration policies appeared to have increased physical and social fragmentation, with gentrification causing socially unsustainable involuntary displacement. Previously in the UK the state played a dominant role in regeneration, rather than being merely one actor within a network of involved parties but, since 2010, in line with neo-liberal adherence to urban policies, the UK government has retreated from this undertaking once again. Clearly urban regeneration is a key factor in increasing social inclusion, requiring working at the local scale, rather than seeking unrealistic massive structural changes to urban forms.

UK academics stressed:

> *The shift towards a globalised economy has also entrenched the concentrations of urban deprivation...Economic development in disadvantaged neighbourhoods needs to be rooted in an understanding of the different elements of human, physical, financial and social capital...and the interrelationship between them, both in the immediate area and more widely (Syrett and North, 2008:90).*

Researchers described successive governments' approaches to the problems of poverty and disadvantage on area-based geographical terms as a problem of *place* (Healey et al., 1995) others argued against this conception:

> *...as the focus is on symptoms rather than causes, which are to be found in the processes leading to de-industrialisation, unemployment, poverty, social exclusion and growing inequalities...urban regeneration in the 1980s relied heavily on policy instruments that aimed to attract the private sector to invest in property in run-down urban areas on the assumption that this would...trickle down to deprived communities (Tallon, 2010:62-63).*

Dorling provided further commentary on this misguided thinking noting that:

> *...it became patently obvious by...the start of the 1990s that the trickle-down wasn't trickling down...What's happening in Britain is that the rich are actually getting richer, the average is getting slightly poorer and the people who are poor are doing much, much worse than they were two or three years ago (Dorling, ABC television 2011).*

The UK government still assumes that private investment will inevitably grow, ignoring the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, or the consequences of de-industrialisation for specific places, while remaining deaf to local communities' fears for future generations.

In the EU some interventions took the form of contracts or covenants but appeared confined to maximising public policy efficiency rather than resolving issues of inequality (Anderson and Van Kempen, 2003). While the US policy emphasis was on social processes, contrasting with the economic focus adopted in both the UK and the EU, in Australia governments concentrated on the deep exclusion experienced in social housing estates, ignoring the housing stress suffered by lower income owner-occupiers and private rental households in the older suburbs of West-Central Sydney. Hence this paper provides the background for discussion of issues of urban regeneration, gentrification and displacement, plus the related issues of employment participation and accessibility, exposing the need for greater social inclusion.

Australian urban policy

Australia clearly lags behind other developed nations in producing policies to deal with urban regeneration in its major cities, unlike the UK where urban regeneration involved policies to influence the social, economic and physical development of cities, focusing on economic development, competitiveness and tackling social disadvantage and exclusion (Tallon, 2010). A body of research from the 1970s to the early 1990s, into the fate of Australian urban policies and previous attempts at policy coordination, emphasised how land use zoning documents were having limited impacts on the patterns of urban growth. McLoughlin (1992) specifically pointed to cities being shaped by private sector power-plays, with planning failing to direct urban form, or consolidate centres and leading to socially regressive outcomes favouring some areas over others. By the end of the 1990s, while *social exclusion* became shorthand in Europe and the UK for the wide-ranging interrelated aspects of social inequality, the term was not widely adopted in Australia. Yet Randolph and Judd (2000) described social exclusion as coming to mean more than just the material aspects of disadvantage; arguing that the origin of social polarisation, underpinning social exclusion concerns, lay in the interrelated changes in the development of global and local labour markets; the structure of welfare provision and support; fiscal constraints; and demographic change.

In Australia, *public housing* was positioned as a central variable in neighbourhood exclusion; (Randolph, Ruming and Murray, 2009), but this distracted attention from the problems resulting from the complex mix of tenures and socio-economic, ethnic and gender relations found in many urban areas. Social exclusion was increasingly related to the failure of the housing market to provide affordable housing. Randolph and Judd (2000:91) stressed the need for a more complex policy prescription for tackling social exclusion, calling for a framework for understanding the interconnectedness of disadvantaged peoples' problems and an integrated, holistic policy response. While low-market sites were not abandoned as in many UK, US and European cities, the older suburbs of Western Sydney still housed increasing concentrations of the socially and economically disadvantaged (Gleeson and Low, 2000:53). Australian researchers used social exclusion references to draw attention to housing policy limitations and the strengths of the concept:

> *...social exclusion is inadequate when merely used to describe pockets of poverty and disadvantage rather than to present a set of ideas about social phenomena and the processes leading to disadvantage. Social exclusion's main value is at the level of implementation...[and] can be used to endorse housing policies that seek to adopt a multi-agency or 'joined up' government approach in which problems are not tackled in isolation but addressed at the source (Arthurson and Jacobs, 2003:ii).*

Commenting on the lack of private rental housing affordability, the complexity of inequality was highlighted:

> *By adding to the speculative element in the cycles of economic boom and bust, greater inequality shifts our attention from the pressing environmental and social problems and makes us worry about unemployment, insecurity, and how to get the economy moving again. Reducing*

> *inequality would not only make the economic system more stable, it would also make a major contribution to social and environmental sustainability (Wood, Forbes and Gibb, 2003:263).*

The housing focus aside, social exclusion was increasingly used to frame a broad range of social and territorial issues. Coupled with locational disadvantage, social exclusion was acknowledged as *place-based phenomena,* since deprived areas suffering a lack of services could compound residents' vulnerability to exclusion (Randolph and Murray, 2005:52). Hence social exclusion is as much about a lack of power and social integration and participation as about limited access to resources (Edwards, 2001). It is now widely acknowledged that poverty and decline are not confined to an individual's circumstances and responsibility, but result from a combination of the social structures in which the disadvantaged are located, their local level connections and community interactions.

The importance of social inclusion

Social inclusion is not just an abstraction, its achievement is important in today's political climate. In many countries, there are *powerless groups* (including ethnic communities, refugees and minorities) suffering poverty and social exclusion; there are *regions* that have been left behind by economic progress; and there are *barriers* to social mobility (Atkinson and Marlier, 2010:3). Nowadays the social inclusion focus examines how poverty and social exclusion are created by economic, social, cultural and political processes in space. The rhetoric of *joined up solutions* recognised the need to address complex issues of disadvantage from a multiplicity of sources. Captured under this umbrella term, usually by centralised government, this required a whole-of-government, cross-departmental approach. The concept of *place* was identified as the mechanism for joined-up policy: both Britain and Australia identified the most deprived neighbourhoods as recipients of an array of social exclusion policies (Morrison, 2008). While social inclusion remains a contested term in academic and policy literature, it is both significant and volatile, since as Gidley et al. (2010:6) correctly argued, *there is a spectrum of ideological positions underlying theory, policy and practice.*

People are considered excluded, not just because they are currently unemployed, but because they have limited future prospects and lack voice, power and representation. Hence social exclusion considers the complex causes and consequences of disadvantage. Conversely, social inclusion combats poverty and social exclusion by bringing people into mainstream society as opposed to being outside it, by addressing social and economic issues in tandem and focusing on areas not just individuals, which places a greater emphasis on equity.

Social research now distinguishes between exclusion and inclusion, providing a visible, dynamic and multi-dimensional approach to the analysis of disadvantage. The lack of an integrated approach to solving complex urban problems contributes to regional poverty and decline and a single set of causes should not be implied. Alongside affordable housing, economic resources and employment, there is clearly a need to consider health, education and transport accessibility, together with justice, well-being, mobility and social and political participation when developing policies. Social inclusion is more than an aspiration for a modern city, providing a multi-factor framework superior to other simpler, often one-dimensional approaches around *poverty* or *social disadvantage*. The concept can help to take a more integrated approach to intersections between housing and labour markets, transport services and other social infrastructure in specific places. The presence of social equity and justice should be considered a prime ingredient of an economically successful city and a prerequisite for a city's long-term social and environmental sustainability, underscoring the importance of policies for social inclusion and their role in effective urban planning.

The limitations of planning in NSW

From 1948 onwards, unreliable population forecasts and the need for more effective urban growth management resulted in episodic attempts at metropolitan planning for Sydney with varying degrees of relevance. These fragmented planning efforts were undertaken by a range of state agencies with frequent changes made to their departmental identity rather than to their roles and functions. Rapid population growth since WWII consistently left these strategic plans struggling with issues of residential expansion, unaffordable housing and inequitable access to services and infrastructure, poor employment distribution, increasing socio-economic polarisation and threatened environmental quality. Often these complex urban policy issues are compounded by unrealistic expectations about what planning can and cannot achieve (Fingland, 2014).

In 1976 Sandercock observed inequality, poor city planning and income distribution in Australia, with urban planning failing to achieve re-distribution; perpetuating the socio-economic divide. She pointed to the political, economic and social causes and manifestations existing in cities, noting:

> *While town planning ideas encompassed...very broad aims, it has never been within the power of the town planning techniques of zoning and subdivision control to achieve this breadth of intention (Sandercock (1976:2).*

Attributing this to the planner's lack of control over a fundamental resource—land—Sandercock stressed that, apart from Stretton's 1970 work on the shift in resources from the poor to the rich in cities, little empirical research was undertaken into the equity or distributional aspects of large cities, or how city planning could attempt to tackle the problems. Such limited town planning understandings remain unresolved. Common tendencies to overestimate the effectiveness of planned interventions (the illusion of control) overlook the side-effects of planning measures; unconsciously cover up what is unknown; make results hard to assess; often misinterprets failures as success and limit monitoring of planning intervention outcomes (Schönwandt, 2008:43).

Significant cost advantages can be gained by proper planning and management of the development process, however, the local authority-based planning system in NSW is not equipped to undertake regeneration ventures: it requires new thinking and a different approach. It is asking too much of the system, which is regulatory rather than entrepreneurial in nature, to expect conventional land-use zoning tools and the small-scale development companies operating in West-Central to come close to achieving high quality community and neighbourhood regeneration. Knockdown-rebuild (replacement) housing and home extensions are increasing in the older suburbs with strata titling legislation, site amalgamation difficulties and scarce development financing further hampering regeneration (Pinnegar, Freestone and Randolph, 2010).

The link between employment and social inclusion is complex. Quality-of-life and sustainability concerns are coupled with questions of access to labour, infrastructure and markets, yet metropolitan strategies have failed to identify a jobs generation pathway for West-Central. With mounting evidence that the job targets are unlikely to be achieved, or generated by the manufacturing sector, and risk being part-time and casual, greater emphasis is needed to attract permanent, career jobs to the sub-region (Urban Research Centre, 2008). Creating new jobs can help reduce social exclusion, but depends on the nature of these jobs; where they are located; and whether they restore a sense of control, or offer future prospects.

While some town centres have good transport links, many jobs available to West-Central's residents are dispersed across the Greater Western Sydney region, attracted to lower cost suburban land with fewer political and regulatory hurdles. Most residents do not travel into Sydney CBD but crowd onto already congested suburban roads—resulting from a huge infrastructure deficit needing to be addressed, prior to accepting a higher density population influx. Increasing car dependency necessitated fundamental changes in existing lifestyles, not only because of the adverse impacts of fossil fuel reliance, but also growing social exclusion. Major transit expansion projects, failing to connect West-Central to higher-order job centres, demonstrated limited analysis and awareness of employment distribution by location, with significant proportions (45.9%) of West-Central residents leaving the sub-region each day to work (Beard, 2011).

Political interests and fiscal policies tend to favour release area development, rather than tackling the additional maintenance required to support the older suburbs' regeneration (Fingland, 2014). Previous policies favoured residential uses in transit nodes and rarely considered employment, assuming that jobs take care of themselves and never provided incentives to limit zoning for jobs to transit-accessible locations. Giving little consideration to the serious impacts of social exclusion and lacking a human dimension, these strategies failed to address the older suburbs' problems. By ignoring alternatives to long-established policies and providing only a limited response to the most obvious difficulties, the metropolitan plans overlooked the bulk of available information about cities and their populations. Projections of dwellings, jobs and infrastructure needs were presented on the erroneous assumption that current trends would continue in a linear fashion over unrealistic planning horizons, providing limited examination of the information's accuracy and unsubstantiated estimates about delivery timeframes. The numerous strategic plans failed to deliver the necessary infrastructure to cater for West-Central's population growth, causing major difficulties in accessing services and employment, high car dependency and increasing socio-economic polarisation along spatial lines.

Planning in NSW is a fragmented, *ad-hoc* process undertaken by a range of agencies with different agendas; often operating in isolation. When issues become too difficult for the responsible agency additional authorities tend to be created, rather than reforms to existing government institutions and the solution appears to be to produce another plan. Yet statutory planning rarely has the goal of creating well-designed cities. Local plans are often difficult to navigate, lack vision and their outcomes are generally unclear. These shortcomings are compounded when a proliferation of development control

plans apply to separate aspects of the process, few of which involved effective community consultation or expressed a desired character for an area. The planning ordinances under the Local Government and the EP&A Acts relate principally to the processes leading to development, rather than the quality and design of the resulting physical form.

Recent strategic plans have conflicting priorities—such as the disconnection between the *city of cities* planning objective and a continuing over-emphasis on access to the Sydney CBD—failing to gain support from other agencies or the community, with a lack of monitoring of newly implemented plans leading to a loss of public faith in the planning system. The reluctance by successive NSW governments to invest in urban infrastructure leaves a gap between planning rhetoric and service delivery and etiolated plan-making is largely marginalised from the budget-setting process, captured by NSW Treasury and the more powerful state agencies. Government policies tend to compartmentalise urban issues into either *social* or *economic* problems, while remaining blind to factors such as intergenerational unemployment, residents' limited social capital and lack of empowerment. Conversely, changing demographics, increasing spatial segregation and polarisation are better characterised as cultural disadvantage problems with both social and economic consequences.

Poorly targeted programs for urban regeneration by cities and national governments have struggled to address the problems of rising socio-economic polarisation. Not surprisingly, in such a context of neglect, metropolitan planning in Australia is able to be described as dealing with:

> *...increasingly complex and spatially variable urban conditions...[and] planning processes will require an increased spatial sensitivity capable of responding to differentiation in how localities are affected by...Sydney's changing social, economic and policy contexts (McGuirk and O'Neill, 2002:314).*

This has significant ramifications:

> *The task of preparing the Australian economy for competitive status in an apparently inevitably globalising economy framed a parallel reconfiguration of the dominant public policy paradigm characterised by public-sector marketisation and growing fiscal conservatism (ibid: 308).*

Considerable variations in income levels, apparent at the local scale, show West-Central becoming a much more polarised area. In addition to income inequality, residents' life chances and opportunities are not universally shared. Shifting provision of services from the public to the private sector has exacerbated inequality, with the emerging spatial segregation adversely affecting people's welfare in areas lacking employment, essential public transport, community facilities and services provision. West-Central's imbalance in its skills and labour force, affected *inter alia* by changes in the global economy and patterns of labour mobility, migration and advances in technology, is leading to population leakage and skills flight. But overseas evidence is emerging that sub-regions which embrace and are actively attracting immigrants, can be more successful in transforming failing economies. Proactive planning and community development practices are required, with stronger communities supporting weaker markets.

Entrenched labour market access problems in parts of West-Central and an over-emphasis on employment self-sufficiency goals, failed to deliver equitable suburban labour markets. Losing jobs from old industrial suburbs and limited employment growth in more accessible locations, made servicing journey-to-work by public transport extremely difficult, resulting in increased private vehicle travel costs, congestion and transport disadvantage. Dispersed employment should be actively discouraged and replacement of old industrial and commercial lands with only residential development ceased, with jobs, not just housing, concentrated in regionally accessible centres. National policies should aim to reduce car dependency, rather than amplifying social isolation and disengagement among poorer, jobless and socially-marginalised populations.

Social exclusion and inclusion concepts can be deployed to address the complex interconnected urban issues, coupled with statistical analyses and integration with academic studies and evokes the need for interventions to be inclusive. These concepts provide a dynamic, multi-dimensional approach to the analysis of disadvantage, since individuals are no longer considered to be victims but actors coping with both inclusion and exclusion, often simultaneously.

Nation states have shifted from a charter based around *government* to one of *governance* with intervention measures needed to parallel that shift. Such intervention requires multiple, integrated actions between the housing, employment and transport policy areas; involving crossing from a national scale through to regions, local communities and down to the level of the household. These insights provide the raison d'être for research to consider the impacts of demographic factors (including socio-

economic status, cultural and linguistic diversity, geography, gender and age) and status (such as homelessness, unemployment, a lack of empowerment and location disadvantage). Spatial and demographic overviews of sub-regions examining the issues of housing affordability, limited economic resources and employment; alongside justice, well-being, mobility and social and political participation, in the context of social inclusion, confirm the value of adopting the social inclusion agenda to evaluate the nation state's policy role in urban regeneration. A national strategy, contributing to realising social inclusion objectives, could improve social outcomes, including factors such as exposing discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, disability, age, religion and sexuality (the EU's equalities agenda). Hence social inclusion is concerned with the questions of rights, recognition and inclusion in the processes of decision-making, rather than simply the outcomes of those decisions. These are questions of human flourishing.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates how socio-economic disadvantage plays out for Australia's older middle-ring suburbs when support mechanisms are withheld. Planning interventions in West-Central Sydney have a poor track record in buffering its residents against poverty, unemployment and locational disadvantage and are simply facilitating development. The embedded neo-liberal ideology appears unlikely to change, yet all NSW government activities require better coordination, with local government empowered and properly funded to carry out its agreed responsibilities. Without government intervention in the market, pockets of disadvantage in West-Central's suburbs will increase as social problems concentrate and new investment drains further, risking Sydney becoming an even more divided and polarised society. This growing disadvantage is not only about income inequality, it has also to do with opportunities to lead full lives.

Key insights emerge when socio-economic disadvantage is explored through the lens of a social inclusion agenda. This paper promotes consideration of the strong association between social exclusion and housing, employment and transport policies, together with the role of individual agencies, and structural factors in determining poverty and inequality. Greater policy coordination and more effective strategic planning, involving consultation and concerted intervention, necessitates strengthening the responsibilities and accountability of the range of agencies charged with urban regeneration. The co-option of social exclusion and inclusion by the federal Labor government in 2007 offered the opportunity to rehabilitate these concepts by cutting through the definitional vagueness and political spin adopted from the 1980s to the mid-1990s in Australia, but have been abandoned once more. Social inclusion could be used as a framing device, instead of the more common terms such as social disadvantage. Metropolitan policies and local programs need to consider the multiple aspects of social polarisation and be coordinated to promote spatial, economic and social inclusion to reduce the social exclusion of residents. A more concerted agenda would address equality in terms of equal opportunities and embrace a holistic approach to social reform and the framing of policies that remain compassionate to disadvantage to improve the social, economic and physical condition of areas undergoing transition and decline. Such an agenda would also nurture social diversity and tolerance of minorities. It would be mindful of the links between housing, employment and transport policies as underpinning greater community sustainability, well-being and health and, rather than being an action to correct a residual social problem, a social inclusion agenda could act as the driver of equitable urban regeneration rather than accepting the *wicked problems* of inequality as the natural order of things. Managing urban growth for sustainable outcomes for future generations requires greater understanding of the spatial impacts of policies, significant urban financing innovation and new skills in urban management. Partnerships between different spheres of government should be developed, with recognition that spatial issues and the well-being of communities are a shared responsibility.

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