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Social Inclusion and People from Non English Speaking Backgrounds with Disability

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I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land. I would also like to extend thanks to TasCOSS, both for organising a timely and thought provoking conference, and for having me here today.

The National Ethnic Disability Alliance (or NEDA) is a national peak representing people from non English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB) with disability.

Non English speaking migration has strongly shaped Australia over the last two centuries, particularly over the last 50 years, from the Snowy Mountains Scheme onwards, where migrants from non Anglo Saxon cultures have changed so much of what it means to be Australian – our cuisine, our practices, our values.

In this respect, Australia is not like any other nation. Today, Australia is regarded as the most linguistically diverse country on earth. Approximately 1 in 4 Australians is from a non English speaking background.

People from non English speaking backgrounds also include people with disability. Given that 1 in 4 Australians come from a non English Speaking Background, and 1 in 5 Australians have disability, NEDA estimates that there are approximately 1 million people with disability from NESB in Australia.¹

For NEDA, representing people from NESB with disability means that we are at a social policy cross roads. On the one hand, we represent people with disability. But, on the other hand, we also represent people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

With this in mind, I would like inform you of one key statistic that guides some of NEDA's work in social inclusion.

¹ The ABS General Social Survey 2006 finds that across Australia over half a million (513,026) over 18 years of age are born in a country where English is not the main language, and have a core activity, schooling or employment restriction. This group represents 3.4% of the total population over 18 years of age (or around 1 in 30 people). Note that this does not include people born in Australia in a non English Speaking Household. Often these households will face similar barriers – for example access to information and services.

Many of you will be familiar with the barriers to labour force participation for all people with disability in Australia. According to the Productivity Commission Report on Government Services, approximately 1 in 5, or 20% of people with “profound or severe” disability participate in the labour force – that is, 1 in 5 people with disability either have a job or are looking for a job.²

So what happens when we consider the cultural background of people with disability? How does this affect labour force participation.

The Productivity Commission tells us that the labour force participation rate for people born in a non English Speaking Country with a “profound or severe core activity limitation” was 11.5% - approximately half that of people born in an English Speaking Country (20.1%).³

In other words, while only 1 in 5 people with disability participate in the labour force, this figure sinks to 1 in 10 when you consider non english speaking country of birth.

It is for this reason that the work of NEDA is at the social policy cross roads – simply because in order to explain the barriers faced by people from NESB with disability, it is not enough to consider disability or culture in exclusion from each other – we have to think of them together.

In order to solve the exclusion of people from NESB with disability from the labour force, we need to take into account a range of factors.

We have to factor in, for example, the effect of income poverty and barriers to services that are faced by all migrants, including migrants with disability.

We know, for example that migrants and refugees are often over-represented within low income groups in Australia: for example some 36.5% of humanitarian entrants have a household income that falls in the lowest quintile (ie lowest 20%) of all earners.⁴

We also know that People Born in non English speaking Countries are likely to have lower incomes than people born in English Speaking Countries / Australia: for example around 48% of people born in non English Speaking Countries have a weekly income less than \$400; where approximately 31% of people born in Australia are in the same group.⁵ People who are not proficient in spoken English fare worse: around 60% of these residents have an income level less than \$400 per week.⁶

We also know that English proficiency has an impact on outcomes for People who are not proficient in English face other forms of disadvantage: for example only 55.8% of people who are not proficient in English can drive (compared with 86.1% for the general adult population) and thus face transport difficulties getting to important destinations.⁷

² Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services, 2008.

³ Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services, 2008.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, General Social Survey 2006.

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Migrants, Census of Population and Housing 2006.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Migrants, Census of Population and Housing 2006.

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Migrants, Census of Population and Housing 2006.

It is no surprise that English proficiency also has an impact on participation in the labour market, and one can assume income poverty outcomes.

Social Inclusion Goals

NEDA has been very supportive of the Australian Government social inclusion agenda, and believe that it provides a positive framework for change.

However, one of our concerns has been the lack of attention by the Australian Government on the interaction of language, culture and faith on social inclusion outcomes.

As I have described, many of the barriers faced by people with disability from NESB, in fact the barriers faced by a range of NESB groups, including migrants, do not necessarily fit into the current social inclusion agenda. In order to address participation fully, we need to think about cultural and linguistic inclusion, at the same time as we think of social inclusion. Or perhaps more appropriately, cultural and linguistic inclusion should be the same thing as social inclusion.

I would like to propose 3 goals to think about that would improve inclusion for people from NESB with disability, indeed, I believe improve inclusion for all people from NESB.

Goal 1

Starting with a specific focus on people from NESB with disability, social inclusion should take into consideration the specific barriers faced by people with disability from cultural diverse backgrounds to accessing appropriate support services.

People from NESB with disability face a number of barriers to accessing support services in Australia. These include a lack of culturally accessible information and services; discrimination in service provision; myths, misconceptions and negative stereotypes about disability and ethnicity in the general community and government's emphasis on rationalist economics and competition principles rather than social inclusion.

At present, people born in Non English Speaking countries are 3 times less likely to use a government funded disability service than a person born in an English speaking Country.⁸ For supported accommodation services, this means that while approximately 1 in 5 people in Australia are born in a Non English Speaking Country, *less than 1 in 20 people from a Non English Speaking Country receive CSTDA funded supported accommodation services.*⁹

In NEDA's view, these statistics alone suggest there is a lot of work to be done in relation to the provision of appropriate supports. A simple goal would be equivalent service utilisation rates between people born in Non English Speaking countries in comparison to the English Speaking Country peers.

⁸ Australian Government Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services, 2008. "Nationally, the proportion of people born in a non-English speaking country who use CSTDA funded accommodation support services in 2005-06 (0.5 service users per 1000 people aged 15-67 years) was lower than the proportion of people born in an English Speaking country who used these services (1.8 service users per 100 people aged 15-64 years)." (p14.34) "Nationally, the proportion of people born in a non-English speaking country who use CSTDA funded employment services in 2005-06 (1.9 service users per 1000 people aged 15-67 years) was lower than the proportion of people born in an English Speaking country who used these services (5.6 service users per 100 people aged 15-64 years)." (p14.34)

⁹ Derived from Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Users of CSTDA-Funded Services, 2004-05.

Goal 2

Clearly, we need to give migrants better opportunities and fairer outcomes. Aside from the poverty faced by migrants and refugees, there are a number of key social policy issues that relate directly to social inclusion outcomes for migrants.

For example many recent migrants face difficulties entering the housing market, with particular problems accessing private and public housing, negotiating tenancy contracts, and finding suitable accessible housing. Migrants also face significant barriers to employment – something I will discuss in a minute.

I think everyone can acknowledge that migrating to a new country is a tough experience – not only as a result of uncertainty in relation to basic s such as employment and housing, but also in the difficulties associated with building new social networks.

Better outcomes means ensuring that we minimise the time migrants will take to get on their feet. Unfortunately, at least in my opinion, the opposite has been the case in recent years.

An issue that NEDA has been working with closely is the 10 year qualifying period for the Disability Support Pension.

In Australia all migrants (except for those immigrating on humanitarian grounds) have to wait two years before they can access income support.

However migrants with disability, including their carers, have to wait for the “10 years qualifying Australian residence” specified by the *Social Security Act 1991* (s94) in order to access the Disability Support Pension (DSP)

The 10 year exemption for the Disability Support Pension creates potential financial difficulties for migrants with disability, particularly if they are unable to achieve financial security through employment. The DSP is payed at a higher rate than other forms of support, and therefore offers more appropriate coverage of some of the costs of disability than other entitlements, such as the Newstart allowance. The DSP is also often required for eligibility to disability support and equipment programs.

In NEDA's view, including within a social inclusion agenda a priority to reduce income disadvantage for migrants, including migrants with disability, would assist to reduce exclusion for these groups. And of course, we would support removing discriminatory public policy, such as the 10 year qualifying residence period for the DSP.

Goal 3

The third goal I would like to talk to you about is more difficult to define, and arguably more difficult to talk about.

Many of the barriers faced by people from NESB with disability are a factor of large scale issues around social inclusion and disability and cultural and linguistic diversity.

Arguably, the last number of years have seen a deterioration in social inclusion for people from non English Speaking backgrounds, not simply because of poverty, or poor access to

services, or housing stress, but because of broad social factors, such as increased incidences of racism and discrimination, strong anti immigration sentiments and Islamophobia becoming evident within public discourse. A recent longitudinal study of skilled migrants found that “more than 40 per cent arrivals thought that there was either a lot of racism or at least some racism in Australian society.” (Commonwealth of Australia, “New Migrant Outcomes” August 2007).

I say that it is difficult to talk about these issues because racism and discrimination have become dirty words in public discourse. There has been an environment where government are unwilling to talk about how race and ethnicity continue to have a stake in social outcomes.

Yet the effects are very real. Many here would be familiar with the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey – the so called “HILDA Survey.”

In a paper presented in 2007,¹⁰ using data in part sourced from the HILDA makes a startling observation in relation to the incomes of skilled migrants in Australia.

As you may be aware, the Australian skilled migration program is fairly ruthless. The migrants who come through this program are usually very highly qualified, they have high levels of English Proficiency, and they are willing to work. These are migrants who, if the playing field were level, should be very competitive in relation to native Australian workers.

The researchers find a startling, albeit unexplained statistic: “We observe a median wealth gap of \$18,000 implying that immigrant households to Australia accumulate substantially less wealth given their characteristics than similar native-born households.”¹¹

The researchers further remark “this gap is completely unexplained.”¹²

Might I suggest that these final questions actually reflect the uncertainty for accounting for how racial and ethnic discrimination affect outcomes for migrants, including migrants with disability.

The finding highlights how much work there is to do in Australia in understanding and acknowledging the role played by people from NESB, and the kind of barriers to participation experienced by this group.

It also highlights the need to revisit the question of Australia’s multicultural portfolio. Unfortunately the Australian Government has not had an active multicultural policy since 2006, with an apparent defocusing of multicultural affairs as a portfolio in recent years. It would make sense for the social inclusion agenda in Australia to be tied to a revitalised multicultural policy.

I further note that, in addition to an active multicultural policy, there is significant scope for reform of government migration, settlement and citizenship policies that arguably have increased social discord between communities. The recent steps taken by the Australian government to remove Temporary Protection Visas, and review the Citizenship Test are

¹⁰ Bauer, Cobb-Clark, Hildebrand and Sinning. “A Comparative Analysis of the Nativity Wealth Gap.” April 26, 2007. available at <http://ideas.repec.org/p/iza/izadps/dp2772.html>

¹¹ Ibid., p27.

¹² Ibid., p27

positive, but there are many other areas where reform will lead to increased social inclusion: for example removing the current 10 year limit on migrants receiving a Disability Support Pension.

Conclusion

I believe the social inclusion agenda has created an opportunity for Australia to lead the way in thinking about culture, faith and language within the frame of social policy.

I think there are at least 4 areas where cultural and linguistic inclusion can be built into the social inclusion agenda:

First, we must look at access to services and support, and aim to improve access and utilisation of services by people from NESB.

Secondly, we must address forms of income poverty faced by migrants and refugees.

Thirdly, we must acknowledge the barriers faced by people with low English proficiency in accessing services and support –English ability should not be a barrier to participation in a multicultural society.

Finally, we must stand up to systemic forms of discrimination, including racism, that profoundly affects outcomes for all people from NESB, including people with disability.

I believe that taking seriously the above issues within the context of a national social inclusion agenda would go some way towards promoting a rich, inclusive and cosmopolitan Australian society. I believe this is a society that we would all want to be part of.

Thank you.