Reflection: Poverty Alleviation and Well-being

Helen Johnston, NESC

Introduction

Prior to working in NESC I worked in the Combat Poverty Agency for 14 years where my main concern was poverty alleviation. When I joined NESC in 2007 my first task was to prepare a ‘social report for Ireland’. Researching the area brought me into the realm of quality of life and wellbeing research and in 2009 NESC published the Well-being Matters report. Research and indicators on wellbeing and quality of life have developed much since then, especially in the OECD and the EU, as well as at country and city level, and by academics and researchers. So what can this research into quality of life and wellbeing bring to our understanding of policies for poverty alleviation? The papers and discussion today have contributed to the debate and helped to tease out some of these issues. In the time I have I offer 4 reflections:

Reflection 1: The Importance of Income for Poverty Alleviation

The first reflection is that income remains a central tenet in poverty alleviation. What today has told us is that it is not the only element which contributes to a person’s wellbeing but without an adequate income a person’s quality of life is diminished. There is no doubt that if the basic social welfare rates had not been, by and large, maintained during the economic crisis poverty levels would have been much higher than they are today ... even though they are still too high, with the most recent data showing a consistent poverty rate of 8% (2014),
higher for children (0-17) at 11% i.e. more than 10 per cent of our children are living on a very low income and deprived of basic necessities. So what is an adequate level of income? Is it to be above the poverty line of 60% of average income (€10,786 per annum or €207 per week in 2014); is it to meet the Minimum Essential Standard of Living calculated by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice of €242 per week for a single adult of working age? Today is not the day to discuss possible answers to this question but to emphasise that it depends on factors such as the cost of living in the society, what services are available and access to those services, as well as the overall distribution of income, as the research shows that is it not only your level of income which affects your wellbeing but also how it relates to the income of others.

**Reflection 2: The Importance of Having a Sense of Purpose**

What the wellbeing research tells us, and what many of us already know, is that no matter what your income you need a reason to get out of bed in the morning, in other words, a sense of purpose. For many people this is a paid job, ... and for poverty alleviation we need to be able to create jobs, ... jobs which provide an adequate income. But as well as providing an income jobs give people a sense of self-esteem, of making a contribution, and of social interaction. We have made inroads in reducing the high levels of unemployment, and notably long-term unemployment, since the recession but we need to continue to work to break down the barriers many people face in accessing employment – things like appropriate education and training, childcare, supports for disabled people and addressing the housing crisis.
Reflection 3: The Importance of Service Provision

That brings me to my 3rd reflection – the importance of adequate service provision. For example, the cost of renting a home in Dublin today has put many people at risk of poverty and rendered many people homeless. We have also heard from the St Vincent de Paul about the importance of the quality of accommodation. A number of speakers have emphasised the centrality of good physical and mental health for people’s wellbeing, specifically access to health services and the important role of the medical card for low income families. Access to quality childcare and other care supports is important to both those caring and those being cared for. And very important in my view is access to education as this provides people with the opportunity to make decisions about their lives. While Ireland is renowned for the quality of its graduates there are still too many young people who do not have a good education experience which denies them the opportunity to develop to their full potential. All of these issues reflect the need to give further consideration as to how we deliver ‘tailored services’.

Reflection 4: The Importance of Empowerment

Which brings me to my fourth reflection – the importance of empowerment and the sense of agency people have in making decisions about their lives. This is supported by having an adequate income, a sense of purpose, and access to quality services, as I’ve already mentioned, but it is also about having a stake in society, of feeling socially included and in being able to influence decisions which affect your life. We are well aware of where this is
not happening as seen in the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump in the USA where people, for various reasons, feel excluded from mainstream society, feel on the outside, and want to challenge the establishment. In Ireland, during the recession, many of the community supports which had been in place were stripped away. Local communities are the places where people live and interact with their neighbours. If this environment is positive it contributes to people’s wellbeing, but if it is negative, because of neglect, crime, and so on, it diminishes quality of life. The provision of community development and other local supports in disadvantaged areas throughout the country greatly assists in addressing the legacy of the recession and contributes to a greater sense of inclusion and wellbeing.

Final words

Thank you again for the opportunity to offer reflections. I think this work is really important as we address the legacies of the economic recession in an ever-changing global environment, where we need a wider range of societal anchors that economic growth alone.