

Dear Students of Social Work,

In an earlier letter (“No. 3/ Vol 2/ 2015: Understanding Policy Issues on Poverty”), I touched on how we are fortunate that social work here in a city-state with good housing means that we do not have to grapple with distressed communities with intractable issues of poverty and worse still, persistent intergenerational poverty. We also examined how despite research being done, most countries still struggle for generations in public policy making and testing out of strategies to eradicate intergenerational poverty without much success. Research however can direct policy making towards at least 3 areas of focus that can make a difference if the strategies are sustained with a long term view. The areas are education, work and family relationships. In terms of work it is not just about employment but skills upgrading, reskilling and job aspiration.



Strategies

Decades of experimentation and learning have led to an evolving set of findings and principles for antipoverty efforts in large countries. These strategies include revitalising neighbourhoods and moving families out of severely distressed urban neighbourhoods which undermine families’ capacities to meet their children’s developmental needs, and thereby trapping children especially of a certain ethnicity in poverty. Research has also shown that nationwide efforts to expand employment opportunities, boost wages, strengthen systems of work support, and bolster the social safety net are necessary. They are however insufficient for children living in severely distressed neighbourhood environments. Dual-generation interventions that target the neighbourhood conditions most damaging to children’s healthy development are also thought to be critical in “moving the needle” on persistent, intergenerational poverty.



If we have only 3 policy focuses – what will they be?

It has become clearer over decades and after various attempts to find the answer to the question of how we should help the poor, that the answer is not that difficult although it may sound ironically simple. The answer lies in ensuring access to school or education (and being motivated to complete them), good jobs and family ties.

1. Education



Let’s see how we fair in relation to education. Subsidized education is a key component of the Singaporean approach to social inclusion and social mobility. This has been instrumental in creating equal opportunity and avoiding wide differences in educational opportunities according to socio-economic status which is common in many countries. The subsidy and a strong curriculum including that for special schools ensure a good quality of education across the social spectrum and across all income groups. Education then becomes an effective vehicle for a ‘levelling up’ effect. Ensuring social mobility, however, does not translate to ensuring equal outcomes because students are inherently different. In the case of students from disadvantaged background, it is about ensuring that they attend school regularly and stay in the system.

Learning from the experience in the US where children whose parents grew up in high-poverty neighbourhoods score dramatically worse on reading and problem-solving tests than those whose parents grew up in non-poor neighbourhoods, we now have ground up initiatives to ensure that children from low-income families learn to read in their early years. Efforts targeted at ensuring that pre-school education reach low-income families are therefore crucial to early intervention strategies.



2. Work

In Singapore, we have a low unemployment rate and yet companies are still struggling to get workers. The issue is a deeper one and is about reskilling, upgrading of skills and lifelong learning efforts. We have the Workforce Development Authority and schemes such as the Skills Future credit that are part of the mechanisms and structures for enabling and facilitating access to opportunities. However, in and of themselves, these strategies will not automatically translate to financial stability and economic advancement. There are always the elements of individual and peer responsibility and discipline that are needed to sustain commitment. The challenge is that of accessing expanded employment opportunities, boosting wages and increasing productivity. Work must be productive, meaningful and purposeful. This is not the singular responsibility of any one entity. It is about a shared commitment to optimise resources through well designed roles to produce clear outcomes. It is about job re-design, expansion and individual habits. Full-time work too is the passport to an improved standard of living.

To help address income inequality, our workfare supplement to help poor working individuals and families supplement their income, is a direct support to calibrate the moral hazard problem associated with unconditional cash transfers. It could work better at redistributing incomes, while preserving the work ethic and promoting self-reliance. In instances where households require social assistance, the level of social transfers has been raised to help these households. Where there are working adults, the approach is to help them to get better jobs because children will tend to do better when parents do better.

3. Family relationships



Various research findings about safeguarding the interest of children and youth invariably conclude on the importance of *stable* family relationships. What is important to appreciate is that most children and youth can thrive and even do well when they have at least one relationship with an adult that is stable and which provides consistent guidance and reference. It is useful to know this as it enables us to focus on how to help individuals and families especially in a context where the family life course can now be more complex and dynamic. In helping children and youth in poor families, it is always important to remember that all children, regardless of where they live or how much their parents earn, need responsive care giving, safe and secure environments, adequate and appropriate nutrition, and health-promoting behaviours and habits.

Making things happen through social work

To address issues related to the poor and families with low-income, public policy and strategies at the systems level are key. At the individual family level however, the family-centred practice of social workers will help families to improve their capacities. The practice includes three key elements: (1) an emphasis on strengths, not deficits of these families; (2) promoting family choice and control over resources; and (3) the development of a collaborative relationship between parents and professionals that the families interface with.

Social work skills are needed to carry out good assessments, develop service plans and conduct purposeful interventions with children, youths, older persons and families. Effective family-centred practice is part of helping low-income families to improve their circumstances and is characterised by sensitivity, diversity, and flexibility on the part of social workers. It is a systematic way of working with families and helping them to systematically access amenities and services to rebuild expectations and hope.

In working with poorer families, it is good to appreciate the needs and deficits of people with low-income but we should not focus too much on them while overlooking their strengths. This is not to say that we should not ensure a good safety net which is crucial when people are in crisis. In the words of Lim Miller, founder and CEO of the national Family Independence Initiative (FFI), "Most poor families are not in free fall. They don't need nets to catch them so much as they need springboards to jump higher." So in social work practice, it is important to create a structure for families that encourages the sense of control, desire for self-determination and mutual support. It is less about doing things to people or implementing changes but more about enabling, facilitating and supporting individuals and families to help themselves by giving them the resources that enable and equip them to improve their lives.

Ang Bee Lian

Director of Social Welfare, Ministry of Social and Family Development

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