

Who are society's vulnerable people in the changing environment?

Remarks from Helen Cooney on 9 December 2016 for a Catholic Social Services Victoria planning day

To speak about Society's most vulnerable people requires us to know who they are. But I suspect we all have different definitions of 'most vulnerable'. For me, it might be those yet to be born or infants in the 'fourth trimester'. For some, it would be those who are incapable, perhaps because they are incarcerated or perhaps by their chronic homelessness.

But we can agree what a 'human' is. In advocacy, 'dignity of the human person' is loaded, particularly in the last 48 hours.ⁱ But I want to use that tenet as a tactic to focus on people rather than services, funding streams or portfolios, and look to the top of each of our respective proverbial cliffs, because all 'humans' come to our services from somewhere.

And they all start out with their mother during her pregnancy. There are great challenges and opportunities associated with the transition to becoming a parent. Men become dad at this time and are open to change, but Mum's are also at greater risk: health wise, due to her (and his) investment in the relationship, and with a third party joining the relationship, Dad feel at threat. I'm talking about violence.

After they are born, people transition through early childhood development and their school years. Child care subsidy is often seen as a policy of workforce participation of women. It's linked to the tax system. It's economic. It's a policy about preventing poverty. Some of us in the welfare sector see child care as 'respite' to keep homes safe and an opportunity for parents to learn skills from workers. That perspective is one of increasing social connectedness.

In those early and school years, we also consider developmental delay, also known as 'disability'. While the prevalence of disability is higher in poor communities, it's often an area considered to transcend socioeconomics. The big change coming is the NDIS. We often talk about the risk of non-engagement with the NDIS for the 'most vulnerable', in this context 'the most disabled'. This is because the first step is to register, and that requires family or community support. Again, I reflect on social connectedness.

Other examples in those years relate to education, family life, transitions, juvenile justice and growth in refugee population. These all link to violence, poverty and social isolation. And interesting case study is that which the Victorian Government is calling 'safeguarding'. It is my view that the most invasive, most expensive, and least effective public policy intervention one can think of is the removal of a child from their family, that is sometimes needed and should only ever be to something better. The growth in demand at Child Protection is frightening and was the topic of a recent episode of Four Corners.ⁱⁱ The context of that growth is violence, neglect and poverty, drugs and alcohol, mental health and homelessness. That big issue is about 'family' breakdown, it's about violence, and it's about poverty.

Children grow into adults of working age who deserve the dignity of work to alleviate their poverty. And that work is increasingly casual, and that's not okay because poverty isn't alleviated by an income less than what is needed to live. Adults also deserve the dignity of freedom from unwarranted – and ineffective – imprisonment. And we know those in prison are full of people mostly coming from childhoods of poverty, violence and few people to 'look out for them' as socially connected people do.

Those we call 'older Australians' deserve the dignity of resources to age well – and there is change on the way to superannuation and pensions – to prevent poverty. When we talk about the issues of age discrimination, it is in part driven by the 'hidden' nature of age. And why are they 'hidden'? Because they're not connected to other people. In the political context of the day, it's important to talk about the potential for the change to how we provide dignity of life at its end. Many of us have personal and professional experiences that show the end of life (and at times its unexpected continuation) as opportunity to reconcile what are at time difficult topics to work through – like the violence or trauma perpetrated by or against you.

I'm quite sure I will not have mentioned all the major changes Catholic Social Services are facing. I've certainly not tried to name the top three advocacy issues for 2017. But I've tried to outline that society's welfare concerns can be prevented, resolved or 'managed' if we focus on people and their poverty, the violence/trauma they experience, and help build their social connection, which I see as resulting from the breakdown of family in the broadest community sense.

ⁱ On 8 December 2016, the Victorian Government announced it will introduce legislation into the Parliament next year to legalise voluntary assisted dying for terminally ill people in Victoria.

ⁱⁱ On 14 November 2016, 'Broken Homes: On the frontline of Australia's Child Protection crisis' aired on the ABC's Four Corners program.