Continental shifts on exclusion

The concept of social exclusion is a European one – but it means different things in different countries, as **Paul Spicker** explains

The idea of social exclusion came to Britain from the European Union. The Maastricht Treaty referred to the combating of exclusion as a general aim of social policy, and created powers for the EU to intervene.

In the EU exclusion was used in place of the more contentious idea of poverty, which the Conservative government in Britain had refused to accept. But the EU did not invent the idea. It was taken from debates in France, where poverty had never been central to policy formation. The French-speaking sections of the European Commission responsible for social policy saw it as the obvious way to resolve the disputes.

In France the idea of exclusion is based on a particular view of society, influenced heavily by Catholic social teaching. The key concept in Catholic thought, and in French social policy, is solidarity or mutual responsibility. People in relationships have obligations to each other. Thus everyone in a society forms part of a pattern of obligations in their relationships with family, friends and community. These obligations are not equal but depend on each person's individual relationships.

A community, and a society, consists of complex, overlapping networks of solidarity. French social policy, which they call generalisation, is committed to extending solidarity to the greatest possible extent. The basic law on social security declares that solidarity is its central principle. Exclusion means that people are not part of the networks of solidarity that hold society together. They do not have duties to other people, and other people do not have duties to them. Some people are marginal, having only minimal links with others; at the extremes, the most excluded people are without any network of family, friends or community. Excluded people need to be included or, as the French say, 'inserted' into society. This is the basis for the French 'Revenue Minimum d'Insertion' – the nearest thing the French have to Income Support.

As a condition of receiving benefit, every claimant has to make a contract of insertion, committing them to the kinds of action – in employment, training, housing, health care or family relationships, for example – that will help them become part of society. Society also has obligations to the person, so the 'Commission Locale d'Insertion' (local committee for social inclusion) has a corresponding duty to make contracts with external agencies to provide excluded people with opportunities for inclusion. This is a powerful model, and it has been hugely influential in Europe, with imitations in parts of Spain, Belgium, and Italy. Furthermore, the growing influence of this policy means that national governments wanting to draw on EU resources have had to look at ways of responding to social exclusion. But the diffusion of the idea through the EU has led, not altogether surprisingly, to some national variations in the understanding of exclusion, with every country tending to interpret the idea in 'familiar' terms.

In Germany, for example, the emphasis has tended to fall on inclusion in the economy. In the UK Tony Blair has identified social exclusion with multiple deprivation: he thinks of exclusion as a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdowns. That is not what social exclusion really means, but it says a great deal about the direction that the Social Exclusion Unit has been set to follow. The agenda has included, among other topics, school exclusion, teenage pregnancy and deprived urban areas.

In Scotland, until recently, responsibility for social inclusion was shared with area regeneration in the Scottish Executive. These functions have now been moved – with Scottish Homes – to a new agency, Communities Scotland, which describes its mission as working for housing and regeneration. There are strong links between these different functions: housing is central to much of the work in social inclusion, while social welfare depends on the foundation of housing provision. Community is also an important aspect of both area regeneration and social inclusion: people need to be included in a community, and building sustainable social networks is essential if people are to have a community to relate to. Most social inclusion partnerships in Scotland are area-based, and their role has been seen as a natural successor to the many community-based initiatives that Scotland has developed over the last 25 years. At the same time, a focus on social inclusion suggests a different agenda to either community-based policy or area regeneration, and there are possible tensions and conflicts of interest.

The first problem is that policies for area regeneration do not have to be inclusive. Some areas have been regenerated through redevelopment, which effectively moves excluded people away. Second, some excluded communities are not area-based, a case that applies to minority ethnic groups and, significantly in Scotland, travellers. The third problem is that many excluded people live in different locations from the focus of area-based policies. Poverty is widespread, and people do not have to live in deprived areas to be socially excluded. (The Social Inclusion Partnership for young people in Dundee, which I am involved in, has a citywide remit. It needs it.) Fourth, some groups such as homeless people, discharged psychiatric patients or ex-prisoners are

Excluded people need to be included or, as the French say, 'inserted' into society…

excluded from the communities on which the policies rely. A handful of Social Inclusion Partnerships are thematic rather than area based: they deal, for example, with young people, carers and, in one case, sex workers.

Logically, a policy of social inclusion should reach out beyond community, to people who are inadequately covered by existing provision. In each of these conflicts, the shift of emphasis from community and area-based policy to exclusion is persuasive. It reflects issues of poverty, disadvantage and social participation better than an area- or community-based policy can.

It is perhaps important, then, to recognise that the model of inclusion has problems too. People may be included in unequal and degrading relationships. The responsibilities imposed on families, carers and women can be burdensome and difficult. An emphasis on personal and social relationships is sometimes intrusive. People whose main problem is not their social relationships, but their lack of resources, may resent pressure for inclusion.

Social inclusion is not, then, enough. It needs to be counterbalanced with policies for empowerment, rights and social justice.

Paul Spicker holds the Grampian chair in public policy at the Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen