

Developing a social enterprise project idea with the disadvantaged from the 'bottom up'

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Abstract

This paper looks at a small pilot project which aimed to develop an anti-poverty strategy with a small number of disadvantaged people in inner-urban Melbourne. The main objective of the project was to facilitate a small group of people so that they themselves could develop a social enterprise idea as a way of addressing some of their issues of poverty. The pilot study also tried to ascertain whether the participating welfare agency would be interested in integrating such a project idea into its existing services. The paper discusses some of the processes and difficulties involved in arriving at the participants' social enterprise idea, clearly showing that the disadvantaged people themselves have the capacity to contribute to the development of similar anti-poverty project ideas.

Keywords: *Social Enterprise; poverty; disadvantage.*

Introduction

Social problems such as poverty and homelessness continue to be major community concerns in most OECD countries including Australia (Serr 2006c). As many governments around the world have been committed to neo-liberalism, they have often implemented narrow economic policies including privatisation, deregulation and the reduction of the public services sector. While there has been an actual increase in the demand for social welfare provisions as a result of social dislocation, the need for a variety of public services has often not been met (Australian Council of Social Service 2008). Instead, governments in Australia, USA. and to some extent the UK have focused on the 'failures' of the welfare state and progressively questioned the legitimacy and even the necessity to provide social services to the poor. Since the 1990s there has also been a greater emphasis on 'individual responsibility', 'mutual obligations', and the promotion of greater community involvement under the banner of 'volunteerism'. The trend of questioning the value of the welfare state and the provision of social services was resolutely pursued by the Howard government and the influential Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) in the early and mid-2000s (Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, 2004; Saunders 2005; Australian Government 2006). This trend was followed by an increased interest in the notions of 'social capital', 'social entrepreneurship' and 'social enterprise', and a change in public policy away from traditional public welfare. Given this context some commentators view the keen interest shown by governments in social enterprises (SEs) with some scepticism (Gray, Healy and Crofts 2003).

Social enterprises

The growing focus on SEs has been particularly notable in Britain with the development of a 'social enterprise strategy' in the early 2000s to support, finance and resource SEs. Consequently the U.K. government also set up the Social Enterprise Unit (SEU 2005) and the Social Enterprise Coalition (SEC 2005) to initiate research into SE models and assist the establishment of SEs. While not so pronounced in Australia, the level of interest and support for SE options has risen in both the government and the non-government sectors (Barraket 2004). Thus we have seen various support schemes emerge, such as the Prime Minister's Community Business Awards for partnerships between the community and business sector (Serr 2006b), and community building strategies in various States. In Victoria, for example, such strategies had been developed under the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC 2003-2006)

While definitions of SEs vary, they invariably have a business focus in order to produce goods or services to generate profits. This orientation on economic and business development has led to some strong criticism since the approach can potentially undermine more traditional community-based development processes and models (McArdle 1999; Gray et al 2003). However, SEs tend to develop strong links with various community stakeholders and have an ethical/social agenda in order to benefit the community in some way. This process normally includes the sharing of operational surpluses (Barraket 2004, Serr 2006b). Many commentators also suggest that SEs can create employment and training opportunities through commercial activities and encourage notions of self help in the community (Simmons 2000; Talbot, Tregilgas & Harrison 2002).

Although Australia has a long history of intentional communities and cooperatives (see Metcalf 1995; Serr 2006b), it has only recently become interested in SE models. Compared to other developed nations such as Britain, the Australian SE sector is still relatively undeveloped, especially when it comes to applying this model to the work with disadvantaged people (Serr and Rose 2008). Much of this work relates to skills training and the creation of employment options for disadvantaged people and is managed through existing welfare agency infrastructure. The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL), for instance, has played a leading role in sponsoring and supporting various SE projects as part of its 'Innovation Hub' established in 2003. SE projects thus developed include:

- Community Cleaning and Training Enterprise
- Charity Waste Recovery Centre
- A catering business that provides meals to BSL homeless programs
- The Hunter Gatherer clothing label and fashion stores
- The Phillips Gate project in West Heidelberg that is developing a range of enterprise including a community café (BSL 2003)

As SEs are increasingly becoming part of the work of established service providers, some commentators have claimed that the SE approach can achieve better outcomes for the disadvantaged than the traditional welfare sector, because of their capacity to engage and empower people (Gray et al 2003). In this context criticisms of established welfare provisions have gained momentum both in government and some sections in the community sector. Whereas recent public policy is questioning the traditional framework of the welfare state itself, some researchers want to see a greater involvement by the disadvantaged themselves in the identification of social issues such as poverty but also in the development of anti-poverty strategies (Peter Saunders 2005; Serr 2006a). In many ways the SE approach therefore seems to lend itself to the achievement of the government's agenda to reduce its role in the community sector. On the other hand, SE models may open new innovative options to involve and empower the disadvantaged. Yet it is still unclear whether an SE can really serve the needs of the disadvantaged more effectively than traditional service approaches. What seems obvious, however, is the fact that not many SE projects have consulted and involved poor people themselves in the design and management of SEs, in order to really empower them..

This paper therefore looks at a small pilot project which aimed to develop a social enterprise idea with a small number of disadvantaged people in inner-urban Melbourne. The context for the project is the idea that the disadvantaged need to be involved in defining their own problems as well as being part of developing their own solutions (Narayan 2000b; Serr 2004b). This project is also based on some research conducted earlier as part of the Shattered Dream study, which asked a small number of disadvantaged people, service providers and researchers/advocates to define poverty issues (Serr 2006b).

The aim of the project

The main aim of the project was to facilitate a small group of disadvantaged people in order to develop an SE idea as a way of addressing the participants' issues of poverty. The pilot study also tried to ascertain whether an existing welfare agency (EWA) would be interested in integrating the SE project idea into its current service structure. To this end in 2004/5, the author (who is also the researcher) set up meetings with the group of participants for 2 hours per week over a 10-12 week period. At the end of the process, the SE idea was to be presented to the EWA to see if the agency was interested in exploring options to host such a project. It was made clear to all participants at the beginning that the development of the project idea might not be accepted by the agency, which made no commitment other than to look at the SE proposal.

Access and recruitment of participants

The project was conducted at a large inner-urban welfare agency in Melbourne. This EWA granted access to their clients and also assisted with the recruitment process. The project was advertised at the agency's premises and explained to interested parties. An agency worker then selected volunteers based on the researcher's selection criteria, that volunteers a) were willing to cooperate and be part of the discussion group; b) had the cognitive abilities to understand the task required; c) were not under

the influence of alcohol or any other substance which could interfere with the research and d) were competent to give formal consent to participate.

The initial group selected consisted of 12 disadvantaged volunteers (7 females and 5 males), age-range 22 - 72. These participants had low levels of educational achievement, and only two people had current casual/part-time work. After a number of weeks a small core group of two men and three women emerged who were critical in the development of the final SE project idea.

Limitations and strengths of the approach

A number of participants had transient/unstable lives without permanent accommodation, lacking adequate opportunities and life chances. Most also suffered various personal problems, inhibiting their ability to fully participate in the project and reducing their capacity to continue to attend the regular meetings. Most participants had initial difficulties in understanding the concept of the project and how a so-called 'SE' could ever address poverty, their problems or needs, and were sceptical about their ability to develop an SE idea, and about whether an SE could ever become reality. No participant had ever attended or worked in a setting where there were more or less formal meetings.

One of the most significant aspects of this pilot was the fact that it clearly involved the disadvantaged themselves, empowering them to work on a possible strategy to address their problems of disadvantage. As time went on, the researcher observed that those participants who attended the meetings on a fairly regular basis developed a greater sense of confidence and self awareness. They not only understood the whole concept of the SE, but also developed a strong belief in themselves and the fact that they could be involved in such a project. The core group was therefore keen to put their thoughts into practice and enthusiastically explored related business ideas. As reported by agency staff this occurred even after the project was completed.

As demonstrated later in the paper however, limitations of this type of research emerged, in that while such research can facilitate the development of ideas and a change process for participants, it can be undermined by the constraints of risk management measures taken by an agency, who might otherwise have facilitated the research outcomes. What follows is a discussion about the development of the SE project idea and the kind of processes that were involved.

Developing a social enterprise: The Coffee Shop Project

The core purpose behind this project was for poor people themselves to identify relevant poverty issues and then develop an SE to address their needs. Thus a "ground-up" approach was used to closely involve the disadvantaged throughout the development of the initiative. There is increasing recognition of the merits of this approach, especially in the area of poverty research. A number of researchers now acknowledge that the disadvantaged must take part in the definition and development of their own solutions to ensure better outcomes for the disadvantaged (Narayan 2000; Peter Saunders 2005; Serr 2004b). This trend also acknowledges that poverty is a

multi-dimensional experience and does not relate solely to the lack of income (Serr 2004a; 2006a).

Initial processes and difficulties encountered

While the participants were curious at the first meeting with the researcher, most had only really attended to see what would happen. They had no conception of how to work in a group, nor did they have the skills to function in a formal/ semi formal meeting. Many of the participants had multiple personal problems, including homelessness, emotional/psychological difficulties, and addictions to various substances such as alcohol and drugs. Some participants therefore appeared volatile on occasion. Others, especially those with low self esteem, were also vulnerable to being ridiculed and attacked by others in the group.

There was much confusion in the first meeting where most participants were unable to speak without being interrupted by someone else in the group. While some members never spoke, others would not stop talking once they had started. Some people had a lot of good ideas but others were unable to articulate clearly what they had in mind. The group also had major difficulties in grasping the key ideas behind the project and were rather unsure as to whether they wanted to be involved in the initiative. The initial few meetings were therefore taken up with:

- keeping the group going
- developing the necessary skills of the group so that members could actually function and work together in the meeting
- re-iterating the aim of the project
- explaining how poverty is defined and deciding how this particular group wanted to apply the concept
- explaining the concept of an SE and the fact that it was the disadvantaged themselves who needed to develop the idea of it

Defining poverty and the objectives of the project idea

The most difficult task for the group was to understand how to define poverty. After much debate participants finally agreed to use it in the same way as the disadvantaged in the *Shattered Dreams* study (Serr 2006b) had developed it earlier. Since people in the earlier group had also come from the inner-urban areas of Melbourne, with similar lives and socio-economic characteristics, they seemed to resemble the participants' own poverty experiences. Thus they agreed with the earlier group that poverty involves:

... many factors, including lack of income and resources, substandard accommodation, family conflict/breakdown, lack of social or community networks, personal problems and ill health, physical hardship, negative outlook on life and the experience of personal degradation (Serr 2006b:x).

Thus participants in this project agreed that poverty is a multi-dimensional problem, and identified with the poverty categories developed by the people interviewed in *Shattered Dreams*, as outlined in Box 1. However the current participants insisted on including unemployment in the list of categories, as they thought unemployment relates clearly both to their own poverty experience and to the solution to poverty.

Box 1: Poverty Categories Identified in Shattered Dreams

1. Multi-Dimensional Aspects
2. Lack Of Adequate Income
3. Substandard Accommodation
4. Family Conflict/Breakdown
5. Lack Of Social/Community Networks
6. Personal Problems

Source: (Serr 2006b:7).

Once poverty was thus defined and agreed upon by the participants, the next task for the group was to identify the objectives of the actual SE project they wanted to develop. Based on the poverty definition and the kinds of needs implicit in poverty experienced, the group agreed on the following objectives for their SE project:

- (a) To meet the needs of participants
- (b) To provide relevant skills and training for the participants
- (c) o provide employment opportunities for the participants
- (d) To make the project self-funding over time
- (e) To make a positive contribution to the local community (Serr & Rose 2008).

Developing the SE project idea

As already pointed out, the initial process of working with the group was difficult given the diversity of people involved and the many kinds of personal problems experienced by the members. Low levels of general education reduced the participants' ability to understand the initial tasks required. The lack of skills to conceptualise the idea behind the project was further compounded by the fact that no participant had ever been part of a formal meeting or a discussion group. Part of the confusion in the early meetings was also due to the fact that people kept coming late to meetings or dropping out of the process over time. Sometimes an unknown person would turn up, contribute to the discussions, and never return again. Some meetings were also characterised by tensions between participants when potential conflict had to be avoided and people needed careful management. The vulnerability of participants was also demonstrated when one homeless young woman became emotionally attached to the researcher, writing inappropriate letters and leaving

numerous telephone messages. Eventually she had to be referred to the participating agency and counselled to leave the project.

Despite the many initial presenting problems, participants developed the necessary skills for the project at a remarkable pace, applying themselves with great enthusiasm to the tasks at hand. Once people had gained confidence, they showed amazing creativity and talents, and their in-depth knowledge of poverty and real life experience came to the fore. This enabled the group to come up with their project idea, which included some of the planning stages and possible management structure of the coffee shop. During the development process, the group clearly recognised that their project had to be hosted by an existing agency, both to make it successful and to provide the kind of personal support still needed by each individual member of the group.

Table 1 presents the broad SE idea developed by the participants, where the main purpose of the project is to set up a Coffee Shop. However the project also includes a Food Store, a Training Venue, and a General Office, all to be housed in one building.

Table 1: The Coffee Shop Project

SETTINGS	FUNCTIONS
1. COFFEE SHOP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The coffee shop intends to sell basic food items such as: coffee/ tea, soft drinks, cakes, foccacias, sandwiches
2. FOOD STORE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The food store will be located near the coffee shop and provide some subsidised non-perishable food items for local disadvantaged people Membership based system may be considered to draw in the local community
3. TRAINING VENUE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This facility can be used for training purposes for the participants themselves but also intends to organise recreational activities such as yoga/meditation/needle classes for the local community. It is hoped that participants will patronise the coffee shop
4. OFFICE	<p>The office is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> facilitate the setting-up process of the coffee shop and also assist in the running, promotion and advertising of its activities organise and manage recreational classes set-up additional small businesses once coffee shop is fully operational; ideas so include: gardening business, food delivery, furniture removal services, handyman service

Source: Adapted from Serr & Rose (2008).

Accordingly the Coffee Shop is to provide some basic foods items without the need for intensive preparation and cooking. Participants clearly wanted to make profits through this enterprise, and they also wanted to assist local people who are in need and disadvantaged. Thus they developed the idea of the Food Store alongside the Coffee Shop to provide cheap and subsidised non-perishable food stuffs. The aim of a training facility is to have a venue which can be used by the group to run relevant training for its members to acquire the skills necessary to run its operations. In addition, the venue could be used by the local community for recreational activities. It was hoped that people attending these activities would also patronise the Coffee Shop to increase its revenue. Although the general office was simply going to be the place of the group's administration, participants also decided that they wanted to use it to set up other small scale businesses, such as a furniture removal service for instance. The group anticipated that the Coffee Shop would eventually be able to employ its members and become financially self-sustaining. Members also hoped that the income from the Coffee Shop and Training Venue would be able to subsidise the Food Store, and assist some of the needy people in the area. A membership scheme was thought of where people in the local community might join and thus be encouraged to eventually support the Coffee Shop and Food Store.

The project's structure and operations

Table 2 describes the details of the SE idea developed by the group and how the participants thought the project could be structured and managed.

Participants felt strongly that the SE should be based in inner-urban Melbourne in order to maximise the opportunities for the development of a successful venture. They wanted to limit the number of disadvantaged people involved in the SE, to minimise the potential problems within the group and in the operation. Thus the group identified a number of problem areas which might present difficulties for the successful operation of the SE. These included:

- Personal conflict between participants and staff
- Disagreements between participants regarding roles, functions, and day-to-day activities
- Individual participants becoming unwell or just not turning up for work, leaving the operation unattended
- Some individuals not 'pulling their weight'
- Someone not 'fitting in' with the project, and having to be asked to leave the project
- Other people coming from the outside bringing in problems/conflict, making it essential for rules to be clearly established; for example, no drugs/alcohol on premises (Serr & Rose 2008).

In order to deal with the anticipated difficulties the group felt that agency staff needed to be involved in the SE, and should continue to be available to assist and support individuals when required. As the Coffee Shop idea was quite a 'big idea' to start out with, participants were quite realistic. They did not think such a major project could be started from the beginning without adequate knowledge, training and skills. Therefore they thought of starting out in a more modest way, first with the Office and a small business idea such as the furniture removal service. This would allow participants also time to attend necessary training classes and develop the kind of skills and working relationships with each other.

As Table 2 makes clear, the group also proposed that various stakeholders needed to be involved in the management of the SE. Since this is a 'bottom up' approach, participants felt strongly that they have to be included and represented in any management structure. Thus it was proposed that there should be a Board of Management, consisting of members of the projects (participants), agency staff and some members of the community with the relevant business expertise.

Table 2: Proposed Project Details

Number of Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5-10 people, with preference given to the current six participants
Location/ Venue for the Project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The project should be housed in an independent and suitable building in inner-urban Melbourne
Starting small with the Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The project should start with the Office and a small business idea such as the furniture removal service in order to develop the bigger project
Anticipated Problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Various difficulties associated with on-going personal problems and support needs
Support Needs identified by the Participants	<p>In order to deal with anticipated problems, participants suggested that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two appropriately skilled staff members assist the project Individual participants still need access to and support from agency staff when required
Management and Governance of the Project	<p>The project should be managed by a Board, consisting of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants Relevant agency staff Researcher External representatives with relevant expertise, such as food handling and accounting

	While the group was interested in investigating cooperative methods and principles, processes of governance, and mission statements/regulations, it was recognised that these would need to be clearly established and fit in with what is possible in relation to the work of EWA
Roles within the Project	<p>People/organisations involved would have the following roles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants be directly involved in all activities of the project • The EWA to auspice and support the project • Researcher to be responsible for developing and conducting an action research project to document the progress and processes of the project • EWA and researcher to investigate/seek funding options for the project
Advertising the Project	<p>Possible public relations options suggested include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a leaflet and then mail-out/letter drop • A launch by someone well known • Local newspaper feature/article • Community Radio interviews
Funding Options	<p>Possible funding options include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government/DHS • Philanthropic Trusts/Foundations • Local Council • Fund raising activities • Corporate sponsorship

Source: Adapted from Serr & Rose (2008)

While it is clear that the project would have to be hosted by an EWA, the group also saw value in an action research component in which the researcher would document the process during the different set-up stages. Funding for the proposed SE would need to be investigated and applied for by the EWA and researcher. Once the project was to go ahead, the group suggested several options for advertising/marketing, including a public launch, mass mail-out, and media campaign.

Project successes and impediments

The great success of this pilot was that in a brief period of time participants developed an SE idea as a way of tackling their own poverty problem. This achievement confirms both the findings of other studies, and the fact that disadvantaged people

themselves have a significant role to play in developing poverty alleviation strategies (Narayan, Chambers, Shah and Petesch 2000; Serr 2004a, 2006a).

Despite being marginalised in society with low educational attainment, life chances and opportunities, the disadvantaged here have shown a remarkable capacity to understand the complex conceptualisations with which they had clearly struggled at the beginning. After only a few weeks, participants were able to overcome many of the hurdles of personal circumstances and the difficulties in working in a totally new and different environment. They mastered the skills in constructive engagement among themselves, and successfully brainstormed, workshopped and planned activities unknown to them previously. Without any prior knowledge of business and SE models, they developed a project idea that is both creative and innovative. This achievement again demonstrates that the disadvantaged have great potential to make very constructive contributions to poverty solutions if they are only given the opportunity and chances to do so.

Although the participating agency made no commitment to actually set up an SE with the participants, it had promised to look into the feasibility of the idea at the end of the process. When the EWA showed no interest in exploring the proposed SE further, participants were clearly disappointed despite no promises having been made to them. For this reason the researcher has undertaken to explore opportunities with other agencies to accommodate the project idea.

The EWA's decision not to continue the project seems to be based on two factors: first, it felt that such a project could not be integrated into the existing service model of the agency; second, the project was seen as 'too risky'. These risk factors included:

- Questions about the financial sustainability of such a project, as its development would require significant resources over a number of years
- Health and safety issues which could potentially expose the agency to legal liability, especially around the handling of food
- The general 'risk' such a project would inevitably pose to the agency
- Issues of governance and control over the project's operations, including financial accountability (Serr and Rose 2008).

While the decision by the EWA has disappointed the participants who were keen to develop a real SE project from 'the bottom up', the approach taken by the agency needs to be seen in the wider organisational context, where welfare agencies increasingly operate in an environment dominated by 'risk management' and 'financial accountability'.

Even though this current paper cannot explore these issues further, it is important to note that the work of organisations like the EWA are increasingly influenced by considerations of 'risk', to protect the interests of the agency and its staff. As Green (2007:397) points out:

Alongside this corporate approach to risk management, related regimes, including those governing occupational health and safety, quality assurance, auditing, negligence, and professional indemnity, all take their place in the complex regulatory frameworks constructing risks and risk responses for social workers.

This approach originally comes from economics and related business models, to calculate and minimise 'risks' to business operations. Related models have not only influenced the corporate world but also other sectors including welfare service providers (see Beck 1992, 1998; McDonald 2006). In this context the decision by the EWA not to pursue the SE idea will therefore be explored further elsewhere. What needs to be investigated is whether the focus on managing the risk to protect agencies and their staff will ultimately undermine the development of innovative and creative anti-poverty approaches such as the 'bottom up approach' shown in this paper.

Conclusion

This paper has explored some of the processes involved in the development of an SE idea with a small group of disadvantaged people in inner-urban Melbourne. The main objective of the project was for the disadvantaged themselves to look at their poverty issues and then develop an anti-poverty strategy in the form of an SE. The project also considered the factors influencing the participating agency's decision on whether to explore the possibilities of integrating the SE idea into its existing programmes.

As the discussion demonstrates, developing an SE with highly disadvantaged people where they themselves are the main actors in such an initiative is very intensive and difficult. People's lack of education, social disadvantage, and personal problems are demonstrated to be impediments to such an endeavour. However, this pilot project also shows how much potential poor people have to be part of their own solutions, and demonstrates the enormous creativity and innovation they bring to such efforts. If SEs are developed from the 'bottom up', with the disadvantaged actively involved in all parts of the process, SEs clearly have the potential to empower the disadvantaged and to help improve their situation. Much can therefore be gained through this process.

The fact that the EWA was not interested in pursuing the work of the disadvantaged group further has to be seen, at least in part, in the wider context of risk management which currently influences the organisational behaviour of the welfare and other related sectors. The EWA decision therefore warrants further exploration in a follow-up paper to see how the increasing focus of 'risk' by welfare agencies can potentially undermine SE and similar initiatives, which try to empower the disadvantaged.

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