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Social Exclusion: An ILO Perspective

edited by Jose B. FIGUEIREDO and Arjan DE HAAN, International Institute for Labour Studies, Research Series 111, Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Office, 1998, 129 p., ISBN 92-9014-577-3.

Global economic and technological changes have swept across the globe, creating vast new groups of disadvantaged people. At the same time, globalization has imposed limits on state capacity to respond to these developments. The concept of *social exclusion* has risen to new prominence in the context of the search for policy frameworks to address multi-dimensional disadvantage which severs individuals and groups from major institutions and opportunities in society such as housing, employment and other citizenship rights. Increasingly it is used in place of a more traditional focus on poverty and unemployment, considered to have a more narrow economic and distributional focus.

The Third Poverty Program of the European Commission defined poverty/social exclusion as "a dynamic process, with different stages; often resulting from lack of resources; leading to situations of multiple deprivation; multidimensional; implying shortcomings with regard to participation in "mainstream society," and to access vital social systems (labour market, health system, etc.); implying denial of social rights; containing factors of persistence and vicious circles that may prevail during the whole life cycle and lead to transmission of situation intergenerationally, and in extreme cases, imply de-integration from family ties and social relationship, and bring about a sense of loss of identity and purpose." Policies to combat exclusion have occupied a prominent place on the agenda of European countries for some time, but the concept has only recently come into widespread use in North America.

Social Exclusion: An ILO perspective is a record of the proceedings of the ILO conference "Overcoming Social

Exclusion: The ILO Contribution" which took place in Geneva in May 1997 to explore theoretical issues and policy implications from a social exclusion perspective. It is but one volume from a broader research series from the International Institute for Labour Studies (IILS) on social exclusion and development policy. The book has three major sections: a theoretical perspectives, an exploration of divergent policy approaches and a series of papers from practitioners detailing a variety of policy responses to different dimensions of exclusion. With contributions from several of the leading thinkers in the area of social exclusion, it is well worth reading for a distillation of current theory and policy in the area. As is perhaps inevitable in a collection of conference proceedings, the last section is somewhat uneven, but does contain an important paper on gender and social exclusion by Petra Ulshoefer of the ILO.

The concept of *social exclusion* originated in France where, in the 1970s, the term was used to refer to people with disabilities, the suicidal, the aged, abused children, youth drop-outs, adult offenders, substance abusers, as well as those excluded from regular employment based social benefits. It has evolved to refer to emerging patterns of disadvantage in the wake of the sweeping economic transformations of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly the persistently poor and the long-term unemployed.

The dimensions of the problem will be familiar to many. In Europe, one-half of the unemployed remain without work for one year or longer. In Canada, only about one in ten of the unemployed are out of work long-term, but this is higher than historical levels and trending upwards. Worrisome signs, for those

concerned about a growing risk of exclusion in Canada, include an overall rate of employment, and participation rate that still have not returned to pre-recession levels, and a rate of poverty that has barely budged from recessionary levels, even at the peak of the economic cycle. There is some evidence that poverty is becoming concentrated among high-risk groups who face long term poverty, those with limited education, lone parents, those with a work limitation, visible minorities and recent immigrants.

A now voluminous literature documents polarizing labour markets and deteriorating job quality as well as diminished mobility out of low wage labour. A strength of the book is the recognition that globalization is having profound effects on social cohesion at a national level, an understanding that seems to have eluded many promoters of the global economy. These impacts vary tremendously across economies, and the book points out how the concept of *social exclusion* can be used to illuminate the impact of technology transfer, reinforcement of democratic participation and worker rights.

The literature on social exclusion, including now this volume, identifies two advantages to the social exclusion approach. It highlights the *multi-dimensionality* of disadvantage, and in principle, directs attention to the political and economic *processes* that generate exclusion and thereby undermines social cohesion. The comprehensiveness of the concept broadens the focus from disadvantage based on purely economic grounds – poverty and unemployment – to include marginalization through the denial or non-realization of civil, political and social rights of citizenship. At the same time, it recognizes the centrality of employment and an economic base from which people can exercise their rights of citizenship and overcome other dimensions of disadvantage.

Where the literature on social exclusion has been weakest is in operation-

alising the term to properly understand the phenomenon under discussion, and to allow for research and meaningful policy interventions. Where this book is strongest is in its presentation of frameworks for operationalising the term. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the contribution by Arjan de Haan “Social exclusion in policy and research: Operationalising the concept,” which sets out a conceptual framework linking *dimensions* of social exclusion (physical, economic, human capital, social capital and political) and key aspects of these dimensions (such as income, labour market activity and civic engagement) to indicators that make it possible to identify populations excluded. De Haan’s framework also extends the analysis of the dimensions of exclusion to identify the institutions, agents and processes that have produced exclusion.

It is particularly gratifying to be presented with analytic frameworks that are useful in both North and South. John Gaventa’s contribution argues that the participation of the excluded in the definition of the problem and the creation of solutions is a key outgrowth of this new approach, one that promises to democratize policy making and strengthen civil society.

In some ways frameworks for analyzing social exclusion simply amount to a re-packaging of familiar ideas. The thinking on social exclusion, including in this volume, is most developed around the impact of poverty and unemployment, and less well developed in other dimensions. But researchers and policy makers have long recognized the complex inter-relationships among poverty, unemployment and many dimensions of what has become known as social exclusion – health, social participation. As far back as the 1930s, M. Jahoda, P. Lazarsfeld and H. Zeisel (1933) landmark study of Marienthal examined the impact of unemployment on social isolation. For many years researchers have explored the relationships

among poverty, unemployment, health and social and economic participation. However, there is no denying that the comprehensive framework for understanding social exclusion presented in this volume compels us towards a research agenda that will look at how the different dimensions of deprivation intersect and consequent comprehensive policy solutions.

The policy chapters of the book are similarly strong, including an excellent overview of policies to address social exclusion in Europe by Hilary Silver, one of the most substantial contributions to the book. One gets a sense of the breadth of policies implicated in a social exclusion framework by examining the 1998 *Loi de prévention et de lutte contre les exclusions* of France's Jospin government which encompassed supply side, demand side, and matching labour market policies, as well policies to address the role of the 'third sector'; improvements in the social minima; housing policy; health policy; education; social services; citizenship and culture. The goals of social cohesion and solidarity are paramount in this approach.

If breadth characterizes the French response, the discourse narrows considerably when attention turns to the United Kingdom, where policies to address exclusion are couched in terms of dependency and individual responsibility, a rhetoric familiar to North Americans. In policy terms, this translates into an emphasis on employability, work incentives, education and training.

In a 1994 IILS discussion paper, Silver identified three distinct approaches to exclusion: a *Solidarity* model, built on the goals of social cohesion and integration; a *Liberal* model which is based on the language of underclass and dependence; and a *Monopoly* model wherein class and power interweave to produce exclusion by the included. The clear implication of this typology is that social exclusion frameworks currently extant are largely consistent with the cultural

and ideological predisposition of the governments in question. It appears that the concept social exclusion is sufficiently malleable as to allow for policies consistent with almost any ideology. How else could policies as divergent as those emanating from France and the United State's welfare-to-work program Transitional Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) even appear in the same volume?

Ensuring broad labour market 'flexibility' and steady turnover in the lower tier of the labour market has the purpose of creating regular, if not permanent attachment to the labour market, albeit at the bottom end, and may therefore avoid the formation of an entrenched, and politically unstable, underclass. But such policies can hardly be taken seriously as an attempt to overcome social exclusion or to create social cohesion. In a polarizing labour market they may simply reinforce exclusion, as people trade desperate wage poverty for stigmatized income support programs that, no matter how meagre, at least had the virtue of signifying that the rest of society took some interest in the well-being of the less fortunate.

Those looking to a social exclusion framework for fresh approaches to the problems thrown up by the global economy may therefore be disappointed. The hope of the editors of this book is that policy frameworks based on *social cohesion* will provide a "normative vision of how economic globalization should evolve so as to enhance social justice" (p. 3). If a social exclusion framework forces us to confront the reality that social exclusion and inequality have grown as a by-product of globalized post-industrial capitalism, flexible labour markets and a more limited role for the state in mediating market relations, then perhaps it will at least lead us to ask the right questions. That would be a substantial contribution.

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