

Social Connectedness and Poverty Eradication

A South African Perspective

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Building on earlier work which argues that social isolation can be both a consequence of living in poverty and a cause of its persistence, this paper presents case studies of two South African programmes to illustrate how strengthening social connectedness may help to diminish intergenerational poverty. The central argument of the paper is that social connectedness can play a crucial role in providing access to social capital, in altering the exclusionary processes that entrench intergenerational poverty, and in helping to reduce other deprivations of multidimensional poverty.

One of the case studies involves rural and urban communities in five of South Africa's nine provinces and the other is situated in urban Johannesburg. Through the case studies, and with reference to research on Indigenous knowledge, worldview and conceptions of connectedness, the paper explores mechanisms that promote social connectedness as a driver for eradicating intergenerational poverty. In so doing, it considers how an expansion of people's relational capabilities can alter exclusionary processes that impair the prospects and well-being of poor children and youth. The paper concludes that attention to social isolation provides insight into the enabling conditions for making progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 1 (end poverty in all its forms) and Target 10.2 (empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all).

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1. Introduction

Social isolation, or relational deprivation, is an important dimension of poverty and an impediment to human well-being and capability. People living in poverty talk about isolation, shame, and humiliation as being key aspects of their lived experiences; yet until recently these have been neglected dimensions in multidimensional poverty research. Also, despite a growing literature on the mediating role that social support can play between income and low subjective well-being, little policy exists to develop and strengthen support networks, especially in developing countries (Mills, Zavaleta and Samuel, 2014). Building on earlier work which argues that social isolation can be both a consequence of living in poverty and a cause of its persistence (Mills, Zavaleta, and Samuel, 2014; Samuel, 2016; Samuel et al, 2014; Zavaleta, Samuel and Mills, 2016), this paper uses case studies of two South African programmes to illustrate how strengthening social connectedness may help to diminish intergenerational poverty. We argue that social connectedness can play a crucial role in providing access to social capital, in altering the exclusionary processes that entrench intergenerational poverty, and in helping to reduce other deprivations of multidimensional poverty.

The illustrative cases come from the Social Connectedness Programme, a partnership of the Samuel Family Foundation and the Synergos Institute, South Africa. One case involves rural and urban communities in five of South Africa's nine provinces; the other is situated in urban Johannesburg. Through the cases, and with reference to research on Indigenous knowledge systems and conceptions of connectedness, the paper explores mechanisms that promote social connectedness as a driver for eradicating intergenerational poverty. In so doing, it considers how an expansion of people's relational capabilities can alter exclusionary processes that impair the prospects and well-being of poor children and youth. A central argument of the paper is that attention to social isolation provides insight into the enabling conditions for making progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 1 (end poverty in all its forms) and Target 10.2 (empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all).

We begin with a brief conceptual account of social isolation and its converse, social connectedness, from the standpoint of a capabilities approach

to multidimensional poverty. The account also sketches Indigenous southern African conceptions of connectedness, well-being and poverty. We then describe the background to the case study and present relevant findings from the two cases. The discussion section draws together the main threads of the paper towards answering two questions: (i) Are the mechanisms of social exclusion amenable to change? (ii) What can be done to alter exclusionary processes, especially those affecting youth? We also consider how ending exclusionary processes helps to reduce and, possibly, prevent intergenerational poverty. In conclusion, we outline some policy implications, with particular reference to the capabilities of children and young people.

2. Social isolation, connectedness and multidimensional poverty

Income deprivation is just one of the many dimensions in which people experience poverty. Lack of access to health care, education, nutritious food, clean water and sanitation are among the frequently measured dimensions of poverty. Social isolation, along with shame and humiliation and other 'hidden' dimensions of poverty, has received far less attention in research and social policy until recently (Samuel et al, 2014). Yet it is one of the dimensions that poor people cite as central to their experience of poverty (Narayan, Chambers, Shah and Petesch, 2000).

Social isolation is a form of relational deprivation, a deprivation of social connectedness. Subjectively, isolation may be experienced as loneliness or a persistent sense of being unable to approach others to find comfort, seek advice or engage physically or emotionally. It is like feeling one is sitting alone at the bottom of a well – invisible and outside of all circles of care and concern (Samuel, 2016). More formally, social isolation can be defined as “the inadequate quality and quantity of social relations with other people at the different levels where human interaction takes place (individual, group, community and the larger social environment)” (Zavaleta, Samuel and Mills, 2014, p. 6). Isolation has both internal and external aspects. Whereas external isolation refers to a paucity of meaningful relationships with other people (de Jong Gierveld, van Tilburg and Dykstra, 2006); internal isolation refers to the distress resulting from the divergence ‘between ideal and perceived social relationships’ (Hawkey and Cacioppo, 2009). The internal and external spheres together reflect a person's social

connectedness, or deprivation thereof (Zavaleta, Samuel and Mills, 2016; Samuel, 2016).

There is growing evidence to suggest that social isolation is a core impediment to achieving well-being and that people living in absolute poverty regard 'social isolation' as pertinent to their understanding of poverty (Narayan, Chambers, Shah and Petesch, 2000; Zavaleta, Samuel and Mills, 2014). Amartya Sen has argued that relational deprivation is both intrinsic to capability poverty and a cause of diverse capability failure (see Sen 1999; 2000). Four premises support the claim that relational deprivation is an intrinsic part of capability poverty: first, people have good reasons to value connectedness with others; second, relational deprivation can result in other deprivations; third, affiliation between people is a social basis for respect and non-humiliation (Nussbaum, 2000); and, fourth, people's sense of belonging to a group enhances their capabilities and can support their productivity.

In short, social isolation is a critical dimension of poverty. Social relations are fundamental to human well-being. Relational deprivation has adverse effects on people's quality of life, health and well-being; it erodes their sense of dignity and hinders them from realizing their rights.

Deepening connectedness and overcoming social isolation among vulnerable children and youth, especially, is a vital endeavour. Children who live in extreme poverty experience many layers of deprivation, all worsened by isolation. When children, youth and their caregivers have no network of people upon whom they can depend for mutual support, this aggravates the deprivations of poverty. In southern Africa, income poverty, stigma, premature burdens of care in households affected by HIV and AIDS, school drop-out, and an inability to access services are all factors that put children at risk of social isolation. This impedes their development and makes them vulnerable to further deprivation. As the eco-systemic model of human development explains, development, from infancy to adulthood, depends critically on the social environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In early childhood, development occurs through reciprocal interactions between the child and the people and things in the child's immediate environment. As children grow older, through youth and into adulthood, more complex reciprocal interactions

with a wider range of people and things affect their development. Relational deprivation, especially when it is associated with other deprivations of multidimensional poverty, is therefore a severe impediment to human development and well-being.

Being socially connected enables the young to participate in activities that strengthen their relations with their peers and communities, build resilience and give them a sense of belonging. Socially connected people have meaningful relationships and bonds with those around them, including their peers, families and communities. Social connectedness is instrumentally important because it facilitates people's access to opportunities and nurtures their participatory abilities (Samuel, 2016; Zavaleta, Samuel and Mills, 2016). There is an extensive literature on social capital that points to the instrumental value of social connectivity within family, groups, and community, and to the importance of the rules governing this connectivity (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000; 2001).

Social connectedness has more than instrumental value; it is intrinsically important. This is so not only because social connectedness gives people a sense of belonging and because people value social relations for their own sake (Sen, 2000; Zavaleta, Samuel and Mills, 2016), but also because it is constitutive of people's well-being. On this view, people become who they are through their relatedness to others; "well-being happens in relationship", which is itself dynamic and varies across geography, history, life cycles and the ways in which time and space are organised and managed (White, 2009; 2010).

3. Insight on social connectedness from indigenous knowledge perspectives

Indigenous knowledge and knowledge systems differ in different regions of the world. While there is no homogenous notion of Indigenous knowledge, increasingly there is awareness within the international and scientific communities that Indigenous knowledge systems, historically ignored or viewed as inferior in the colonial context, are highly relevant and informative. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted in 2008, recognizes that "respect for Indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development...". This relevance is also apparent with regard to socio-economic issues and community development. Within the African context, the term

'Indigenous knowledge' is used to describe the knowledge systems developed by a community in contrast to the scientific knowledge that is generally developed externally (Ajibade, 2003) .

As we consider social isolation and social connectedness within specific community contexts, Indigenous worldview and knowledge systems provide important insight. Within the southern African context, Indigenous knowledges, generally referred to as Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), include an appreciation of social relationships and social connectedness as closely linked to and even essential to the achievement of well-being.

Within IKS the notion of resourcefulness shifts the narrative of poverty to generate hope and present opportunities for positive, culturally attuned social support. Two commissioned studies on social connectedness and Indigenous approaches to care and support in southern Africa have enriched our understanding of connectedness (FDC, 2014; NMCF, 2014) . Both studies started with the assumption that knowledge of heritage-true practices may contribute to locally-attuned interventions that make best use of scarce resources to provide a sustained pathway for social support. Within a broadly shared communitarian worldview that values wholeness, harmony, spiritual well-being and interdependency, each IKS in the studied communities has established customs and responsibilities for acquiring, processing and sharing different kinds of knowledge. People apply their collective skills, experiences and insights to maintain or improve their livelihoods. This collective social capital can be used as a resource for survival and development (see NMCF, 2014: 2-14).

Indigenous practices expand the realm of relatedness through a concept of continuity of connectedness that transcends the domain of the living to include ancestral relationships. In the continuity of connectedness, cultural 'capital' and spiritual 'capital' are as important as social capital. Within such a continuity of connectedness, need is a positive human attribute. Need links relationships and serves as a way to attain meaning in life. Being needed and being in need are regarded as inevitable and valuable features of life. Where need is observed, giving help is obligatory. Responding to need is reciprocal: if one never offers to help, one cannot expect to be helped when the need arises. The NMCF (2014) study concluded that where IKS values

frame life, there are good grounds for assuming that care and support strategies and structures exist, irrespective of how effective they may be and regardless of external interventions.

Across the studied communities, levels of income and individual economic status appeared to be less important to Indigenous notions of poverty than the number and quality of social connections and the available communal capital (NMCF, 2014). A person with plenty of material assets can be considered poor and vulnerable if s/he does not know how to approach, or live with, others. Resources are not exclusively 'mine' or 'yours'. Rather they form part of a pool that people may dip into, or give from, in cases of need. The total sum of care and support is calculated from what everyone can give collectively. On the basis of their findings, the authors recommend that care and support policy should "target existing care and support networks: thus emphasizing the continuity of connectedness" (NMCF, 2014:9).

This brief exploration illuminates ways in which IKS can inform, inspire and guide interventions with communities facing complex issues involving social isolation and poverty. Through an emphasis on communal relationships and bonds, as opposed to simply economic needs, broader, more holistic and sustainable solutions may be possible.

4. Background to the case study

According to the South African national census (2011), about half of South Africa's population is made up of people under the age of 25 years. More than half of all young people between the ages of 15 and 24 years live in income poor households, and are among the most vulnerable to the national economic inequality. These figures do not take account of all people classified as youth in South Africa. The country's national policy expands the category of youth to include people aged 15-35 years, on the grounds that young people's transition to an independent, sustainable livelihood can take a relatively long time, especially under prevailing conditions of inequality. Challenges facing youth include, among others: high drop-out rates and inadequate skills development; poor health, high HIV/AIDS prevalence, and high rates of violence and substance abuse; a lack of social cohesion and volunteerism; and disability (National Youth Development Agency, 2015). In the first quarter of 2015, there was an estimated youth unemployment

rate of 37% among people of 15-34 years compared with an unemployment rate of 17% among people aged 35 – 64 years (De Lannoy, Leibbrandt and Frame, 2015). These estimates exclude youth who have given up seeking for jobs.

Low levels of education, poor nutrition, restricted access to and uptake of health care, lack of parental support and care, restricted access to basic services and housing are interrelated dimensions that reinforce youth poverty and can cause a persistent sense of isolation and exclusion, from childhood into young adulthood. For many South African youth, “the pre-conditions for a sense of belonging are largely absent” (Burns, Jobson & Zuma, 2015: 83). Absence of a sense of belonging, aligned with the social challenges of unemployment, deprives young people of feeling valued and appreciated within their own families and communities. All these factors hinder youth in poor communities from crafting their identities in positive ways towards personal development and community building.

Yet the situation is not without hope. A growing literature testifies to the dreams and aspirations of young people in South Africa and to the conditions that assist them to navigate adversity. Researchers and policymakers recognize the importance of taking the agency of youth seriously, and of providing support and bridging relationships to open opportunities that enable a sense of real and imminent possibility (De Lannoy et al., 2015). Buti Manamela (currently Deputy Minister in the Presidency: Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation as well as Youth Development and Administration) points out that in youth policy consultations across the country, young people insisted that they want to be partners in their own development. In response to this insistence, the new policy for youth development centres on building youth agency “with young people at the centre of their own development” (Manamela, 2015: 8).

We suggest that advancing young people’s relational capabilities is crucial in these endeavours. Promoting social connectedness is a central purpose of the Social Connectedness Programme from which we have drawn the cases for this paper. From 2009, the Social Connectedness Programme in South Africa, in partnership with the Samuel Family Foundation and coordinated by the Synergos Institute, started to analyse chronic isolation as a contributor to and consequence of poverty and

initiated some practical measures to increase and deepen social connectedness of children and youth. Even though social isolation affects people from different socio-economic and historic backgrounds, this initiative chose to focus on addressing social connectedness of children and youth living in poverty in South Africa and neighbouring countries.

The programme aimed to bring about personal transformation of care workers to enable them to become agents of social change within their own communities. The programme worked collaboratively to strengthen resources and traditions of care by identifying and promoting effective models that enable meaningful connections for vulnerable children and youth. The theory of change is that improving the practices of those who interact with children on a daily basis (i.e. care workers, families and communities at large) will break chronic social isolation that vulnerable children and youth experience and that this, in turn, will help to bring communities closer together to work collaboratively to care for and improve services for children.

5. Case studies

The Social Connectedness Programme promotes social connectedness among children and youth so as to enhance the enabling conditions for their well-being and development. It does so, in part, through project partnerships with organisations operating in the children and youth sectors.

The first case considers the Networking HIV/AIDS Community of South Africa (NACOSA), a national civil society network of more than 1,200 organisations and individuals from six out of nine provinces of South Africa. The second case involved a partnership with City Year Johannesburg, a non-profit organisation that brings together a diverse group of South African youth for a year to participate in leadership training and opportunities for service-learning. Participating youth (known as Service Leaders) do their service in selected primary schools where they support teachers with literacy and numeracy teaching in class, provide after school homework support to learners and run a kids club that focuses on sporting and social activities.

Through the Social Connectedness Programme, social connectedness training and support was integrated into the training sessions of NACOSA and City Year. In both partnerships, youth provide

care and support services to children – on a volunteer basis in the case of City Year and through employment in the case of NACOSA. Apart from institutional leaders, 90% of the practitioners who receive training in social connectedness are between the ages of 20-35 years. Youth are thus the primary beneficiaries of social connectedness training in these two cases. Children, their caregivers and communities are secondary beneficiaries. Most of the participating youth – service leaders in City Year and child and youth care workers in NACOSA – come from lower income households and families with very limited access to employment opportunities and social mobility. Many young service leaders in City Year, for instance, join in order to earn the small income from a stipend and to better themselves through leadership training. For some, the stipend is the primary income for their households.

It is against this background that we examine outcomes from the social connectedness training offered to youth associated with NACOSA and City Year. Monitoring and evaluation in both cases used mixed methods; individual interviews, focus groups and survey (both baseline and, where possible, end-line), with data collection from a sample of different role players in the programme. The mixed method approach enabled the evaluation team to triangulate the data to develop credible and valid evaluative conclusions. The evaluation was conducted against two main achievement criteria for the Social Connectedness Programme, namely, an outcomes criterion and an impact criterion. The intended medium- to long-term outcomes are: (i) a cohort of practitioners across sectors has a deeper understanding and integrates social connectedness into practice; (ii) key institutions integrate the knowledge of social connectedness and scale up and replicate best practice models of social connectedness through deep and broad engagement with programmes and practice; and (iii) a cadre of leaders from a range of sectors are aware of the value of social connectedness and promote and lead the work on social connectedness. The intended impact of the programme is that the resilience of children, youth and their caregivers is developed through social connectedness interventions, and this is given expression in their performance in their different life spaces, and in their ability to access resources, services, and opportunities.

We focus on those aspects of outcomes and impact

that are pertinent to poverty eradication and social inclusion, particularly among youth. Together, the two cases yield qualitative support towards the assumption that enhancing social connectedness may be a key mechanism for addressing capability poverty. They illustrate how deepened social connectedness and an awareness of isolation and its relationship to poverty can enable positive identity formation and resourcefulness among young people. In the City Year case, they also point to persistent obstacles to young people's confident exercise of their agency.

Findings

For the purposes of this paper, we group findings from the two cases under four main themes: (i) increased awareness and understanding of social isolation, its effects and its relation to poverty; (ii) increased self-awareness, confidence and awareness of others; (iii) extended social connectedness at the levels of family, work, community and larger social structures; and (iv) increased social capital, initiative and resourcefulness.

Increased awareness and understanding of social isolation, its effects and its relation to poverty

In the NACOSA case, the majority of child and youth care workers who had been trained in social connectedness indicated an increase in their knowledge and awareness about social connectedness and isolation. Several mentioned a deeper understanding of the relationship between poverty and social isolation. One of the care workers commented: "I do understand the connection between isolation and poverty. For us it has helped us to give our people a chance to know that coming from poverty does not mean you need to isolate yourself from others." Although she makes no mention of shame, her comment implies her recognition of the relationship between shame, isolation and poverty in people's lived experiences.

The ability to explain the concepts of social isolation and connectedness to others is one indicator of understanding. For some care workers, the Indigenous concept of Ubuntu provided the entry point: "I did not find it difficult [to explain the importance of social connectedness] as I compared it to Ubuntu, and mostly in rural areas it's still upheld and they unite in everything." This concurs with the NMCF (2014) finding that a continuum of connectedness is a central

characteristic of Indigenous knowledge systems that regard well-being as constituted in relatedness. But other responses from NACOSA care workers imply a perception that Indigenous practices of connectedness may have been eroded in some communities. They welcome the contribution that the social connectedness programme makes to building Ubuntu and greater communal trust.

For young service leaders in the City Year case, the social connectedness programme appears to have been more effective in increasing their understanding of social isolation than of its relationship to poverty. In an end-line survey, 58% of the participants indicated that their knowledge about social connectedness had increased since the start of the programme; 56% indicated an increase in their knowledge of the relationship between poverty and social connectedness; and 68% indicated an improved understanding of social isolation.

Increased self-awareness, confidence and awareness of others

The NACOSA evaluation also revealed how care workers' increased ability to develop their own sense of social connectedness as an important feature of their development and self-awareness. They felt greater confidence in expressing themselves and opening up to others. They saw these changes as invaluable to their personal lives and to their work as community practitioners.

Increased self-awareness and confidence, together with an understanding of the importance of a sense of belonging, resulted in a more sensitive and open awareness of others. Reflecting on her perception of children, one care worker commented that it was not hard for her to accept gay children as her own grandchild has gay tendencies, since she was little. She said she knew the child was born like that but was worried that she would be discriminated against by community members. "Now I understand and do not want to change the child."

Awareness of others includes recognizing when people are socially isolated (internally, in their sense of loneliness or not belonging, or externally, in an absence or dearth of social connections). For care workers in NACOSA, being aware of isolated children is an important first step in overcoming exclusionary processes. Many of their comments

about an increased awareness of isolation also reveal a practical understanding of how poverty, shame and isolation are interrelated. The following extract illustrates the point: "There was a child that did not go to school and I went to that child and asked what the problem was. I am focusing on how she feels not how she behaves and try to get to her feelings. The child talked to me eventually and I found out why she did not go to school, as she did not have a school uniform and spoke to caregiver and asked her to find our clothes to go to school...and then the child went to school. I felt good as I made a difference in a child's life."

For many young service leaders in City Year, the social connectedness programme helped them to overcome their own isolation and increased their sensitivity to others. One quotation from a plethora of examples illustrates this change: "Being alone, at first I was that kind of a person who would prefer to be in his own corner and wait for someone to come to me but now I can't do that anymore, as I am the one who would sometimes go 'out there'. What led to that in the beginning was that I needed to understand the people around me first, through the learning of social connectedness it has somehow changed how I see things."

Service leaders' realization of a shared experience of social isolation opened the way for friendships and mutually benefitting relationships among the service leaders. As one participant said, "I realized we have a lot in common, we need each other, to support each so we can achieve a future we want." Implicit in this comment is an understanding of the role of social connectedness and collective agency in enabling young people to fulfil their aspirations.

Extended social connectedness at the levels of family, work, community and larger social structures

Child and youth care workers in NACOSA reported a sense of advancement in their networking abilities and in their abilities to collaborate with management in their own organisations, as well as with community leaders. Through this extended social connectedness, and an understanding of the importance of building connections, many of the participating care workers took the initiative to increase the number of support groups to discuss issues affecting children and the broader community. One care worker commented that "after the training, we went to the traditional leaders (and

engaged with them) and taught them about SC [social connectedness]. Thereafter, the traditional leaders called a community meeting and introduced us as the community care workers and we became more accepted.”

In the NACOSA training, reflection sessions shifted the emphasis from the care workers’ own social connectedness to the need for social connectedness among the caregivers and children with whom they worked. 74% of the trained care workers indicated that they are able to offer a better quality of service to the child and family, and to implement the circles of support with increased awareness of social connectedness. In this they are supporting families and caregivers to build relationships in order to better support each other based on the similar challenges they face with children and teenagers.

Increased social capital, initiative and resourcefulness

One of the outcomes of the programme is that care workers in NACOSA have been able to change the way they work within households. Due to their understanding that building social connectedness involves open communication and child participation, they are encouraging parents and caregivers to allow for joint problem-solving and where relevant, joint decision-making. During home visits, care workers are now encouraging families to sit together and eat during dinner times so as to promote connectedness within the family and nurture intergenerational communication. One care worker commented: “Since the training, I am able to support children and able to come closer to them and, if necessary, try to help them disclose more to their families. For example, I used to work with a child who did not want to share with me and tell me what was going on at home.... Then she started to tell me about her abuse and, as a result, I referred her to a social worker...” After training, the care workers also find that they are more willing and better able to mediate challenges experienced where parents feel unable to help their children.

The peer support and mentorship that grew as a result of the Social Connectedness Programme is a key element of success for City Year alumni. Understanding the kind of social support networks that they can provide to each other enhances their social relationships as well as their social capital, through information-sharing about available networking events, job opportunities, scholarships,

fellowships and internships, as well as working collaboratively on community-based and social entrepreneurship projects. Two alumni shared their observation about the need for social connectedness in their own community. In their view, social support is a low-cost critical resource for the care of children, yet it is lacking. Both of them are currently working on a project to enhance the design and implementation of community-based care initiatives that encourage connectedness and more meaningful time spent with children. The project is producing handouts to provide parents and guardians with culturally contextualised information about children’s psychosocial well-being. Materials will include parent dialogues on social connectedness, its importance and how to build deeper relations with children.

Within the reach of NACOSA’s work, community cohesiveness has improved and a buddy system (through peer conversation and relationship-building) has been initiated among some of the care workers. One care worker commented that the buddy system was reminiscent of the old days when there used to be people around who were supportive and respected each other. This comment harks back to the continuum of connectedness in Indigenous knowledge systems (NMCF, 2014), which may have been eroded in many communities.

An important finding from the NACOSA case is that an understanding of social connectedness has resulted in improved systems of support for vulnerable children and youth. Some care workers commented that the programme had helped to promote better relationships and connections among caregivers and prevented them from feeling isolated and carrying the burden alone, as they now understood that other people were having the same experiences.

Initiative in resource mobilization is another striking outcome. Since the social connectedness training, care workers in communities that face high levels of deprivation have placed additional effort into facilitating processes to enable members of the community to access grants for households. Without the grants, children in many households go hungry because their caregivers do not have the means to buy food.

Accessing networks of this kind contributes towards the well-being and resilience of children, as social

grants and services will give them access to much needed resources. Care workers have tried, where possible, to establish the linkages required to assist caregivers, parents and children to get the required documentation for basic services, including child support grants, feeding schemes, schooling, health centre access and housing support. In the absence of these networks, it is extremely difficult for community members to make any headway in this regard. The relational support the care worker gives to parents and children is often the key element that keeps many dysfunctional and destitute families from falling apart, thus holding families and communities together and mobilizing resources and resourcefulness for improving the lives of families and children in a sustainable manner.

For most young service leaders in City Year, the social connectedness programme improved their ability to recognize isolated children at school and their ability to assist children in building social connections. However, it was found that most were not yet confident about their ability to identify and access resources to support social connectedness or to identify and link with supporting networks. These are critical to their ability to enable children to access sustainable support mechanisms and will need more focused attention with future cohorts of service leaders. Site leaders have recognized the need to work with the young service leaders to help them access networks, not only so that they can better support the children at the service schools but also in order to open employment opportunities for them once they complete their service learning in City Year. In a context of high youth unemployment, this is an important potential benefit of the social connectedness programme.

6. Social connectedness as a mechanism for change

In earlier work, we argued that acknowledging the contribution of social isolation to the lived experience of poverty “is necessary for eradicating global poverty” (Samuel, 2014). There we considered policy entry points for confronting isolation as an important dimension of multidimensional poverty. The case studies in this paper, together with research on Indigenous knowledge systems, suggest practice and intervention entry points for confronting isolation, particularly among youth and the care workers that work with children and youth.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals,

no matter how limited in their brevity, present an opportunity for policymakers, researchers and development practitioners to examine the means for attaining the aspirations to ‘end poverty in all its forms’ (SDG Goal 1) and ‘empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all’ (Target 10.2). With the SDGs in mind, we draw together the main threads from preceding sections to address two questions: (i) Are mechanisms of social exclusion amenable to change? And (ii) what can be done to alter exclusionary processes affecting youth and their communities? In so doing, we also consider the question of how ending exclusionary processes also prevents poverty and its transmission from one generation to the next and reflect on opportunities to advance innovative practice, intervention and new policy.

The short answers to the two questions are clear. Mechanisms of social exclusion are open to change. A concerted effort to address the issue of social isolation, and the associated stigma and shame of poverty, is crucial for disrupting the mechanisms of exclusion. Structural change, necessary as it may be, is on its own no guarantee of a socially inclusive society. Equally necessary is “a cultural shift towards recognizing the need to build and re-build social connections” (Samuel, 2014: 15). The case study, research on the ecology of human development, and South African research on youth aspirations and resourcefulness, all suggest that supporting youth to deepen and extend their social connectedness is an important way of altering the exclusionary processes that affect them. This involves an extension of connectedness not only within their immediate environment (at home and in the community), but in all spheres whose influence affects the fulfilment of their aspirations and shapes their opportunities for participation and effective agency. In other words, it involves support towards increasing both bonding and bridging social capital. Both forms of social capital – bonding and bridging – are needed in order to alter the exclusionary processes of poverty.

The case studies show that social connectedness has a crucial role to play in developing resourcefulness and providing access to social capital. More research, of a different kind, is necessary to establish whether, and how, more extensive social connectedness among youth might alter the exclusionary processes that entrench intergenerational poverty and help to reduce other

deprivations of multidimensional poverty. However, the case studies in this paper, earlier research (Samuel, 2014; Samuel 2016), and a growing body of research and analysis on youth and intergenerational poverty together provide support to these conclusions.

In their recent analysis of multidimensional youth poverty in South Africa, De Lannoy, Leibbrandt and Frame (2015) argue that if the prevailing poverty dynamics are left unchecked, they are likely to be transmitted to the next generation. This assumes that each generation transmits different ‘capitals’ – economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital – to the next, younger generation. Transfer of these capitals is influenced by a complex set of factors, both within and outside an individual’s household. Our case studies, and the research on Indigenous knowledge systems, illustrate that enhanced social connectedness can play a pivotal role within this complex of influencing factors.

The case studies show that, within its reach, the social connectedness programme helped to reduce social isolation (in both its internal and external aspects) of young caregivers and service leaders. In turn, through their activities in households, communities and schools, they helped to address isolation among children and their caregivers. For these young caregivers and service leaders, the programme helped to deepen and extend their meaningful relationships at three levels of human interaction (individual, group and community), and in a few instances at a broader social level. For many of the trained youth, greater social connectedness helped them to leverage resources for themselves and for the people they serve.

Social connectedness training in NACOSA and City Year enabled young care workers (NACOSA) and young service leaders (City Year) to bond with one another as fellow practitioners. An important outcome for the care workers was an increase in their bridging social capital. As a result of training, new knowledge and support in their self-created peer support and buddy groups, care workers were able to create bridges to community members, traditional leaders and local government departments. Through resourceful exercise of their agency they were able to assist children and caregivers who were previously excluded from social grants and other forms of social and health care which is their constitutional right. For a few

service leaders in the City Year programme, they became more aware of the role that they could play in creating connections, which served to strengthen their relationships with each other as well as encouraging a practice of reaching out to others to deepen these networks. However, for many young service leaders in City Year, bridging social capital remained just out of reach, although several gained an awareness of its importance. Across the board, the case study confirms the instrumental efficacy of social connectedness in facilitating people’s access to opportunities.

Social connectedness is also instrumental in nurturing people’s participatory abilities (Zavaleta, 2016). Active participation in decision-making and a range of other activities, at different levels - household, community, broader social and political structures – is crucial for a sense of belonging, as well as for building trust and reciprocity. The case studies presented in this paper illustrate how an awareness of social isolation and a deepened social connectedness helped to bring about more open, sensitive and respectful ways of responding to others.

Developing young people’s social connectedness at all levels is necessary, albeit not sufficient, for their social inclusion and sense of belonging. Deeper and wider social connectedness also holds some promise for contributing towards disrupting the transmission of intergenerational poverty. The case studies, along with other work in the Social Connectedness Programme, demonstrate the efficacy of concerted awareness raising, knowledge building and skills training.

Research on the conception of connectedness in Indigenous knowledge systems offers insights into the principles for crafting such interventions. The NMCF (2014) study advances the view that “policy and intervention infused with IKS can result in resourceful responses that use communal capitals to direct mutual well-being and livelihoods, rather than frame assistance as individually targeted aid for victims who are disabled and isolated by vulnerability” (p.3). It is therefore recommended that “care and support policy must target existing care and support networks: thus emphasizing the continuity of connectedness” (NMCF, 2014:9). Although not explicitly stated, an implication of the study is that comprehensive policy solutions and interventions must be based on a collaborative

process which begins with the inclusion of excluded people and groups.

7. Conclusion

As illustrated through these case studies, an understanding of social isolation and concerted action to combat it through extending social connectedness, are necessary conditions for attaining Sustainable Development Goal 1 ('end poverty in all its forms') and Target 10.2 ('empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all'). While not synonymous with social exclusion, social isolation is intricately linked to the causes and consequences of both social exclusion and poverty. Similarly, while social connectedness is synonymous neither with social inclusion nor with social capital, as the case study illustrates, it plays a crucial role in providing access to social capital and in altering the exclusionary processes that entrench intergenerational poverty.

These case studies also provide important insight for policymakers and programme design to positively contribute to the sustainable achievement of UN Sustainable Development Goal 1. Three implications emerge as central contributing factors fostering the development of social connectedness. Characteristics of comprehensive and successful policy interventions may include: effective community engagement, mobilization and ownership; actively and specifically providing for the voice and perspective of the socially isolated or marginalized individuals or groups within the design and implementation; and finally, ensuring cultural sensitivity, resonance and relevance.

Such characteristics form the foundation of significantly new and innovative approaches to policy development especially within international development and development policy related to marginalized groups. Historically such policy development has been characterized by the imposition of dominant values, ideas and approaches often foreign to the community to which it was intended to apply. Therefore, no matter the intent, such interventions often served only to create the condition of social isolation as opposed to the desired policy outcomes. As illustrated here, such a new, innovative approach is actually directly informed by ancient traditions and Indigenous worldview emphasizing inter-connectedness and community.

Further study in this area may explore the ways in which largely colonial policy the world over can be revealed in such light and moreover, the opportunity and imperative to advance de-colonized approaches to policy development. This paper and the foregoing assessment of characteristics that build social connectedness may serve as a starting point to inform a robust framework of de-colonized policy approaches. This exploration affirms key principles which provide important guidance in this work – namely respect, recognition and reciprocity. Moreover, this examination presents an important challenge to all policymakers to consider and reflect carefully upon how such principles can be adhered to and furthered in their efforts to advance the UN Sustainable Development Goals in a sustainable and successful manner.

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