

Social Exclusion - Reader

Illustrative definitions

Social exclusion “Exclusion consists of dynamic, multi-dimensional processes driven by unequal power relationships interacting across four main dimensions—economic, political, social and cultural—and at different levels including individual, household, group, community, country and global levels. It results in a continuum of inclusion/exclusion characterized by unequal access to resources, capabilities and rights which leads to health inequalities”, (Popay and others, 2008, p. 2).

“Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole” (Levitas and others, 2007, p. 9).

“Social exclusion is what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, poor health and family breakdown”(United Kingdom Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004, p. 2).

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Although there is no universally agreed definition or benchmark for social exclusion, lack of participation in society is at the heart of nearly all definitions put forth by scholars, government bodies, non-governmental organizations and others (see box I.1). Overall, social exclusion describes a state in which individuals are unable to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life, as well as the process leading to and sustaining such a state. Participation may be hindered when people lack access to material resources, including income, employment, land and housing, or to such services as education and health care — essential foundations of well-being that are captured in Agenda 2030. Yet participation is also limited when people cannot exercise their voice or interact with each other, and when their rights and dignity are not accorded equal respect and protection. Thus social exclusion entails not only material deprivation but also lack of agency or control over important decisions as well as feelings of alienation and inferiority. In nearly all countries, to varying degrees, age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, religion, migration status, socioeconomic status, place of

residence, and sexual orientation and gender identity have been grounds for social exclusion over time.

The term social exclusion was used for the first time by former French Secretary of State for Social Action, René Lenoir (1974), to refer to the situation of certain groups of people – “the mentally and the physically handicapped, suicidal people, aged invalids, abused children, drug addicts, delinquents, single parents, multi-problem households, marginal, asocial persons, and other ‘social misfits’” – whom he estimated to comprise one tenth of the population of France and who were considered vulnerable yet outside the realm of social insurance systems of the welfare state. The concept soon took hold in other developed countries; more recently, the European Union dedicated 2010 as the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion

While intertwined, the concepts of poverty and social exclusion are nonetheless distinct. Poverty is an outcome, while social exclusion is both an outcome and a process. Poverty and exclusion need not go hand in hand; not all socially excluded groups are economically disadvantaged. People are often excluded due to a disability or because of their sexual orientation, for instance, without necessarily living in poverty. Levitas and others (2007) observed: “Many of the attempts to define social exclusion distinguish it from poverty... on the basis of its multi-dimensional, relational and dynamic character”. Indeed, whereas poverty is most commonly defined in monetary terms, social exclusion takes a more holistic view of human development