

Freedom to Flourish: Young People and Social Disadvantage *

Over the past few years the Australian Province, in collaboration with its schools, has run an expanding series of lectures and panel discussions on social issues aimed at provoking discussion and action. This year the focus of the **Mary Ward Justice Lectures** is on disadvantaged young people. Social disadvantage, which prevents young people from flourishing, is not, unfortunately, just an issue for Australia but, for most of the world.

International youth surveys indicate the key factors contributing to youth disadvantage are: family poverty, family conflict, poor housing, lack of education and social exclusion which lead to unemployment, disengagement and risky behaviour. In a recent report the International Labor Organization (ILO) noted that around 40% of the world's unemployed (81 million) are aged between 15 and 24. Without family and community support young people are vulnerable to labour exploitation, sexual abuse and violence. A survey of homeless youth in the USA indicated that more than 70% had experienced some form of violence and 32% reported sexual assaults. The Global Financial Crisis and rapid population growth have contributed to soaring rates of youth unemployment, including educated youth. Youth unemployment in Spain is around 50% and South Asia has the largest proportion of unemployed and inactive youth in the developing world. The *World Employment and Social Outlook* report (ILO 2015) stated that *youth, especially young women, continue to be disproportionately affected by unemployment* noting that the 2014 youth unemployment rate was almost three times higher than the overall unemployment rate.

Of particular concern are young people who are not engaged in education, training or employment. The consequences of young people drifting from rural areas to cities in search of work, existing on intermittent casual jobs, sleeping on the streets or in squats and engaging in low level crime are enormous. The inevitable results are poor health, social isolation, mental illness and an increased risk of suicide. With low self-esteem, lack of skills and loss of confidence there is a very real risk that these young people will be trapped in poverty and forced to live on the margins. The cost to societies with large numbers of unemployed and untrained young people is immense when loss of productivity, increased crime, social disruption and continuous cycles of poverty and dysfunction are factored in.

Education is one of the key factors in breaking this cycle of poverty and disengagement but it cannot be a "one size fits all" approach. The educational model must fit the targeted needs of the specific groups. A Cambodian youth from a large family who has had no education and whose only skills are those of a subsistence farmer or a young girl barred from the work force because of culture or domestic duties have very different needs. Here, in Australia, we have frequently failed to meet the educational needs of young Indigenous people by assuming the standard curriculum will suit everyone.

If young people are to flourish governments, educational authorities, health experts, business and the young people themselves have to meet and map out new paths and new structures which meet, not only their education and training needs, but also their health and well-being. In recent years the UNDP and other agencies have focused on forums and structures, such as Youth Parliaments, to encourage the participation of young people in civil society and to enable their voices to be heard. Nations cannot afford for their young people to be voiceless and powerless in a world which could offer so much.

*Title of the Mary Ward Justice Lecture given at Loreto Toorak, Australia.