Public housing de-concentration: a practitioner's view

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Introduction

Redevelopment and regeneration projects are being used by housing authorities around the world to respond to the issues associated with poorly designed public housing estates with high levels of disadvantage. This has led to intense debate.

On one side are those who see redevelopment and de-concentration as the only sustainable way to address current issues. On the other side are those who question whether intended outcomes are actually achieved, while highlighting unintended outcomes such as anxiety and loss of relationships and supports as residents are relocated and public housing becomes more dispersed. This is a debate that needs to take place. However, this should not be at the expense of applied research and genuine dialogue that seek to inform best practice.

In June 2010 Shelter NSW held a conference titled 'Estates in the Balance: Best practice in redevelopment and regeneration of public housing estates'. As a conference delegate, I observed that a number of presenters seemed to focus on questioning the merits of redevelopment, rather than on 'best practice' in conducting redevelopment projects. This paper is a response to these observations and a call for a broader approach.

New Minto

I commence the paper by briefly discussing the concept of social mix, the state of social mix research, and the place of social mix in contemporary macro public housing policy in Australia. I then highlight and acknowledge key points made by four of the presenters at the conference, while at the same time using these points to argue for a broader research agenda; one that will inform and support practitioners to achieve the best outcomes possible for public housing residents affected by redevelopment. In doing so my intention is to encourage dialogue and collaboration between stakeholders, rather than to add fuel to the well worn debate.

Social mix and disadvantage

The term social mix refers to the mix of demographic characteristics that might be found in a given geographic location, such as a public housing estate. Characteristics considered may include: age, cultural background, family type, income (source and level), tenure, employment and so on. Due to eligibility criteria and allocations policies, public housing estates typically have a narrow range of social mix.

Public housing estates are often described as 'concentrations of disadvantage', in which disadvantage is thought to have an additive effect, meaning that an individual's or family's disadvantage is compounded by the disadvantage of their neighbours. This phenomenon is typically labelled an 'area effect' or 'neighbourhood effect'. In summary, the total disadvantage in the place is considered to be greater than the sum of the disadvantage of individuals and families.

David Lilley and the Australasian Housing Institute would like to invite comment, foster dialogue and facilitate debate on the topics of redevelopment, regeneration and social mix. Send your thoughts on any of the issues raised in this article to d.lilley@unsw.edu.au

The state of social mix research

To date the focus of social mix research and debate in Australia has been on whether or not redevelopment of public housing estates, to create social mix, is an appropriate course of action. Many of the presenters at the recent conference have contributed to this debate. One of the central arguments put forward is that dispersing public housing residents does not address their disadvantage. In fact, it may worsen it if they are moved to an area that lacks the sorts of formal and informal supports that are often available within public housing estates, such as trusted neighbours and community development workers. Another argument is that numerous studies have failed to show improvements in resident wellbeing following de-concentration, while the process itself is demonstrably stressful and unsettling.

Macro-level public housing policy

In Australia, the new National Affordable Housing Agreement commits federal, state and territory governments to "creating mixed communities that promote social and economic opportunities by reducing concentrations of disadvantage that exist in some social housing estates".

Thus while the issues and debates about the merits of redevelopment are important, and warrant ongoing research, in many ways this is no longer the 'main game' for housing practitioners. Contemporary macro public housing policy makes de-concentration inevitable. This requires that practitioners focus on asking how any risks to public housing residents might be mitigated, and how best to 'make social mix work' in practice.

Old Minto

'Estates in the Balance'

The speakers at the Estates in the Balance conference came from diverse organisations and perspectives. Here I will focus on the presentations of four speakers who each raised concerns about the objectives and processes associated with de-concentration.[1]

Michael Darcy (University of Western Sydney)

Darcy challenges us to be clear about what we are trying to achieve via the de-concentration of estates, by asking what problem we are trying to solve:

…what is the problem that mixed tenure redevelopment policies are attempting to solve? We need to address this question before we have any chance of knowing whether it is worth the effort, expense and pain. The point of asking it is not to oppose redevelopment but to ensure that 'best practice' reflects the priorities we really want to pursue. The risk is that by confusing or conflating 'concentration' with disadvantage itself, we will fail to address the real issue.

This helps to clarify that social mix should be viewed as a means of contributing to some other outcome (such as increased resident wellbeing), rather than as the outcome itself. Questions of best practice will therefore need to relate to all of the contributors to the outcome, such as resident participation, services and supports, not just to the physical location of dwellings.

Julie Foreman (Tenants' Union of NSW)

Foreman challenges us to more carefully consider the impacts of regeneration projects on the residents involved. These include anxiety, confusion, grief and loss of connections and supports. Resident quotes in Foreman's presentation included:

"I've been here 11 years and I chose to be here… I want to live here, I felt I could call it home."

"There is a huge impact on the elderly – they are particularly anxious."

These are clearly issues that must be taken seriously, but there are broader considerations. Firstly, acknowledging these impacts does not automatically mean that de-concentration should not be pursued. As Darcy pointed out, this will depend upon both the outcome being pursued, and the extent to which it can be realised in practice. Secondly, public housing residents are not the only clients that decision makers must take into account when making decisions about their portfolios, since the needs and desires of applicants (future tenants) should also be considered.

Having worked in client service I am aware that there are often very large discrepancies between demand for public housing spread throughout the community, compared to public housing located on estates. I have clear memories of working with clients who were desperate to gain public housing. They knew that waiting times were significantly lower in areas with high numbers of homes located on estates, but resisted the idea of locating themselves and/or their children in an estate environment.

Kathy Arthurson (Flinders University)

Arthurson identified three proposed benefits from regeneration and social mix: social networks; decreased area stigma; and better services. She then went on to question the achievement of these proposed benefits, using an extensive literature review and her own empirical research. Her conclusion was that research illustrates the negative impacts that can arise from processes of changing social mix:

- We have to question what is being achieved.
- Australian 'social mix' strategies are linked to expectations of creating 'inclusive', 'cohesive' and 'sustainable' communities.
- However, in the projects studied social mix was not a prerequisite for the development of cohesive communities.
- Where supportive social networks already exist breaking up the community under justification of changing social mix appears an illogical way to address disadvantage.
- In light of the findings what should we conclude? Are high levels of dispersal of public housing tenants and community regeneration complimentary or inherently contradictory strategies?

Again, it needs to be acknowledged that Arthurson makes valid points. At the same time, there is a need to ask some alternate questions. For example, are the issues identified about de-concentration itself, or about how de-concentration policy is being implemented? Are the processes and outcomes currently associated with de-concentration the only ones available, or are there alternatives? And in particular, how can the outcomes of de-concentration be improved?

Gregor Macfie (Tenants' Union of NSW)

Similar to Darcy, Macfie challenges us to clarify our objectives. He also calls for transparency/realism concerning risks and limitations, and for assurance that no damage is done. He challenges us to:

- clarify objectives of social mix redevelopment in terms of how it will make life better for low income and disadvantaged tenants and involve tenants in this process. Be honest about risks and limitations

- try to ensure no damage is done – if social mix is to continue to be pursued, attend to the particular risks for disadvantaged people in these new communities.

This constitutes an important shift from simply identifying risks and challenges to seeking mitigative strategies and actions. This opens up the terrain in which I seek to work and which was the stated focus of the Shelter conference: If de-concentration is to take place, how can we achieve the best outcomes possible?

The challenge for housing practitioners

The issues and questions associated with de-concentration are real and they deserve attention. At the same time, the pursuit of de-concentration by federal, state and territory governments in Australia is also real. Practitioners working in this field are often attacked as though they are the policy makers. While this may be 'part of the job', it can also destabilise their attempts to form constructive working relationships with residents, thereby interfering with the achievement of practical outcomes.

We need to find a space between polemical exchange and complete unity that will allow for real dialogue, applied research and improved outcomes. Above all, we practitioners need to focus the attention of the sector and academics on what constitutes best practice in de-concentration, so that social housing residents get the benefits from redevelopment that are intended.

I suspect that this is difficult for some advocates and researchers, particularly those who fundamentally oppose renewal efforts that involve rehousing/de-concentration. For these people to pay attention to improving the policies or approaches that they oppose is to condone them, or at least to weaken their position in arguing against them. Where this is the case I believe that the debate should be entered with caution. There is a very real danger that we will miss the opportunity to develop our understanding of best practice by focusing on issues that we do not control.

Call for a new research agenda

Below I offer a sample set of questions that might guide future research and the development of best practice:

- What are the outcomes sought via de-concentration initiatives?
- What is the 'theory of change' (the model of cause and effect) inherent in existing initiatives?
- What alternate theories of change might be articulated and tested?
- What can be learned from existing projects, for application in future projects?
- What combinations of interventions (both physical and non-physical) best help us to achieve desired outcomes?
- What levels and types of support do residents affected by de-concentration require?
- What types of resident participation most benefit residents?
- What are the risks associated with de-concentration and how can they best be mitigated?
- What balance must be struck between the interests and needs of current and future residents?

Conclusion

It is perhaps inevitable that different people will have a different focus and approach within the field of social mix research. However, acknowledging its inherently contested nature does not prevent the broadening of the field. I am not calling for dismissal of current issues, concerns or debates. Rather, I am seeking greater acknowledgement that de-concentration is a reality and seeking more assistance from the sector and the academic community to identify best practice within this context. This might just be what makes the difference to those residents affected by regeneration initiatives.

The views expressed in the article are the author's and not those of the NSW Government.

Endnotes

1 These and other presentations are available on the Shelter NSW website: http://www.shelternsw.org.au/docs/sem-archive.html