

Refuting the Standard Objections to Shared Societies

Political leaders and their followers often say they are keen to achieve a Shared Society but hesitant to take the steps that will lead to it. They often make the same objections that have been heard in many other different situations or they say other people are making these arguments and they cannot refute them. Therefore, they do not move forward.

But they can easily be refuted on the basis of those who have worked to promote Shared Societies. Many of the arguments are based on economic grounds but the economics of Shared Society actually justify building a Shared Society as the way to achieve prosperity for all.

The following are the Standard Objections that are most often made and how to refute them.

“We have to look after our own people first.”

Refutation: In effect the best way to benefit the whole community is to ensure that all members of the community are able to be economically active and productive. Favouring one section of the community over another means that everyone suffers because the whole community is deprived of the full potential of those who are marginalised and the state may have to expend resources on managing and controlling tensions and hostility which is the likely result.

For a variety of reasons a community often favours its own members in housing, education and jobs, etc not realising that the whole community has a contribution to make and the whole community is more settled, stable and productive.

“They do not want to work”

Refutation: In actual fact marginalised people often work much harder than the rest of the population to survive but are not very productive because of lack of opportunity and lack of resources. If these opportunities and resources were available, they would take them, and with their energy and enterprise they would become productive members of society and consumers who contribute more significantly to the national economy. If they need allowances in the workplace for certain cultural practices such as times of prayer or personal cleansing, these minor adjustments are all that is required to enable them to play their full part in the workforce.

The source of this objection is a lack of understanding of situations different from our own and judgements are made on superficial impressions. Because people are not involved in sophisticated work activities does not mean that they are not working and they may in fact be very busy and sustaining their family. If they are not working it may be because they are not given the opportunity to work, perhaps because of direct or indirect discrimination. Or they are located in areas that are too far from them. Economic projects may in fact have been located nearer to people from the dominant community to facilitate their access to the opportunities on

offer. If we are resentful that they need special allowances to observe their cultural practices, we forget that the working environment is organised around our requirements and we take that for granted and would be offended if those arrangements were changed.

“They do not want to fit in – They do not want to integrate”

Refutation: Invariably people from marginalised communities say that they do want to fit in but that they are not welcome. It is only natural that we want to mix with those like us and so we exclude those who are different. As a result those groups have no incentive to integrate with the rest of the society, particularly if they have limited employment or housing opportunities and so they often keep to themselves. When they are excluded, it is not surprising that they hold on to their traditions almost as a defence against the outside world, and closer examination often shows that the form that these “traditions” take is often more rigid than is the case where the community has an easier relationship with neighbouring communities

There are two incorrect assumptions behind these statements. On the one hand we assume that we welcome strangers and in fact we want them to be like us. If they are not like us we push them away. We fail to see that the way people are treated often makes it more difficult for them to “fit in” and encourages them to keep to themselves. Secondly we forget that many traditional practices are as valid as our own. It is natural to hold on to one’s own tradition and cultural practices. We would be offended if someone expected us to give up customs or, for example, not cook certain foods because they create a pungent smell, and we would resist such pressures.

The source of this objection is a lack of understanding of the lifestyles different from our own and judgements made on superficial impressions. It also shows a failure to see that the way people are treated often makes it more difficult for them to “fit in” and encourages them to keep to themselves.

“They live in shacks and slums”

Refutation: Many people from disadvantaged ethnic groups do live in substandard housing – but not by choice. It is the best that is available because the ways to achieve better housing conditions are blocked. However those “shacks” are often very clean and neat in spite of the overcrowding in the neighbourhood and the lack of amenities. If opportunities for improvement are available they will invest in their accommodation with a positive impact on the overall economy.

This objection arises from a superficial and stereotypical reaction to poor living conditions and the assumption that people choose to live in this way. When one looks more closely it becomes clear no better option is available, often because the state and the wider society does not open up opportunities for improvement.

“They are involved in crime and illegal activities”

Refutation: Crime and illegal activity are often a consequence of unstable and disadvantaged communities which provide the opportunity for criminal activity to flourish. Many of these criminals have little other prospects of self fulfilment. But many people living in those communities are very law-abiding and decent people. With support, those people are often able to assert themselves and establish forms of community structures and community control which challenge the control of the community by criminals.

Those who raise this objection overlook the reality that unstable and disadvantaged communities are often the product of the failure of the state and the wider society to allow that community to grow and prosper and link into the wider community, because the residents are treated as outsiders, undesirable and perhaps a threat to the rest of the society. They also overlook the fact that those who become involved in criminality and anti-social behaviour have been failed by the wider society which has not ensured that they have opportunities for self-fulfilment and given encouragement to take advantage of any opportunities that exist.

“They are not capable of holding down a job”

Refutation: There is no evidence that people from minority communities are any less capable of holding down a job. They may have disadvantages because their capabilities and capacities have not been allowed to develop and they have not had access to education but it is in everyone’s interest to ensure they have opportunities to develop their skills and fulfil their potential as productive members of society.

This statement is often based on the assumption that some communities are inherently less capable than one’s own, but this is a sign of prejudice without any foundation. There is also an assumption that other identity groups, especially religion identity groups need special treatment in terms of leave of absence at certain times or their apparel which may be considered unsuitable for the working conditions. But people who adopt this position forget that they also have certain conditions, which are usually met because they are members of the community that sets the norms, and this does not interfere with the proper accomplishment of their work duties.

“They use land inefficiently and their practices are primitive”

Refutation: It would add greatly to the national economy, and therefore be in the interests of the whole society, if land users had the opportunity to be more productive. However marginalised communities are often limited in their capacity to use their land to its maximum potential because they are limited by lack of access to resources, credit or markets, or uncertainty about recognition of their customary title to the land, and the dominant community does not facilitate resolution of these problems and may actually prevent their resolution. Experience shows that when these problems are overcome such landowners are very efficient and productive.

This assumption again reflects a stereotype that other communities are less capable and less purposeful than ourselves and their poverty is a proof of that, when in reality their poverty is a sign that they have been marginalised and their potential contribution to the society ignored and wasted

“They take our jobs”, mainly used in relation to immigrants

Refutation: If members of marginalised ethnic groups gain employment they become economic actors with surplus income and as such enlarge the market for the products and services of other economic actors. If they are underemployed or unemployed they have little surplus resources to contribute to the overall economy. As a result the whole community is held back, not just the members of the marginalised group. In any case because of their limited employment opportunities they will often undertake low paid menial work that others are unwilling to do.

The reality is that less motivated members of the dominant community are unwilling or unable to find employment with which they are satisfied, and as a result they are resentful and find it convenient to scapegoat people from another identity group, who appear to be more successful

“Why should they hold back development” mainly said in relation to indigenous communities who may oppose logging or mining operations

Refutation: People from indigenous communities do want development but they want it to be appropriate development. They also want to receive a fair share of the benefits of the development and compensation for damage and loss to their environment, but often the licences for resource exploitation seem to favour unfairly the larger corporations and, secondly, central government.

It has become apparent in recent times that the issues and concerns raised by indigenous communities about resource exploitation are very legitimate concerns in the light of climate change and pollution. It may not be possible to restore the climate and the land to their previous healthy and productive state. Often the damage done to the environment is not repaired by the company undertaking the project, in spite of promises made, and the cost has to be borne by the people of the area and the state. Often the damage is never repaired or is so severe that restoration of the previous conditions is not possible. Perhaps therefore the objections of the indigenous peoples are justified.

“Why should they own the land and its resources? Why should they demand compensation for damage resulting from exploitation of their land?”, mainly said in relation to indigenous people

Refutation: It is only fair and just that people should have expectations as to how their land will be used. If they get adequate compensation for that use then they bring those resources into the community for its development, which ultimately is in the whole society’s interests. Some of them may be available for ameliorating

the negative effects of the project. If there is no or little compensation then those resources go out of the community and possibly out of the country and therefore there is no benefit.

There is an assumption that indigenous people have no rights over their territory because their traditional customary laws may not be recognised by the state. It is also true that often the state claims ownership of all mineral wealth in the ground across the whole country. However those who are part of the modern economy with modern legal rights would expect significant compensation for any damage done to their property and do not apply the same principle to indigenous people who actually have an older title than they have.

“We have to provide extra services to integrate them”, mainly used in relation to immigrants

Refutation: If resources are used to provide extra services to help immigrants integrate, then they will be more useful and productive members of society and contribute more. It has been shown that the contribution that immigrants make to the economy far outweigh the cost of the services to help them integrate. Effective services will also ensure their will be less social problems and social tensions which would ultimately require higher expenditure.

This statement is often made on the assumptions that immigrants are not needed and not useful and therefore the question is asked “why provide services for them”. It overlooks the fact that many countries need the skills and labour of immigrants and therefore it is appropriate to ensure that they are able to settle and make their contribution.

“They take money out of the country and send it back to their relations back where they came from”, mainly used in relation to immigrants

Refutation: It has been shown that the remittances that immigrants send back to their own country are less than the contribution they make to the host community. These remittances do not damage the host country as they are only a small proportion of national wealth but they help the development of the country of origin where they can be a significant proportion of national income and that benefits the global economy.

This statement overlooks the fact that immigrant come to work and engage in the economy and contribute to the society as well as earn money for themselves. It is only when they are able to make a contribution to the society that they have surplus income some of which they chose to send back to their relatives. Over time and especially over the generations the level of remittances drop.