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Valuable Work: an ethical framework for employment policy

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Introduction - the meaning of "value"

In inviting comment on this topic, the Institute for Values Research is seeking to enlarge the debate about work, employment and unemployment. This paper seeks to explore the topic in its widest sense.

In approaching this topic we need to recognise that "value" has several quite different meanings. In discussion on economic policy, "value" is usually taken to mean the financial value. So people talk about work which "adds value" to a product.^[1] Micro economic reform is intended to increase the economic value of work done within particular sectors. Some people are concerned about how the value of work can be distributed, i.e. how the profits of work can be distributed. This economic meaning of "value" is important, but it is not what is meant by the topic before us.

Then there is the survival value of work. As Michael Easson points out in his paper, work is important to the individuals that do

it. Work provides income, social contacts, identity, and so on. These issues will be taken up by other papers. However, the value of work for human community is much more than this.

The value of work to human community as a necessary framework for employment policy

The Government's Committee on Employment Opportunity released in December 1993 a discussion paper entitled *Restoring Full Employment*^[2]. As Jan Carter points out elsewhere in this volume, its focus is on restoring long term unemployed people to the workforce. The assumption is that policy changes must rely on the market to define what work is valuable. The paper suggests roles for the public, business and community sectors in providing work under the jobs compact, but emphasises the role of the business sector. In its discussion of job creation in the public sector, it focuses on the costs, not the benefits of the work which would be done. Jan Carter suggests that it is inappropriate to expect the Discussion Paper to deal with broader issues of work and job creation, because those issues are taken up in the Kelty Report^[3] *Developing Australia: a regional perspective*. However, that report is also written in a very limited framework, as NCOSS has pointed out.^[4]

Between them, these two reports do not provide a formula for restoring full employment. Neither report understands the value of work for human community or provides an adequate ethical basis for policy.^[5] The discussion paper makes some attempt when it suggests the responsibilities which various groups have to one another^[6]. The list includes the very important principle of "supporting and

working for a fair society in which the benefits and costs of economic performance are shared equally by all". However, no basis for this responsibility is provided. There is no exploration of human rights or the nature of justice, and the implications of this principle for the basic structuring of the economy is not explored - what could have been a guiding ethical principle is kept in a subordinate position. The rest of the list seems to be based on pragmatism - what we all need to do to pull together to help "long term unemployed" - rather than on a genuine ethical base. The jobs compact is pragmatic and limited - a way of helping a limited number of people, not a fundamental commitment to justice, which would require a social guarantee of work for all long term unemployed.^[7]

The Kelty reports makes no pretence of having an ethical base^[8], as is evident in the short comment under forestry for the South Eastern Region of NSW: "The area inland of Bega is a source of high-grade timber, although with the old growth logged out new plantations are needed"^[9]. This is at least an honest statement, compared to the claims of "sustainable logging" which we hear from Government when we push them to implement the National Forest Policy Statement (NFPS) on old growth forests^[10]. But it shows no commitment to the NFPS or to ecologically sustainable development, which are government policies which have ethical significance. The relevance of this to our understanding of work will become clear later in this paper.

In announcing the appointment of the Committee on Full Employment, the Prime Minister raised a number of questions which are much more fundamental than the terms of reference^[11]. I believe that the Committee should have recognised that his speech, in May 1993, provided a mandate to deal with the question of "restoring full employment" in a much more profound way. What Australia needs is a White Paper which offers the nation the opportunity to rethink the relationship of work and paid employment to the life of the community, and to adopt deliberate directions to shape our future as a society. This has been urged upon them in submissions from the Uniting Church in

Australia, Uniya, and the Catholic Social Welfare Commission.

Uniya submissions^[12] included papers from academics in a variety of disciplines, all focused on the opportunity to produce not merely a pragmatic set of "incremental policy changes"^[13], but rather a new "social charter". The Catholic Social Welfare Commission^[14] talked about the need for "a moral accord with people who are long-term unemployed", but their concept of an accord goes well beyond the limited scope of the "jobs compact" and "responsibilities" of various sectors which are provided in the Discussion Paper.

The Uniting Church made two submissions. One focused on the need to rethink the nature of work, and how socially useful work can be turned into paid employment. The other was based on the NSW Synod's commitment^[15] that the goal should be full employment, at adequate wages and with just working conditions, in the context of an ecologically sustainable economy. The first submission is based on several years work within the church on the nature of genuine wealth and the nature of genuine work^[16]. It is an attempt to take seriously the question of "the value of work for human community".

Human community is not dependent on GDP. Indeed, the Indigenous people of Australia remind us that our emphasis on GDP actually destroys our capacity for human community. The stance taken by the Uniting Church^[17], the Catholic Bishops^[18] and by some other churches and their agencies is that economic goals must be placed in the framework of social goals. A healthy economy is crucial to a healthy society, but when the economy becomes the end instead of the means, or when it becomes the only factor instead of one factor among many, we cannot have a healthy society.

The value of work for human community depends on the nature of human community and our relationship with the rest of the ecosystem. In previous work for the Uniting Church I have suggested that we need to rethink the nature of genuine wealth, and to return to the old understanding of *wealth* as *that which enhances the well-being of human community*. This challenges business, unions and government, in their

understanding of public policy issues. *Valuable work becomes that work which contributes to genuine wealth, that is, to the well being of the community and its members.*

Genuine Wealth

There are a variety of ways of understanding genuine wealth. I have developed the following descriptions for use in the work of the Uniting Church ^[19]:

1. Individuality ^[20] - the human individual is valuable, with his or her separate characteristics, health, values, interests, spirituality, intellect and so on. Without individuals who are developing maturity appropriate to their age and situation, there can be no human community.
2. Material wealth - the satisfaction of basic human needs - food, housing, sanitation, education, health care.
3. Technological/instrumental wealth
 - a) the knowledge and skills which enable material wealth to be provided
 - the expertise of agricultural knowledge, engineering, medicine, and the skills which translate that knowledge into practice,
 - the labour force
 - and the physical machinery which comes from some of this knowledge and labour, and which is the means of providing goods and services (ie industrial plant, computer systems, transport vehicles etc).
4. Resource wealth - the raw materials which are used to provide material wealth -for example, land, sea, air, water, fossil fuels, ores, wood, sand, seed.
5. Intellectual wealth - the knowledge and wisdom which humankind has accumulated through the millennia, and has preserved and developed through such means as scholarly pursuit, communal discussion, literature, the arts, and community arts/stories. The wisdom by which a society and individuals are able to reflect on their life and values.
6. Spiritual wealth - personal and community spirituality, religions, and in some cases literature, the arts and community arts/stories etc. The ways in which human beings move beyond themselves to contact with the transcendent. Intellectual and spiritual wealth are often interconnected, since both involve awareness and reflection.
7. Natural/ecological wealth - the world as it is without human activity - its physical form, its plant and animal life, its ecosystems and gene pools. The world which we may modify, but which we did not create and cannot re-create. The world which is air, water, sunshine, land and life. The universe. Planet earth is highly vulnerable to destruction when we reduce it to resources to be used, instead of seeing it as a gift in its own right, to be valued, to be understood as an integrated whole, and to be tended lovingly.
8. Social wealth - relationships (families, communities, races, nations, international relationships) customs, laws, human rights, language, traditions. Our relationships with people and the things which bind us together.
9. Political wealth, ie power - participation in decision-making on matters which affect any or all other forms of wealth. Our capacity and right to make decisions and to organise. This form of wealth is often accumulated by institutions in ways which deprive individuals of their personal right to make decisions.
10. Variety - diversity of life in all its forms; diversity of human beings - individuals, cultures.
11. Creativity - that which enables human beings to take the other forms of wealth and develop them in new ways.
12. Time (leisure and work) - the opportunity to utilise and enjoy the other forms of wealth.

The concept of material wealth is often misunderstood. Genuine material wealth is neither money, nor luxurious goods and

services. Humankind will be genuinely materially wealthy when everyone has access to the following goods and services at the level required to satisfy basic human needs:

- Enough food, of appropriate composition and quality for people to satisfy essential daily requirements of energy, protein, vitamins etc. (Excess food, leading to degenerative diseases, should be defined as destroying genuine wealth).
- Adequate housing appropriate to the household size, type and customary living style (ie lifestyles of different tribal and racial groups) and to the climate. It should, in some way, provide the basic facilities needed for cooking, sleeping, maintaining proper relationships, studying and recreation (especially where there are children who need room to play.)
- Sanitation and clean water within the immediate proximity of the house.
- Education which enables one to
 - become literate and numerate to a functional level, and to communicate effectively what one thinks or feels;
 - acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to function in daily commerce and society;
 - develop one's capacity to think, ie to evaluate facts and ideas, and to challenge false myths and propaganda;
 - develop one's creativity;
 - understand and participate in one's culture;
 - develop wisdom
- Basic health care:
 - adequate diet appropriate to the physical needs of the person;
 - adequate sanitation, clean water;
 - access to the medication required to treat ordinary illnesses and injuries (mass-produced medicines, simple surgical procedures, etc);
 - preventative health programs such as education and the elimination of health threatening problems eg malarial swamps;
 - adequate work, leisure and recreation;

-- dental care - fillings, extractions, false teeth;

- Appropriate help with basic personal and household chores when elderly, sick or disabled.
- Appropriate care and protection while a child.
- The basic transport and communication resources necessary to participate in society and have access to the other requirements listed here.
- Work which contributes to the genuine wealth of society.

Some of these forms of genuine wealth are obviously the gift of God - natural wealth, resources wealth, the human creativity, intellect and ingenuity which underlie technological wealth and intellectual wealth, and the time that we are given to participate in life. Social wealth, spiritual wealth, and political wealth, also stem from our being made in the image of God.

Some forms of wealth are best described as the result of human development of what God gives to us. We do not create, for example, our human intellect, but our intellectual wealth does come from what people have developed over time in the academy and by community reflection.

These forms of wealth are an outworking of God's creative activity in cooperation with human activity - in most cases communal activity. Individuals may make important contributions to these forms of wealth, but none operate in a vacuum, without drawing on the wealth of the community in order to make their contribution. Science and technology, for example, require that particular researchers build upon the ideas of those who have gone before or who work alongside them.

Genuine work

Genuine work, the work which is valuable to the human community, is activity which contributes to any of these forms of genuine wealth.

This definition of valuable work challenges a number of myths. It means that we cannot assume that work is synonymous with paid employment, or with the production of goods and services. Wealth creation cannot be equated with the activity of business. Domestic activity is work. Women not in paid employment are usually working very hard, and those in paid employment find that they still have to perform most of the domestic work as well. Other people who are not in paid employment, children, the retired, the disabled, and the unemployed, may be working vary hard.

On this definition of work, we might better remember who in the labour ward has been and is doing the most valuable work. If we pay an obstetrician a high salary for being attendant for a few hours, what should we pay the mother for gestation and birthing of the next generation?

The wellbeing of Australia does not depend only on how much time people devote to paid employment, but on the total work done and a balance in the kinds of work done. Relying on GDP as a measure of work and production actually hides the declining standard of well being of people, since it ignores changes in that balance. For example, a family's standard of living may fall when the second adult is in paid employment, because work in the family (caring work, household work) does not get done. When people spend long hours travelling to and from work, they have less time for developing other aspects of their lives which are essential to their well being. Voluntary work is a major contributor to the well being of society. This new definition of work does not mean that paid employment or economic activity is automatically devalued or rejected. Genuine work includes economic activity such as production of goods and services (whether in the private or public sector), which contribute to meeting basic material needs outlined earlier in this paper. It includes a great deal of "behind the scenes" activity: without a whole range of other people those who actually make the goods or deliver the services would be unable to function. However, the concept of genuine work means that economic activity and paid employment are not assumed to always be worthwhile - it

depends on what they contribute to human community.

Inactivity may be genuine work

If we take the concept of genuine wealth seriously, then sometimes doing nothing is more productive, that is makes a greater contribution to genuine wealth, than doing something. Examples include:

- Leaving a forest intact may maintain ecological wealth which harvesting the forest will destroy. The harvesting may or may not result in some other form of genuine wealth, depending on whether it is used for essential items or those which are either not essential, or could be produced in other ways. The felling of Coolangubra forest, which is on the Register of the National Estate, for woodchips to be exported to make throw away paper plates and similar items for overseas markets^[21] is an example of where inactivity would contribute more to genuine wealth.
- There has been increasing recognition that the well being of the community is enhanced when cigarette and alcohol production, advertising and consumption is reduced, although this reduces employment for people involved in manufacture and sale, and for those who repair the damage - doctors, nurses, drug counsellors, manufacturers of intensive care equipment.
- Less activity in the financial markets, especially in the foreign exchange and futures markets where speculation is rife, could occur without any decrease in capital actually invested in the production of goods; at the same time it would contribute to a more stable economy. Some people lose highly paid jobs, but the community as a whole would benefit.
- Abolition of arms production, dismantling of all weapons systems, and decreased military and para-military forces would increase global security, the security of humankind and of the ecosystem. It would also protect the political and social wealth of smaller or less wealthy countries

who now have foreign military bases which undermine their sovereignty, their culture, and the rights of women^[22].

- Less production of "junk" - unnecessary packaging, poor quality products which are quickly discarded, goods which are not necessary to meet basic human need^[23] - would leave the ecosystem in better health.
- The list could go on. Economists recognise that everything that is produced carries an opportunity cost - something else is not produced. So all the above forms of inactivity open up the possibility of using resources elsewhere. However, economics has yet to adequately come to terms with externalities - the impact of economic activity on what I have called genuine wealth.^[24] For this reason, to rely largely, as the Discussion Paper does, on coarse goals of increased GDP to provide new employment opportunities, is a dangerous matter, since it fails to show us whether genuine work is being made available, and what genuine wealth is being destroyed. It is a philosophy of jobs at any cost (except on the public purse).

Work which could become paid employment

Recognising the difference between work and paid employment is a two-edged sword. Some people believe that paid employment is disappearing^[25], and want to talk about alternatives, as if people should no longer have the right to paid employment. The work of Jocelyn Pixley^[26] shows that this is a dangerous path, which marginalises people and undermines their citizen-ship. Understanding the value of work should not be used to fob people off in this way, by telling them to get used to unemployment and find something else to do. Rather the point is to recognise work which could become paid employment. It is true that unpaid work often makes a more important contribution to human community than much paid employment. But people need an income, and we live in a society which sees a strong nexus between work and income.^[27] If the work is

valuable to human community, why not find ways to pay for it?

The question should be: "How can we create employment at adequate wages for all those who want it?" This leads to the questions: what work do the Australian people need done, which is currently neglected? How might we draw on the pool of people wanting paid employment so that we get this work done? This question is also taken up by John Langmore in his paper for this seminar.

The economy is developing very profitable sectors which rely on high technology worked by a small workforce. These sectors are creating financial wealth but benefiting relatively few people. We need public policy which enables us to use that financial wealth to fund other work which the community needs done. That means that we need, as John Nevile, Julian Disney and John Langmore all affirm in the course of this seminar, a taxation system which better funds the public sector. This needs to be a permanent change in taxation, although there is also a place for a jobs levy which funds jobs for socially guaranteed work until there is no longer a body of unemployed people.

The unemployed include people who are unskilled, and skilled tradespeople. They include people with skills in using computers or machinery, people with management skills and people with professional expertise.

They include people who feel the need to enter the paid workforce because of financial stringencies, but who would happily devote themselves to important caring work in the home, if they had better income support.

We have roads which are dangerous to drive on because they are in such a bad state of repair, railway systems which need upgrading, and water, sewerage and drainage systems which need maintenance and upgrading.

There are private homes falling into disrepair because their owners are too old, too poor or too busy to look after them and commercial buildings which also need maintenance.

We have historic buildings such as churches which are on the heritage list,

but are disintegrating because the owners cannot afford to maintain them on behalf of the whole community.

We have waiting lists in hospitals, children in need of adequate day care, and families who desperately need support services to help them care for family members who are old or disabled.

We have a million people who are illiterate, and large numbers of migrants who speak little or no English. We have children who need remedial teaching.

We live in a fragile land which urgently needs environmental rehabilitation.

We have vast numbers of people in need of support and training if they are to adequately cope with life. We have community centres which are understaffed and overworked.

Our state wards and the mentally ill are inadequately cared for. Many elderly people suffer neglect.

We have unemployed labourers, tradespeople, builders, painters, people with office skills, managers, nurses, doctors, teachers, scientists... a long list of people who want to work.

On the other hand, we have people who work too hard.

We have a body of administrators and managers who are working longer hours under more stressful conditions because staff numbers have been cut to unrealistic levels.

We have an urgent need for creative thinking, but in the name of efficiency have taken away from academics, ministers, executives and scientists the time in which to think.

We need to create an economy which is environmentally sustainable, so that we stop fouling our own nest, but also so that we respect the rights of future generations and the rights of nature. This means that some jobs should not be created (in high polluting industries) but it also opens the way to many other jobs - creating and manufacturing environmentally friendly technology and products, and working directly in land care projects and the like.^[28]

There are a great many jobs which would benefit society and have relatively little harmful impact on the environment. Many of the jobs caring for people and the environment would not improve our balance of payments, but they would not harm it either.

In short we have work which cries out to be done, a vast army of people wanting to work, and an increasing body of people who are overworked. The market will not resolve this crazy situation. We can, and must devote a greater proportion of GDP to the public sector and the community sector, to get this work done. We must end the myth that real jobs can best be created by expanding the business sector at the expense of the public sector. Some of the work suggested would be done by the business sector, but it needs to be paid for by the community through the public sector. The public sector enables the community to influence the market on the basis of its understanding of need, rather than leaving it to individuals to influence the market in proportion to their personal affluence.

Such a proposal is not "utopian"^[29], if by this is meant "unrealistic" or "unachievable". It would simply reverse the dramatic tax cuts of the last few years, and emulate the taxation levels of other industrialised countries. In fact, what is evident from the last decade is that reliance on the market is unrealistic as a way of organising work and income distribution if the outcome is to be just and to enhance the well being of the community. On the other hand, I am willing to accept the label "utopian", if by this is meant seeking a radical change which cannot be accomplished within the current limited conceptual framework of public policy formation.^[30]

Conclusion

The conclusion we should draw from all this is that unemployment is not an intractable problem. Rather, we live in an absurd society which needs to change. We have work which needs to be done - genuine work which would be of great value to the human community. We have people available who could do it. We can, and must, go much further than the jobs compact proposed in the Discussion

Paper. We need to restore the public sector, both as the way of providing paid employment doing work of value to the community, and, in addition, as the employer of last resort in a social guarantee of work. We must do this not as a burden, but because we base our understanding of the value of work on social values and social goals, and organise the economy accordingly.

[1] Michael Easson made use of this concept of value in his (draft) paper, in discussion of the significance of workplace reforms which are backed by the union movement.

[2] Committee on Employment Opportunity *Restoring Full Employment* AGPS, Canberra, 1993

[3] Taskforce on Regional Development, *Developing Australia: a regional perspective*, AGPS Canberra, 1993

[4] NCOSS "Regional Development: the Kelty Report" in *NCOSS News* February 1994

[5] My point about ethics is directed only at framework implicit in the papers, not the individual authors. I believe a lack of ethical framework is a fundamental flaw in much social policy research and decision-making. The community sector also has often been seduced into dealing with incremental change rather than fundamental ethical issues. On the other hand, too often ethicists are unable to make the connection between their general principles and issues of public policy.

[6] Page 14 of *Restoring Full Employment*.

[7] A description of the Swedish social guarantee of work is provided in Layard R, Nickell, S and Jackman R *Unemployment* Oxford, 1991

[8] That it is possible to discuss issues of investment and development from an ethical perspective is evident in M.D. Young *Sustainable Investment and Resource Use: equity, environment integrity and economic efficiency* Parthenon Publishing Group, Carnforth and UNESCO Paris, 1992

[9] *Developing Australia* Volume 2, page 4

[10] The NSW Synod of the Uniting Church adopted policies on National Forest Policy and Ecologically Sustainable Development at the 1993 Synod, and has worked in cooperation with the South East

Forest Alliance, Australian Conservation Foundation and the Forest Rescue Coalition on these issues.

[11] Speech by Prime Minister, May 1993.

[12] Paul Smyth (ed), *The Employment White Paper: a new social charter? Discussion Papers 1,2,3* Uniya, Sydney 1993, 1994

[13] See Jan Carter's paper.

[14] "A long term accord with people who are long-term unemployed" *Catholic Social Welfare* Vol 2 No 3, September 1993

[15] Resolution 242/92S *Minutes of the NSW Synod* Uniting Church in Australia, NSW Synod, Sydney 1992. Based on Ann Wansbrough *Unemployment: a research report with proposals for policy principles and action by parishes and synod*, Board for Social Responsibility, NSW Synod, Uniting Church in Australia, Sydney, 1992

[16] Published as "Waste not, want not" in *National OUTLOOK* July 1993

[17] eg [Statement to the Nation](#), 1977 (*Minutes of the Inaugural Assembly*), [Statement to the Nation](#) 1988 (in the *Minutes of the Fifth Assembly*), *Statement on Economic Policy* (1992)

[18] Australian Episcopal Conference of the Roman Catholic Church, *Common Wealth for the Common Good* Collins Dove, North Blackburn, 1992

[19] See *Economic Justice - the equitable distribution of genuine wealth* Assembly Social Responsibility and Justice Committee, Uniting Church in Australia, Sydney, 1988. The minutes of the committee acknowledge that this paper is predominantly my work, with some input from Chris Budden and the committee. The sections on genuine wealth are entirely mine.

[20] "Individuality" was not included in the previously published material on which this section is based.

[21] Geoff Angel, at the media launch of the Forest Rescue Coalition, Observatory Hill 18/2/94.

[22] USA military bases in countries like South Korea and the Philippines assume and depend on local women being prostitutes. See *In God's Image* for many articles on this subject.

[23] See Doyle L and Gough I, *A theory of human need*, Macmillan, London 1991, for a substantial discussion of the difference between human needs and human "wants".

[24] A survey of work in this area is available as *Wealth beyond measure*, by

Paul Ekins, Mayer Hillman and Robert Hutchison, Gaia Books, London, 1992
[25] This view is disputed by many writers, eg Belinda Probert *Working Life*, McPhee-Gribble, Melbourne 1989, and "The overworked, and the out-of-work: redistributing paid work, unpaid work, and free time" and John Freeland "Re-conceptualising work, full employment and incomes policies", both in *The Future of Work* ACOSS, Sydney, 1993, both of whom argue, in different ways, that the problem is the distribution of work and income.

[26] Jocelyn Pixley "Citizen, Client or Worker? State, class and welfare" in *Society, state and politics in Australia*, edited Michael Muetsfeldt, Sydney Pluto Press, 1992 and *Citizenship and Employment* Cambridge University Press, Melbourne 1992

[27] See, for example, Rodney Smith "Australian attitudes to employment and unemployment" in Paul Smyth *The Employment White Paper..Vol.1.*

[28] See for example the Australian Conservation Foundation *ACF Job Creation Package* Fitzroy, 1994

[29] A term used by Jan Carter at the seminar in this negative sense.

[30] Michael Hogan, *Australian Catholics: the social justice tradition* Collins Dove North Blackburn 1993, provides a sound defence of utopianism in this sense, pages 135-7.

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