Shaping society in a just way

Dr Fitzgerald’s personal commitment to promoting community wellbeing stems from a childhood rich in active giving, and he continues to aspire to the call of Micah ‘to act with justice, to love with tenderness and to walk humbly with your God’.

At 21, while at university and following in the footsteps of his father, Dr Fitzgerald became deeply involved in the St Vincent de Paul Society, working with inner city families and young people in need.

“To me, it is extremely important that faith be lived out in practice,” he said. “In my earliest days as a graduate, working as a commercial lawyer for high wealth individuals, it became very clear that there was a constant struggle between the aspirations of those who already had much and the needs of those who were struggling.

“The best way forward for me was to seek a balance between these competing interests not only by hands-on community service involvement but by trying to impact on the economic and social policies that affected the way in which society operated, put simply, to help shape a prosperous yet just society.”

For more than 25 years Dr Fitzgerald, who was awarded an honorary doctorate by ACU National in 2001 in recognition of his outstanding contribution to social and community services in Australia, has combined full-time work as a commercial lawyer and later senior public servant, with voluntary positions in the community services sector.

His former voluntary roles have included President of the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS); founding Chair of the national peak body representing the not-for-profit sector, the National Roundtable of Nonprofit Organisations; NSW President of the St Vincent de Paul Society; and member of the national committee of Caritas Australia, a Catholic agency for international aid and development.

Dr Fitzgerald sees his current role with the Productivity Commission, the Australian Government’s principal advisory body on microeconomic reform and regulation, as a way of continuing that cause to improve the overall wellbeing of Australians. “Wellbeing is a broad concept that embraces the notions of economic and social participation, social cohesion, and personal autonomy,” he said. “Good quality public policy should be about trying to ensure that community wellbeing is enhanced through the right mix of economic, social and environmental policies.

“People often see ‘productivity’ as putting more and more pressure on workers, but it is a much broader notion,” Dr Fitzgerald said. “It includes how to use all resources more efficiently and effectively to improve the living standards of the nation. How you use new technology, how you increase your ability to respond to rapidly changing circumstances, how you improve skills and human capacity, and how you design balanced economic reforms are all issues that go towards driving productivity.

“Productivity is central to economic wellbeing. And unless you have economic wellbeing, it is exceptionally difficult to achieve sustainable social and environmental progress.

“It is very clear, however, that there is interplay between the three and all three need to be considered in the development of public policy and the implementation of reform. To maximise the outcomes for society, you have to constantly weigh the relevant and interdependent economic, social and environmental factors.”

Why community engagement makes sense for business

An increasing interest by businesses in the corporate social responsibility agenda makes good, hard economic sense for a number of reasons, according to Dr Fitzgerald.

“Firstly, business only flourishes where society is cohesive and stable, and people are active participants in the economic and social aspects of society. All are vitally important to community wellbeing,” he said.
“Secondly, more new employees are being much more selective as to who they wish to work for. In a thriving economy, wages are not the only consideration and there’s a real shift taking place. Younger workers with professional backgrounds are choosing employers not simply based on remuneration but on the contribution they can make to the organisation, and the contribution the organisation makes to the community.”

Thirdly, companies are increasingly recognising the value of their reputations as a key asset. “It’s very easy in a technologically-rich society for businesses to rapidly replicate the goods and services offered by others. In this environment, there is much to be gained by standing out from competitors and a strong reputation as being socially engaged and responsible matters. There are real competitive advantages and commercial benefits as well as, hopefully, a growing commitment to the common good of the community within which these businesses trade.”

**How community organisations and universities add value**

A rise in philanthropic giving by both individuals and corporations has been accompanied by increasing interest in the notion of community engagement, where businesses not only give but wish to be actively engaged in the giving process and the beneficiary communities.

However, most businesses lack the human services expertise, contacts, organisational systems and means to carry out such engagement effectively. “Without such expertise, risks arise.

“Community engagement must be done well, or there may be unintended and damaging consequences,” Dr Fitzgerald said. “Good intent is a necessary precondition, but it is insufficient. For sustainable, positive outcomes, you need knowledge and confidence. You need the right partners to turn good intentions into good outcomes. So forging a partnership with a university and a community organisation can be a really powerful and productive way to achieve great outcomes.”

Such partnerships hold the key to efficiently and effectively translating goodwill into good works where they are most needed, he said.

Universities are ideally placed to provide the human services and research expertise to both measure outcomes and ensure best practice, while community organisations can provide sensitive and appropriate access to existing networks and relationships, combined with detailed grassroots knowledge of the community’s needs.

“Businesses want to know that their efforts are producing sound and identifiable outcomes. Genuine community engagement can deliver such outcomes, and the benefit for universities is that such partnerships keep them attuned and responsive to the communities they serve, thus ensuring that both their teaching and research activities are contemporary and relevant to the broader society.”

“Most importantly,” he stressed, “community engagement is based on a mutuality of respect and effort with all parties contributing to the collective venture with a desire to achieve a shared learning and agreed outcomes. Critically, community engagement is geared to the empowerment of communities and individuals to make a difference in their own circumstances, and to be more actively responsible for their own destinies.”

**Working together for community wellbeing**

Until recently, wellbeing has often been measured largely in economic terms, such as increases in living standards.

“In the last several years we have moved to a wellbeing framework, which recognises that the ability of people to fully participate in the economic and social opportunities of life and society is critical,” Dr Fitzgerald said. “The greatest poverty in Australia may well be the poverty of social exclusion where people feel marginalised and cut out of the benefits of prosperity experienced by so many.

“I think business and government are starting to understand that they have to be concerned with this broader notion of wellbeing. We need to better understand its elements and improve our capacity to identify key indicators to measure its outcomes. “Consequently, we seem to be in a very favourable environment for community engagement to be pushed forward, with a growing recognition that such engagement can be for the mutual benefit of everyone involved.”

“The opportunity for universities, business and community organisations to work together has never been greater nor more important. It can be a vital tool, together with good public policy, in advancing the wellbeing of communities and individuals.”