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# WHAT IS SOCIAL POLICY?

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Social policy aims to improve people's well-being, and is especially concerned with the welfare of those who experience some form of disadvantage. This book is about social policy in Australia: its purpose and meaning, how it operates now, how it has operated in the past, and the social policy challenges for the future. We show how social policy has affected the lives and choices of Australians over time. We cover how social policy is made, so readers can understand the policy process and become informed and skilled policy activists in their attempts to improve social conditions. In this first chapter the idea and scope of social policy is explored: why it is important, what it means, where it is made and how it relates to other policy areas and to broader institutional arrangements, often referred to as the welfare state.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL POLICY

Social policy change has dramatically affected the lives and choices of Australians over time. Social policy matters. There are many examples of past policy activism in social policy-related areas. In the area of health and disability they include the introduction of Medibank and Medicare in the 1970s and the 1980s, and more recently, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in 2013. These changes increased access to health care, and also changed the way the costs of health care are distributed in Australia as well as to how assistance to people with a disability is assessed, provided and funded. For families, women and children, some relevant changes are:

- the introduction of Child Endowment in 1941, Family Allowance in 1976, payments for single parents in the 1970s and additional assistance for low-income families in the late 1980s and 1990s and beyond
- the introduction of family planning in the 1960s
- the expansion of childcare in the 1980s
- the introduction of paid parental leave in 2011.

These changes have influenced the choices that women can make to have children and to combine work and family. They have also assisted families with the costs of raising children in different ways.

Another example is the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation in the 1980s at both Commonwealth and state levels, which enlarged the rights of minority groups, such as people with disabilities. Also, the welfare to work policies of respective governments from the mid 1980s to the present time have changed expectations of the responsibilities of welfare recipients and the community in the provision of income support and labour-market assistance to people without work. Policies now focus on developing people's capacity to work and expect a broader range of people to be in paid work, including women and people with disabilities. These policies have often been accompanied by reductions in eligibility for income support or in the level of support provided, as happened to many single parents under the Gillard Labor government, when they were expected to be available for full-time work after their child turned a certain age and were transferred to a different form of income support. In the 2014 Budget the Abbott government proposes to restrict eligibility for unemployment payments to people under thirty by introducing a six-month waiting period, among others changes.

In the chapters about individual policy areas in Part 3 of this book, some of these examples are covered in more detail. One such example, discussed in Chapter 12, concerns changes to health care through the introduction of a national public health insurance scheme, initially Medibank (introduced in 1975) and now Medicare (introduced in 1983). Medibank and Medicare represented a significant shift in health care policy. They provided for universal access to basic health care, replacing a system where coverage for health care costs was predominately through private health insurance, with a residual safety net for very low-income Australians. Medicare significantly reduced the cost of basic health care for many Australians, especially people not previously covered through private health insurance or the residual safety net. The cost of health care also became more equitable as the introduction of the Medicare levy meant that the financing of health care was related more to a person's capacity to pay than their need for care. Families were no longer necessarily faced with large health care bills or the need to prove to public hospitals that they were poor in order to receive free hospital care. These changes have made a big difference to the living standards of many Australian families, as well as ensuring a more equitable access to health care (McClelland & Scotton 1998). However, the goals, elements and benefits of Medicare have been disputed and the policy has changed over time. Medibank, the initial version of what is now Medicare, was introduced by the Whitlam Labor government in 1975. It was contested and effectively abolished by the Fraser Coalition government in the latter part of the 1970s. The Hawke Labor government then introduced Medicare in 1983, but changes by the Howard government from 1996, through the introduction of the Private Health Insurance Rebate and then Medicare Plus (see Chapter 12 on health policy), alongside developing financing pressures, watered down the universal and public nature of Medicare. The Rudd and Gillard Labor governments were able to modify some of these changes, for example by income testing access to the Private Health Insurance Rebate, but the first budget of the new Abbott government contained proposals to introduce a \$7 co-payment for GP services, another measure that could undermine the universality of Medicare.

These changes to Medicare point to the contested nature of social policy. People have different views about what is good social policy and these views vary according to differences in values about what is desirable and in assumptions about what will work. Social policy therefore involves debates about values, and in the case of Medicare the continuing debates about the values of public and private financing and provision are central. Social policy also includes debates about the assumptions of the way individuals and societies behave. In the case of Medicare, there are ongoing debates about how people respond to free health care (for example, if bulk billing leads to unnecessary visits and if a co-payment is needed to limit such visits) and the importance of private provision. Policies are therefore rarely completely settled, but are frequently contested and revisited.

Much policy activism is therefore about improving poor policy, but again, what is regarded as poor policy will differ according to people's values and beliefs, and to changing ideas about what works. The Howard government's intervention into the operation of Indigenous communities in northern Australia is a very good example of a highly contested policy. Introduced in 2007 in the lead-up to the Federal election, in response to a report about the extent of child abuse in Indigenous communities, it contained very contentious elements, including the removal of the permit system (through which Indigenous communities controlled entry to their communities), the suspension of the *Racial Discrimination Act* and the compulsory quarantining of welfare payments for all parents (see Chapter 10). These were seen by many as necessary to protect children and improve community functioning. However, others disagreed with these elements on the basis that they denied the rights and autonomy of Indigenous peoples. These debates continued under the Rudd and Gillard governments' approaches to the intervention, which modified some aspects but retained other contested elements despite emerging evidence about its limited effectiveness. Chapter 2 provides more detail about how differences in values and assumptions can influence the design of social policy in particular countries; for example, the use of income and assets tests, plus conditional requirements in Australia's income support system. As a result of these differences in values and assumptions, for many, social policy can have a dark side and is not necessarily about the improvement of personal welfare (Hill 2003), but may also be aimed at social control. One telling example of this in Australia is how we have responded to refugees who arrive in boats. Since 2001 and the much published incident of the *Tampa*, which rescued asylum seekers attempting to seek refuge in Australia, this has been an extremely contested area of public policy, which has influenced the election of different governments (Manne 2013). The then Howard government responded to the *Tampa* by increasing mandatory detention and introducing a range of other punitive policies designed to discourage asylum seekers attempting to come to Australia without explicit permission. For some in the community, these policies are appropriate and may not go far enough. For others they are socially unjust and very damaging to the affected refugees. These differences reflect different values and understandings about the reasons for people seeking refugee status.

Policy activism can also arise as a response to changing needs or social conditions. One current example is the need for different services as a result of population ageing. Another is the pressure for policies to help parents find a better balance between work and family, as a result of the entry of more

mothers into the paid workforce and changing views about the parenting responsibilities of fathers. A range of current issues that involve policy activism includes:

- responses to climate change to protect low-income people and vulnerable communities
- how to respond to the ageing of the population, involving debates about the financing of, and access to, aged care services and how long people should be expected to work before they can access the pension
- balancing work and family, including the type of paid parental leave and childcare that government should subsidise
- the effectiveness and orientation of child protection services
- responses to family violence
- responses to continued Indigenous inequality and disadvantage
- effective early childhood intervention programs
- improvements to mental health and disability service systems
- changes to the funding of schools so that it is more equitable and needs-based.

## THE FORMS AND MEANINGS OF SOCIAL POLICY

Social policy has at least three different meanings. The first is social policy as an *output*; that is, a policy or set of policies, the arrangements and organisation to achieve the policy, and the impact of the policy. Second is social policy as a *discipline* or field of study (Alcock 1998) and third is social policy as a *process* for action to improve societal welfare.

### SOCIAL POLICY AS OUTPUT

If we understand social policy as output, we see social policy as some kind of product, which according to Baldock et al. (2003) may have different forms. It can be:

- *social policy as intentions and objectives* (Baldock et al. 2003, p. 8), meaning social policy as clarifying and debating what we want to achieve. This can be in the form of policy statements or informal agreements. Various examples are provided below.
- *social policy as administrative and financial arrangements* (p. 12), meaning the way we organise our services and institutions to achieve these intentions and objectives; for example, the organisation of our health and housing systems and of our welfare state overall. This is covered in more detail in chapters about individual policy areas and about the changing nature of Australia's welfare state.
- *social policy as outcomes* (p. 18), meaning the impacts of social policies, such as the extent of poverty, how different groups are treated or the overall quality of life of the population. Parts 2 and 3 of the book also contain information about the outcomes of individual policy areas.

Social policies can vary in detail and formality. They can be formal statements with substantial detail about purpose and proposed action, a set of related formal statements, statements of general intention or purpose, and statements where values are articulated or informal agreements of intent that are not necessarily made explicit.

## SOCIAL POLICY AS FORMAL STATEMENTS WITH SUBSTANTIAL DETAIL

*Working Nation* is an example of social policy as a formal statement with substantial detail. Prime Minister Keating released it in 1994 after a significant policy review about the problem of unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment, which followed the very severe recession of the early 1990s in Australia. *Working Nation* (Keating 1994) contained a range of detailed proposals related to reducing unemployment and long-term unemployment. They covered:

- industrial relations changes, such as the introduction of a training wage and new labour-market programs such as case management, job subsidies to employers to take on long-term unemployed people, and a large job creation program
- the introduction of a Job Compact with the promise of a job or training for long-term unemployed people over eighteen months
- some actions to promote regional development
- changes to the operation of income support, including the introduction of reciprocal obligation, which required the unemployed person to take up the opportunities under *Working Nation* or face some penalty (see Edwards 2001; Keating 1994; Watson 2002).

*Working Nation* represents certain features of some policy statements in Australia. First, they are often policy packages—a range of related measures to be introduced over a period of time (frequently, but not always, a four-year period). Second, they often involve action by a number of different ministers and departments, based on the understanding that complex problems require whole-of-government responses. Third, they can involve different areas of policy, such as employment policy and income-support policy changes in the case of *Working Nation*.

Another policy statement comes from the Productivity's Commission's 2011 proposal for the NDIS. This is, in effect, a very detailed policy proposal that arose from an inquiry given by the Gillard government to the Commission. The Productivity Commission was requested to examine the current operation of the disability system and to develop options for change. The resulting report (Productivity Commission 2011) provided a very detailed assessment of the operation and adequacy of the existing system; the proposal for change based on an insurance model, which provided an entitlement to care; how the new system could work in practice; and how it could be gradually introduced over time.

## POLICY AS A SET OF POLICY STATEMENTS

Policy is frequently represented as a set of policy statements rather than being encapsulated in one statement alone. This particularly applies to broad policy areas such as aged care policy, employment policy and so on. It can also apply to a policy issue where there is a series of related changes taking place in a number of different areas. For example, the policy issue of work and family is affected by a number of policy statements, including statements from the previous Industrial Relations Commission about the leave entitlements and working conditions that apply to parents in paid work; the operation of the Paid Parental Leave Scheme, details of which are available from the Commonwealth Department of Human Services; and statements related to the expectations of work by parents who receive welfare payments.

Superannuation policy is also reflected in a number of different detailed statements about the taxes applying to superannuation, the obligations for employers to pay superannuation, government support for low-income Australians who make additional contributions to superannuation, and the conditions under which contributions to superannuation can be made and benefits received. Such policy statements can be accessed through a number of avenues, including Budget Papers, Departmental websites, Ministerial Statements and the election policy statements of the major political parties. They are not always easy to locate.

### POLICY AS MORE GENERAL STATEMENTS OF INTENT AND VALUES

Policies can also be more general statements of intent or of broad values. These are often political party documents, adopted at party conferences, or key ministerial and prime ministerial statements. A good example of a very important general policy statement by a prime minister in Australia is the landmark Redfern address by Paul Keating in 1992. In this statement, Keating identified the need for white Australians to recognise and respond positively to the dispossession of Indigenous peoples' land and way of life (Watson 2002). Another very different example is the past Federal Treasurer Peter Costello's *Intergenerational Report*, released as a general statement that articulated the long-term consequences of the ageing of Australia's population and general options for response (Costello 2002).

### SOCIAL POLICY AS INFORMAL AGREEMENTS

Finally, social policy is not always articulated in a formal statement; instead, it may be a more informal agreement to do things in a certain way. The informality may be deliberate, in order to circumvent the requirements of the formal policy. For example, it is sometimes said that during the 1980s recession, when jobs were not available, many workers in the old Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) had an informal policy not to implement the strict requirements of the work test that applied to unemployed people's eligibility for unemployment benefits. At other times the informal agreement may occur because the formal policy is poorly articulated and not communicated well to those who have to implement it, or because it is so general that it can be interpreted in a number of different ways.

### SOCIAL POLICY AS A DISCIPLINE OR AREA OF STUDY

The second way of understanding social policy is as a discipline or area of study. By this we mean the activities involved in understanding the factors that influence particular social policies and in understanding the impact of such policies on people's lives and the nature of society. The study of social policy is ultimately concerned with understanding how the organisation of society affects well-being. The development of social policy as a discipline derives from the belief that we can change society in a planned and purposeful manner and improve people's welfare using knowledge and research. It has progressively developed alongside governments' increasing responsibility for the pursuit of social well-being.

Australian social policy has been strongly influenced by the development of social policy as a discipline in the United Kingdom, drawing on the Fabian tradition of commitment to social reform based on an intellectual understanding of society's needs and operation. This in turn drew on a tradition

of research into social conditions in the nineteenth-century United Kingdom by researchers such as Rowntree and Booth (Alcock 1998). However, Richard Titmuss is the person probably most responsible for the development of social policy as a discipline in the United Kingdom. Titmuss was important in articulating an ethical case for welfare and social policy (see Chapter 2) and developing a framework for analysing how different institutional arrangements affect well-being.

In Australia, research into social conditions was understandably later in its development. It is exemplified in the work of Professor Ronald Henderson, who came to Australia in the 1960s from the United Kingdom and undertook the first (and only) major inquiry into poverty in Australia. Earlier work was more piecemeal and undertaken by individuals and community organisations. For example, Oswald Barnett developed a study group to understand the conditions of slums in inner-urban Melbourne and to develop proposals for change, which led to the establishment of the Housing Commission in Victoria and the expansion of public housing.

Erskine (1998) identifies a number of features of the study of social policy. As the study of social policy is about an analysis of how policies impact on the welfare of individuals and groups, this means: first, having views about what constitutes welfare; and second, having the means to assess the impacts of policies on people's welfare. Third, it involves an understanding of how policies are 'institutionally organised and implemented' (for example, how the child protection system operates) (Erskine 1998, p. 15). Fourth, it means understanding 'the components of welfare', which may go beyond the examination of existing government policies to understanding how new social issues, needs and arrangements can impact on people's well-being. For example, the changing labour force participation of women means that we need to significantly re-examine our policies to meet the emerging issue of work and family. Finally, Erskine says it is wrong to think of social policy as one discipline. He sees it as a multidisciplinary area of study that 'draws on the methods and theories used in sociology, statistics, management science, history, law, economics, political science, philosophy, geography and social psychology to help explore well-being' (Erskine 1998, p. 15).

In this book, we cover how social policy operates as an area or field of study in Australia, including:

- the different theoretical frameworks about how policies are made
- how to analyse the impact of policies
- the role of Australian institutions in developing and implementing policy
- how current policy is affected by the past and by actions and ideas in other countries
- the impact of change on social policy.

The book is designed to enable readers to develop knowledge of the analysis and appraisal of social policy in Australia.

## SOCIAL POLICY AS A PROCESS

Social policy can also be understood as a process—the activities people, groups and institutions undertake in order to introduce new policies or to change existing policies. Much of what we mean by social policy

as a process has been covered in the discussion above of social policy as an area of study or discipline. But in framing social policy as a process in this book, we emphasise the normative aspect of the policy process, in the sense that we wish to enable readers to develop an understanding of how to be an effective policy actor or practitioner—the useful actions that are more likely to be effective in creating change. By useful actions we mean actions that are more likely to lead to good policy change. And by good policy change we mean policy that improves societal well-being, while also acknowledging that what is regarded as good policy is open to debate and contest. In short, the book is also informed by the view that a good policy process is more likely to lead to good policy than a poor policy process (see Althaus et al. 2007 and Edwards 2001 for elaboration of the importance of the policy process).

This emphasis on the social policy process and the development of social policy practitioners also comes from the idea that good policy is more likely to occur if more people from different organisations and roles are equipped to contribute to policy development. Therefore, we need to help workers who have day-to-day information about what is happening on the ground to be able to intervene in the policy process, just as we need to assist those in designated policy positions in government departments to be effective in their roles. We also need to help those affected by policies to be able to intervene effectively in the policy process. Chapter 3 therefore contains information about how to be a policy practitioner or policy actor at different levels.

## DEFINITIONS OF SOCIAL POLICY: THE MAIN FEATURES AND SCOPE

### DEFINITIONS AND FEATURES

There are several different definitions of policy and social policy. Some are presented in Table 1.1 to illustrate the key features of social policy.

First, as already discussed, social policy has different meanings, including particular policies, areas of study or processes for action.

Second, social policy is more planned than random—it involves some kind of purposeful, intentional activity and often ‘authoritative choice’ (Althaus et al. 2007, p. 6). For example, the decision to introduce reform of family law and no-fault divorce in the early 1970s was not accidental. It arose from purposeful action to change laws seen to be out of step with changing values and the changed reality of marriage and separation.

Third, social policy is concerned about the welfare (or well-being) of individuals and groups in society. This book takes a broad definition of the meaning of welfare as explained further below.

Fourth, social policy is concerned with social relationships—the relationships between individuals, individuals and society, and between different groups in society. This is important because individual and social well-being is very dependent on the quality of relationships.

Fifth, social policy is concerned with both overall welfare and also about how welfare or well-being is distributed among different groups according to important facets of life, such as health, education, income and employment.



Sixth, social policy is concerned with the articulation of objectives and principles, and critically involves debates about values as well as action to achieve them. Different values and beliefs will mean there are different understandings about what constitutes welfare and also about how welfare is best promoted. The example of the continuing and changing debates about Medicare earlier in this chapter illustrate the role of debates about values—such as individual freedom, personal or social responsibility, and commitment to equality—in the development and analysis of social policy.

Seventh, the process of social policy involves not only rational analysis but also political contest about different values and the position of different groups. The analysis of social policy therefore requires an understanding of the power relationships within society and is informed by different theories about power and how it is exercised.

**Table 1.1** Definitions of policy and social policy

Policy can be taken to mean principles that govern action towards given ends.	Titmuss 1974 cited in Dalton et al. 1996
<p>Policy can be seen as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a label for a field of activity</li> <li>• an expression of general purpose or desired state of affairs</li> <li>• specific proposals</li> <li>• decisions of government arising from crucial moments of choice</li> <li>• formal authorisation—a specific act or statute</li> <li>• a program—a particular package of legislation, organisation and resources</li> <li>• output—what government actually delivers, as opposed to what it has promised or has authorised through legislation</li> <li>• the produce of a particular activity</li> <li>• theory—if we do X then Y will follow</li> <li>• a process unfolding over a long period of time.</li> </ul>	Althaus et al. 2007, p. 7, adopted from Hogwood & Gunn 1990
[Public] policy is the continuing work done by groups of policy actors who use available public institutions to articulate and express the things they value.	Considine 1994, p. 4
The study of social policy is concerned with those aspects of public policies, market operations, personal consumption and interpersonal relationships that contribute to, or detract from, the well-being or welfare of individuals or groups. Social policy explores the social, political, ideological and institutional context within which welfare is produced, distributed and consumed. It seeks to provide an account of the processes that contribute to or detract from welfare and it does this within a normative framework that involves debating moral and political issues about the nature of the desired outcome.	Erskine 1998, p. 19
Social policy contains both products and outcome-particular policies, as well as processes of critical reflection, action and contest between people. Social policy is concerned with social goals, purpose and values.	Dalton et al. 1996, p. 4
Social policy is 'actions aimed at promoting social well-being'.	Alcock cited in Hill 2003, p. 1

Finally, while social policy is concerned with debates about values and ideologies, it also draws on empirical knowledge to inform the analysis of social problems and the assessment of solutions. Social policies are based on assumptions about what might work (Althaus et al. 2007). Social policy also uses analytic frameworks to understand how this knowledge can be used in a systematic and rigorous manner.

## THE SCOPE OF SOCIAL POLICY

These definitions point to the broad scope of social policy. They point to a broad understanding of the meaning of welfare, the broad responsibility for the achievement of welfare, the broad range of disciplines required for the analysis and development of social policy, and the interconnections between social policy and other areas of policy.

While *welfare* may be interpreted in a narrow way, meaning the services that are provided to people who are in need, we take the broad definition articulated in the Alcock definition: ‘actions aimed at promoting social well-being.’ Social well-being encompasses how individuals and groups fare in a range of domains or spheres of life, such as living standards (or material well-being), access to information, social participation, family relationships and overall life satisfaction (Western et al. 1995). In Part 3 of this book, we cover the key policy areas that contribute to the welfare of different groups in these domains of life. We cover employment and wages, income support, housing, health, education, community services, and financing and taxation. Policies in these areas are central to the level and distribution of material well-being in Australia, and most have an impact, either directly or indirectly, on people’s relationships and capacity to participate. Policies related to financing and taxation not only directly affect the distribution of income, but also have an important indirect effect as they can determine whether certain social policies are adopted. We also cover policy areas of more recent interest and debate in Australia—climate change and population growth and change. Policies related to climate change will also affect the sustainability of our quality of life and the income of different groups and therefore are also very relevant to social policy. Policies related to population growth and change include how we can develop the services and amenities to respond to bigger cities, how we cope with diversity and population ageing and how we respond to the needs of others—particularly refugees.

This broad definition of welfare also points to a shared responsibility for welfare. While social policy is mainly concerned about what governments do (public policy), it also covers the market and the operations of local communities, non-government organisations and families, *as all influence social welfare*. For example, the market affects social well-being through the production of goods and services and also through its capacity to provide employment at wage levels and conditions that provide reasonable living standards and quality of life. Also many human services are increasingly provided through the market, by private providers (for example, prisons and some aged-care services). Through self-help and the exercise of choice, individuals promote their own living standards and usually those of other family members through sharing material resources and providing social and emotional support. Community organisations have traditionally played a strong role in the provision of a wide range of services in Australia—from nursing homes for older people to employment assistance for unemployed

people—and this role has increased in recent years. Social policy is concerned not only with how governments intervene to change the operations of markets, families and community organisations, but also how policies are made in these other spheres of society.

The scope of social policy is also broad in the sense that it covers a range of disciplines as no single discipline has sufficient knowledge to enable us to understand how welfare is produced, distributed and consumed. We need to draw on the understandings of a range of disciplines including sociology, economics, psychology, philosophy, political science and history. Sociology helps us to understand social relationships, including the relationships between different groups. Economics helps us to understand the resource allocation aspects of social policy, the need to allocate resources efficiently and also how to improve aggregate material well-being, while psychology is important in understanding how individuals behave and the factors that influence their development. Debates about values and goals are also informed by philosophy. Given the central role of government action in social policy, knowledge about political science and the factors that influence the actions and decisions of governments is also important, as is some understanding of past policy approaches.

The interrelationships between economic policy, social policy and public policy are especially salient. Economic policy affects critical aspects of well-being central to social policy, such as the level and distribution of employment, the price of goods and services such as housing, and the finances available for government expenditure. However, it is also increasingly recognised that social policy has economic benefits, given its contribution to the development of social and human capital, and it is often termed ‘social investment’. Well-being therefore is best promoted when public policy integrates economic and social policy considerations in decision-making. As government action is a critical feature of social policy, there is also a strong relationship between public policy and social policy. Public policy can promote social policy considerations, but this is not necessarily always the case. Finally, with a deepening concern about climate change and environmental sustainability, environmental policy has become a more influential area of policy. Policies to promote the environment can have strong social policy implications. They can influence the costs of essential goods and services (such as electricity or water) and also levels of employment (related to debates about increasing energy prices in response to climate change or the need to change agricultural practices to conserve water).

Finally, the scope of social policy is also broad in the sense that there is a wide range of influences on social policy. As policies do not operate in isolation, in order to explore the impact of particular policies and to understand how policies are developed we need to understand their broader social, political, historical, economic and ideological contexts. The social context is important as the roles and relationships of different groups influence the expectations of behaviour and the supports that should be provided by family members or other community members. This in turn affects the adoption of particular policies as well as their impacts. For example, the expectation that parents will financially support their children until a certain age has influenced the adoption of a parental income test to determine the level of support that should be available to young Australians. In contrast, the growth of aged-care services reflects the expectations that older people should not have to rely on their families for care and support. The political context influences the political acceptability of different policies and the economic context

affects the resources available to pursue certain actions, as well as the living standards of different groups. The historical context is important for understanding the impact of previous policies and for understanding the limits that historical choices may place on the present. The international context is important because the international environment, such as interest rates in other countries (especially in the USA), impacts on the choices available in Australia, and this influence has become more marked with increased globalisation. However, the extent of the limitations posed by globalisation on national choices is much contested. The ideological context, and the prevailing values and beliefs, will affect the goals of social policy; for example, the value placed on pursuing equality versus individual freedom. It will also influence the actions that are understood to be effective in improving welfare; for example, through placing emphasis on individual behavioural change or on changing societal structures.

## SOCIAL POLICY AND THE WELFARE STATE

The introduction and development of particular social policies—such as the aged pension, assistance with the cost of health care or the expansion of childcare—is intimately related to the development of welfare states. Welfare states provide the institutional context for social policy and for particular policies. Welfare states have developed in advanced capitalistic societies alongside the development of the responsibility of governments for societal well-being. The form and operation of particular welfare states influences the outcomes of particular policies and also affects the capacity to introduce policy change. Social policy has also developed as an area of study in response to the need for systematic knowledge to inform the way we understand and change our welfare states. And so social policy contributes to the development of welfare states and is also influenced by welfare states. In general, the scope and focus of welfare states has considerable overlap with the scope and interest of social policy, as the definitions in Table 1.2 illustrate.

**Table 1.2** Definitions of welfare states

A society in which the state intervenes within the processes of economic production and distribution to reallocate life chances between individuals and/or classes.	Pierson 1998, p. 7
The range of state interventions that aim to protect individuals from unimpeded market processes and their outcomes.	Cass 1998, p. 40
A type of state predominately concerned with the production and distribution of societal well-being.	Esping-Andersen 1990, p. 1

Some key points about the relationship between welfare states and social policy arise from these definitions. First is the concern of welfare states with *well-being*, and therefore the broad ambit of what we understand by the welfare state. It includes a range of areas and is not confined to a narrow view of welfare. The idea of the welfare state includes systems such as the employment, education and housing systems, and not only, for example, what welfare departments do. Second is the focus on the distribution of well-being; distribution is a key focus of social policy, and the production of aggregate well-being is

also of concern to both. Third is a particular focus on the role and responsibility of the state for ensuring well-being as reflected in the idea of social citizenship, which is also a key idea in social policy. Fourth is the importance of the role of the state, but also the increased importance of the roles of individuals, families, the market and community organisations. The increased role of other sectors (apart from the state) in the responsibility for promoting welfare has led some to query the continued relevance of the term ‘welfare state’ and instead to refer to the ‘welfare mix’, or the ‘enabling state’. It is particularly important to understand how these different sectors interact and how these interactions influence the welfare of different groups.

The development and operation of welfare states is affected by the combined operations of economic, social and public policy. And, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, these policies are informed by dominant values and assumptions. The next chapter goes on to explore values, ideologies and concepts, and their influence on social policy and on welfare states in some detail. The chapters in Part 2 provide more information about the changing nature of welfare states and the continued relevance of the term.



## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Social policy matters and past social policy activism have significantly altered the nature of Australian society in a number of important ways. Policy activism can be required for a number of reasons including:

- changing policies that are causing harm
- articulating different values and beliefs
- responding to changing needs.

We can understand social policy in a number of ways. Social policy can be an output; that is, the expression of intent or purpose. This expression may be in the form of a very detailed policy statement, a series of related statements, a very general statement of values or an informal agreement. Social policy is also reflected in the institutional arrangements that assist people’s welfare, and in the impact of those arrangements on people’s lives. Social policy is also an area of study involving knowledge and analysis that helps us understand the aims of social policy, the context of policy and the impact of policy on people’s lives. If we want to develop good policy and effective policy practitioners, we also need to understand the process of social policy development that is most likely to lead to good policy.

Social policy is about purposeful activity to improve societal well-being, and as such has a broad scope, utilises a range of disciplines and overlaps with economic policy, public policy and environmental policy. It is particularly concerned with the distribution of well-being and with social relationships. Social policy involves not only rational analysis and action but also political contest about different values and the position of different groups. Social policy has developed alongside the development of the responsibility of governments for societal well-being, but is also increasingly concerned with the operations of markets, families and community organisations.