
Social mobility: drivers and policy responses revisited

In December 2010, a British Academy Forum reviewed the drivers of social mobility and policy programmes to enhance it. Professor Anthony Heath FBA and Dr Anna Zimdars reflect on what we have learned and what we still do not know.

SOCIAL MOBILITY has enjoyed considerable attention under the previous Labour government which oversaw the Panel for Fair Access to the Professions and a whitepaper on social mobility in Britain among other initiatives. The new Coalition Government has also signalled its commitment to the

social mobility agenda and prioritises the development of a cross-government social mobility strategy. It thus seemed timely for a British Academy Forum, put together in consultation with relevant government officials, to consider what we have learned about social mobility in contemporary Britain, the challenges faced in achieving it, and policies that might foster mobility. The Forum, held on 14 December 2010, was attended by representatives from the civil service and academic worlds and from the Institute for Government. It was chaired by Professor Anthony Heath.

Conceptual issues

Social mobility is about how sons' and daughters' positions in the occupational structure compare with their parents' positions (inter-generational mobility) or how one's own career moves up or down the structure (intra-generational mobility). One key question has been whether such movements have de- or increased over the past few decades. This question has, perhaps surprisingly, been difficult to answer. This difficulty has partly to do with data availability, but answers to the question also depend on the academic discipline of the

respondent. Entry into the salariat, the preferred mobility measure of sociologists, may have increased in Britain. However, entry into the top income percentiles, the upward mobility measure used by economists, has been declining. Second, ups and downs in the macro-economy impact on net rates of social mobility. In prosperous times of economic expansion, there is more 'room at the top'. As the cake gets bigger, more people are upwardly mobile. But this might still hide the persistence of relative inequalities in the chances of individuals from different origins to improve their position.

These conceptual issues not only highlight some of the challenges of providing an evidence-base for actual social mobility rates, but they also indicate the particular timeliness of discussing social mobility in a time of an unprecedented rolling back of salariat employment in the public sector. If the room at the top is shrinking, more individuals will be chasing fewer desirable jobs. In particular, access to elite positions might become more self-reproducing in tougher economic times. The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions highlighted the importance of e.g. unpaid internships which both advantage the already advantaged and help entry into professional jobs. Similarly, cycles of deprivation might be more likely to continue in times when there is less room to move upwards out of poverty.

Policy responses

There was agreement among Forum participants that governments have tools available to facilitate greater social mobility, even in times when the room at the top might be shrinking. However, not all previously tried policies or currently proposed ones were judged equally likely to deliver on their intended target.

Interventions are broadly focused on four main stages: the antenatal/early-years period; the primary- and secondary-school period; the post-16/into-work period; and finally adulthood and progression into and within the labour market. There was some agreement that returns to investments were greatest at the earliest stages. The potential discontinuation of Sure Start and the confirmed discontinuation of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA),

at least in their present forms, was viewed with regret. In particular, the EMA had improved continuation rates in schooling (although not qualification levels) whereas the evidence for the success of Sure Start has so far been more mixed. In contrast, some new government policies such as the pupil premium were regarded as being unlikely to turbo-charge social mobility based on the experience of other European countries such as France with similar schemes.

There was also some concern that the focus had shifted too completely towards the early years without the development of a strategy for social mobility later in life, for example through the support of life-long learning and adult education. Furthermore, focus on improving educational opportunities without a simultaneous focus on the labour market might not achieve great mobility for certain groups. This is because educational attainment does not always translate into equal labour-market outcomes. The gains of women and some ethnic minority groups in terms of educational attainment have not been followed by those groups surpassing their male, white peers in the competition for the most desirable jobs or most senior positions. Here, selection processes should be further improved, perhaps through increasing the diversity of selection panels or lawful positive action.

Asking the right questions

The Forum also critically questioned whether focusing the mobility debate solely on individual opportunities and policies to promote them fell short of tackling a more radical, and at least equally important question: the question about the equalisation of resources. Contributors argued with examples from the fields of both health and education that increasing social mobility might need more radical thinking. Finland, a country with excellent educational performance results according to the latest student assessment from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) enjoys not only far greater social mobility than the UK but it also enjoys far smaller differences between the rich and the poor. The cultural homogeneity of shared values across social groups as well as social mixing in schools in Finland might further aid social mobility. In contrast, the segregated

schooling system in the UK with disadvantaged children concentrated together in poor neighbourhoods served by 'failing' schools was viewed as likely to inhibit opportunities for these children.

With regards to health outcomes, it was noted that just changing the profile of, for example, the very disadvantaged, would not improve social inequalities in health. If person B becomes the one with rotten health instead of person A – a zero-sum change of who is up and who is down – this would not leave us healthier overall. A similar logic could be applied to the observation that Britain continues to have the highest teenage-pregnancy rates in Europe. The policy aim is to reduce this statistic, and not just change who it is who becomes pregnant. The implication is that structural change (for example, increasing the number of salaried employees or reducing the overall number of teenage pregnancies), not individual social mobility or change in the characteristics of who is most likely to become a teenage mother, is what is needed.

A final observation about structural change concerned the hollowing-out of the middle. There was concern that instead of a narrowing of the gap between the rich and the poor, many jobs were disappearing from the middle, in particular many semi-routine jobs that have been replaced by computers. This hollowing-out of the middle is resulting in greater polarisation and increase of inequality. While a perhaps obvious response would be increasing skill levels in order to move people into the high-skill, high-pay part of the labour market, there was concern whether this argument had been lost in current debates focusing around who should pay what for a university education.

Whose responsibility is it?

This observation segues into a final theme that emerged in the discussion: whose responsibility is social mobility? There was a feeling among government representatives that the state was not the most appropriate actor to change things like parenting in the UK. Maybe the state should focus on its 'core business' rather than expanding into new and more intrusive roles. This sentiment was echoed in work undertaken by the Institute of Government where research on policy successes over the last 20 to 30 years showed

that successful policies shared the key characteristics of inclusiveness in their outreach. The complexity of increasing social mobility might thus be most fruitfully addressed when combining the efforts of the many groups and individuals who can potentially influence mobility: parents, teachers, careers' advisors, selection panels at universities, selectors for jobs, and government policies ranging from the early years to maternity leave policies and positive action but also more far-reaching policies addressing the growing gap between the rich and the poor.

Some final reflections

Promoting social mobility in society cannot be expected to be easy, especially in the absence of sustained economic growth and increasing 'room at the top'. In a situation of zero growth, increased upwards mobility is inevitably going to involve increased downwards mobility too. Policies that

increase the chances of downwards mobility for their children are likely to be unpopular among the middle classes, and middle-class parents and families must be expected to look for ways to outwit such policies. This does not mean that policy-makers should give up the struggle to increase rates of mobility. But they should perhaps anticipate a long-haul struggle and a continually evolving social mobility strategy.

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