

Maximising well-being post COVID-19

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KEY INSIGHTS

Much has changed in New Zealand since the New Zealand Government imposed a nation-wide lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on 26 March 2020. Research³ undertaken by social researchers from Manaaki Whenua – Landcare Research and the Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment provides insights into how people navigated their COVID-19 response and what that means for their, and New Zealand's, continued well-being.

Inequality

A key theme noted by participants was that the impacts of the COVID-19 response have not been even, with several noting that this was not solely a manifestation of COVID-19, rather that it was an ongoing, increasing societal issue that had been crystalised for them by the pandemic:

I'm much more urgently concerned about rampant inequality, socioeconomic inequality in particular in this country and I think it's...been cast into sharp relief by the pandemic (MWB7).

...it's always the people at the lower end of things who get the rough end of it (MWB55).

My other biggest concern ...would be inequity because I think that's been highlighted by COVID (MWB56).

Participants touched on various economic avenues that the Government could use to address this issue:

I think the minimum wage subsidy should give those people a decent living for a decent bloody job. ...I would go so far as to support a universal basic income (MWB10).

[COVID-19] could be a great disrupter to economic thinking and planning. It could be a really positive disrupter. It could drive some really important change, like – I mean, I was really hopeful at first that we might actually start moving towards universal basic income, but there's a whole lot of stuff that has to happen also that – like proper rent control and probably things like tax on second homes and certainly, changing the tax system, so that people [who] are making money from investing and housing are taxed on it properly. There's a whole raft of other things that have to happen to make universal basic income work (MWB7).

³ A background and methodology report is available from StrongeD@landcareresearch.co.nz

I believe that tax relief is one of the best things, the income tax, because that gives people more money to spend and they will spend it (MWB12).

This is a massive opportunity for us to pivot, actually. If we're going to put people in training, make sure the training is training that's going to give...people a living wage, and actually better than that, a really good wage. So, if you're going to train someone, train them in something that makes them money....so, when we're spending money on people, make sure we're spending it on something that's actually going to help them get ahead (MWB81).

Invest in school lunches for their kids; invest in smaller class sizes so people can actually get an education. And a good one, where they're supported. That's the sort of stuff....If they took those opportunities, that would be really good....Sometimes it has to get really, really bad, right, before it gets better. I'm just hoping that we've got a little bit more awareness, so it doesn't have to get worse, it just gets better (MWB45).

Others felt that proposed recovery interventions missed the mark – particularly for women:

So, I guess one of my greatest hopes is around inclusivity and equity and fairness, and I guess some of the things that happened through COVID really highlighted the divide and inequities, particularly impacts on women and migrant and Māori and Pacifica, and some of the responses from the government never really tackled those things, so shovel-ready projects do not favour women getting back into employment for example (MWB41).

Probably the really disappointing thing about...what actually came out was that a lot of people being made redundant were women, and yet all these projects were shovel-ready infrastructure projects that didn't actually employ women (MWB45).

[I hope] money going into things...will make a real difference, and I would love it not just to be jobs for the boys. I know the boys need jobs, but the girls need jobs too, and I look at all of these construction, and even the tree-planting, jobs, and that kind of thing, it's things that are much less geared towards women than are geared towards the men (MWB47).

The detrimental effect of inequality on societal well-being (i.e. living well together) was well recognised by many participants, and improving equality was a strong focus in their suggestions for how New Zealand should respond post COVID-19 and the type of society we should be striving to achieve:

...it would be good for us as a nation, if we could bring our children up – all of our children up – with enough to eat and a good education (MWB90).

I would like to see us as the nation being more supportive of those who are significantly impacted by a well-being deficit, whether that's financial or social or cultural (MWB91).

I have high hopes. I think there's just a real opportunity to make New Zealand more equitable (MWB2).