

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.

Rethinking the Economy

A key theme raised by participants was the concern about the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and what that might mean for their individual and New Zealand's collective future well-being. Although there was recognition that New Zealand had done better than many countries due to the Government's response, many reflected on the economic decisions made, and on the opportunity to make changes post COVID-19. While a strong economy was seen as essential, many did not like the thought of going back to the previous economic growth model that put money before people and the environment:

I hope that we don't go back to life the way it was pre-COVID. So, I'm hoping that the government sees an opportunity to help people transition into the new post-COVID shaped economy (MWB30).

I'm hoping that maybe we have a more creative interpretation of what economy actually means, and maybe we think about what is economy for? When we say we want growth, what is it we want growth for? To do what?...what is it that we're trying to grow? Is it just that we want to grow money and at all costs, or do we want to grow people's well-being, people's capabilities, do we want to grow communities? (MWB52).

We need to move away from that idea of the growth economy and that growing is everything, and what I see in the COVID response is whilst the government has been prepared to put health ahead of profit and economic growth, the aim is to return to economic growth, and I find that ridiculous myself (MWB76).

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

As outlined in the key insight on inequality, people are concerned that New Zealand's economic recovery response would be at the expense of social equity issues. For others, it was environmental issues, such as climate change:

I...don't believe in throwing the environment under the bus to help economy in the short term (MWB28).

I just hope that the economic response doesn't overshadow the necessary environment response in the longer term in terms of recovery....Maybe you can take a whole new approach to that rather than the conventional, neoliberal one that's been around for a while... – one which accommodates and enhances the environmental issues and things like climate change in particular (MWB67).

I guess what I'm most worried about is the bigger picture of things. You hear of those pictures of the waves where there's COVID-19 and then another bigger wave, and it's like, to me, that climate change and the bigger wave is coming and the lack of concern about that is most worrying to me (MWB76).

While not universal, many participants supported the focus of putting New Zealanders health and well-being at the forefront of the pandemic response:

...everyone's response has really put people first over the economy and I think that makes us feel valued and important and like we actually matter in the country... (MWB53).

The focus on health and well-being was something many had reflected on and wanted to see continue. This pivotal change from people servicing the economy to "...the economy's job [being] to serve people and the planet" (MWB7) was expressed as a move to a green, circular or wellbeing economy:

I guess I really hope that we get...more of a...green renewal of the economy. So, we get...renewable energy and that sort of thing as a focus. There's some – not sure all the things that have been selected as shovel-ready projects fit that bill, which is a great shame. But I do think it's an opportunity for a reset. If that opportunity is taken it'll be a good thing (MWB13).

I would love it if our economy shifted more towards well-being and enjoyment and connection, and less about stuff and stuff and stuff (MWB40).

I'd like to think that we have an idea of a holistic way of living so that when we think economy, we're not just thinking about business and money; we're thinking about impact on environment, on people, on individual well-being, on the health of communities, on pollution. We're thinking in a much more circular economy way and hopefully a lot more people have started to consider that (MWB52).

The pandemic has been a time of reflection, and a recurring theme from participants was that while economic growth matters and is important, they saw it as a means to an end, not an end in itself. They wanted the well-being of people and the environment at the heart of economic recovery decisions. The Covid-19 pandemic response reminded participants about what makes life good in New Zealand, and for many it was much more than just the economy:

I think the economy and well-being, while they're related, well-being is bigger than just the economy (MWB91).