

Wellbeing and Policy in New Zealand: The Importance of Government Support

Abstract:

This chapter summarises the modern state of wellbeing and public policy in New Zealand. The evolution of New Zealand's wellbeing approach to policy is explained, key learnings from the process are discussed, and specific actions points to further wellbeing and public policy in New Zealand and around the world are suggested.

New Zealand often ranks in or near the top 10 nations on international wellbeing metrics and is often looked to as one of the leaders in wellbeing policy. In 2011, the New Zealand Treasury reinterpreted its goal to promoting the *wellbeing* of New Zealanders and published the Living Standards Framework, a new model of wellbeing for policymaking. Progress on this new wellbeing approach was greatly aided in 2018 when a change in government brought with it an explicit wellbeing approach to the national budget and reporting processes, much of which was codified into new laws. The Living Standards Framework and its associated wellbeing tools have continued to evolve. Key innovations include an interactive dashboard of wellbeing data and a wellbeing cost benefit analysis tool that covers many domains and indicators of wellbeing.

This new approach has resulted in greater collaboration between government agencies and more transparent reporting on the inner workings and results of public policies. But more could be done, including taking environmental concerns more seriously, fixing data gaps, reporting on wellbeing data more frequently, further training and teamwork for policymakers, and a citizens assembly on wellbeing and public policy.

Key words:

wellbeing and public policy, wellbeing, Living Standards Framework, New Zealand, wellbeing policy

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1. Overview

In recent years, New Zealand has fundamentally reframed the policymaking process into a wellbeing approach (Weijers & Morrison, 2018). The reframing is multifaceted, including new guiding concepts and models, new methods of policy creation and analysis, new laws, and new reporting infrastructure. Since 2011, the Treasury has explicitly understood its goal of achieving higher living standards for New Zealanders as how to achieve wellbeing for all New Zealanders, now and in the future (Treasury, 2011). After this, the Treasury published a series of guides, tools, and models and encouraged their use across the public sector (Treasury, 2021a). Led by the Treasury, policymakers in New Zealand tend to work with a pluralistic view of wellbeing that is influenced by Utilitarianism, Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach, and Māori and Pacific notions of what is important in life (Hughes, 2021). In practice, this means considering how policies might impact the wellbeing-related domains in the Living Standards Framework (LSF; a conceptual model of the stocks and flows of the determinants of wellbeing) and He Ara Waiora (a conceptual model of the ends and means of wellbeing from the perspective of New Zealand's indigenous Māori people; Treasury 2021b).

New Zealand ranks 13th on the Human Development Index (HDI) for 2021 with a score of 0.937, behind Switzerland (1st, 0.962) but above the United States (21st, 0.921) (HDR, 2023). New Zealand's HDI rose rapidly from 1990-2005 (0.806 to 0.912) and more slowly since then. Based on data from 2022, New Zealand was ranked 27th (78.43) on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), well behind Finland (1st, 86.76) but above the United States (39th, 75.91) (SDR, 2023). New Zealand made slow progress on the SDGs from 2000 to 2020 (74.38 to 76.78) but is now progressing faster (SDR, 2023). New Zealand is one of only a few countries to have achieved the gender equity goal. The OECD's (2020a) *How's Life?* Index ranks New Zealand 12th overall (Norway is 1st and the United States is 8th). New Zealand ranks highly in many domains, especially civic engagement (3rd) and health (4th), and only compares unfavourably in work life balance and safety (the latter mainly due to domestic violence and exaggerated perceptions of public unsafety). New Zealand's performance on the OECD's headline wellbeing indicators and inequality of wellbeing has remained relatively steady since 2010 (OECD, 2020b, p. 36, 39). The 2023 World Happiness Report (based on 2020-2023 data) ranks New Zealand as 10th (7.123) on average life evaluation, better than the much wealthier United States (15th, 6.894), but a way off Finland (1st, 7.804) (Helliwell et al., 2023).

Internal wellbeing research reveals similar results to many other colonial nations; problems with inequality in most domains, especially for indigenous Māori (and some immigrant communities) (McLeod, 2018), which is only partially explained by their younger demographic (Reid & Evans, 2022). Objective and subjective indicators show Māori behind on several important wellbeing domains, including income, health, and housing with only very gradual improvements over time (Reid & Evans, 2022). Trends of note over the last decade include high and improving employment rates and air quality, high and worsening mental health issues among young people, and declining school attendance and achievement in poorer areas (Hughes, Cardona, & Armstrong, 2022). In terms of subjective life evaluations, the research shows that mental health (Crichton & Nguyen, 2022), positive experiences, and satisfaction with household income (Jarden et al., 2022) are important predictors of satisfaction with life.

2. Wellbeing initiatives in the country

In 2011, the Treasury reinterpreted its mission from improving living standards (narrowly construed) to improving wellbeing (broadly construed). Inspired by the Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi report (2009) and Sen's (1993) capabilities approach, Treasury staff devised the LSF, which incorporated a wide range of long-term and immediate contributors to wellbeing (Treasury, 2011). This conceptual model of the stocks and flows of contributors to wellbeing was led entirely by the public sector and allowed but not funded by the government at the time.

Still without direct governmental support, the Treasury worked on a now-defunct LSF Tool that was designed to help policymakers operationalise the LSF in their day-to-day work (Karacaoglu, 2012). The Tool substantially narrowed the broad range of stocks and flows in the LSF down to five: economic growth, reducing macroeconomic vulnerability, sustainability for the future, growing social capital, and increasing equity (Karacaoglu, 2012, p. 1). A series of papers developed conceptual depth, guidance, and suitable indicators for each of the five priority areas over the next few years (2012-2015) (Treasury, 2021a).

In 2018, Jacinda Ardern became Prime Minister and announced a wellbeing focus for her new coalition government. New laws changed the way the budget and wellbeing reporting would work. The Treasury was tasked with creating the infrastructure for annual wellbeing budgets and to prepare for regular wellbeing reporting. Statistics New Zealand was tasked with discovering what matters to New Zealanders, how data could be collected to monitor those things, and to work with Treasury to ensure sufficient data collection to make the various wellbeing related instruments viable. Another major wellbeing and public policy conference brought together international academic and public sector wellbeing experts with a range of policymakers to help reframe policymaking in New Zealand to a wellbeing approach (Weijers & Morrison, 2018).

Statistics New Zealand had been preparing for this change since at least 2012 (Morrison & Weijers, 2012). Based on the Conference of European Statisticians' recommendations on measuring sustainable development (UNECE, 2013), Statistics New Zealand consulted widely to devise a suite of indicators (Indicators Aotearoa New Zealand) that would help fulfil New Zealand's reporting obligations to the United Nations, help operationalise the Treasury's LSF, provide data for the various governmental and non-governmental agencies working towards sustainable wellbeing, and enable reporting on what matters to most New Zealanders (StatsNZ, no date). The consultation process included multi-modal public consultation, especially with indigenous Māori (StatsNZ, 2019). The project identified over 100 indicators that provide near complete coverage of the SDGs and the various domains of the LSF and Treasury's other wellbeing instruments.

Inspired by the OECD's Better Life wellbeing initiative (and in order to align the LSF with its new reporting obligations to the OECD), Treasury updated the LSF, including subjective wellbeing as a domain for the first time (Treasury, 2018). Treasury also released papers on Māori (O'Connell et al., 2018), Pacific, and Asian (Yong, 2018) perspectives on wellbeing, that were meant to compliment the 2018 LSF.

In 2018, the Treasury launched the LSF Dashboard, an interactive public portal for wellbeing data (Treasury, 2023a). The LSF Dashboard continues to be upgraded as data for new

indicators become available. The data now cover over 100 indicators and are updated twice a year (Treasury, 2023a).

New Zealand's (and the world's) first official annual Wellbeing Budget was delivered in 2019. Much like ordinary budgets, Wellbeing Budgets set out where the government would spend tax revenue and explain why certain areas were prioritised. A new budget process required public agencies to collaborate on cross-agency funding bids that had to discuss the projected impacts on all of the domains of the LSF (Treasury, 2019).

Some of these initiatives were encoded in law. The 2020 amendments to the 1989 Financial Reporting Act required annual Wellbeing Budgets and a Wellbeing Report at least every four years. The amendments required the Treasury to produce the Wellbeing Reports, which must discuss the state of wellbeing in New Zealand, trends over time, and risks and resources relevant to the future state of wellbeing (Treasury, 2022).

The Treasury evolved the LSF again in 2021. The 2021 LSF added an institutional level, with domains such as 'Families' and 'Markets', to the model and included domains to reflect New Zealand's indigenous Māori people's conceptions of wellbeing, such as 'Whānau, hapū and iwi'—a domain that includes connections with kin and culture broadly (Treasury, 2021c).

The Treasury now advocates a wellbeing cost benefit analysis and encourages policymakers to use its custom-made CBAX tool (Treasury, 2023b). First launched in 2015 (Jensen & Thompson (2020), the 2022 version of CBAX includes all the LSF domains and considers current and future effects as well as risks and resilience (Treasury, 2023b). CBAX can convert many indicators into monetary values and some indicators into non-monetary wellbeing values, including subjective wellbeing (Treasury, 2023c).

In 2022, The Treasury published the first Wellbeing Report—a summary of the state of wellbeing in New Zealand, trends over time, and risks and resources relevant to the future state of wellbeing (Treasury, 2022). The Wellbeing Report was accompanied by twelve background reports that focused on specific areas of concern, such as equality, social cohesion, and Māori and Pacific peoples' wellbeing (Treasury, 2023d).

3. Key lessons

Government support enables a faster transition to the wellbeing approach

The New Zealand experience shows that progress on the wellbeing approach greatly accelerated when the 2018 government actively supported the shift to a wellbeing approach. By assigning agencies to lead specific wellbeing initiatives with short deadlines, and legally enforcing new requirements on them, the government drove widespread change quickly. By requiring cross-agency collaboration, the government also encouraged and enabled more holistic and robust policy proposals (Treasury, 2019). By requiring that policy proposals comment on all the wellbeing domains, more of what's important to New Zealanders will likely be factored into policymaking.

Achieving buy-in for the wellbeing approach

Wellbeing approaches to public policy could easily falter if policymakers and the public do not accept the idea. Some policymakers within the Treasury were adversarial to the wellbeing approach because they saw it as setting values, rather than just advising on efficiency and effectiveness (Weijers & Mukherjee, 2016). Public sector workers were also suspicious of subjective measures of wellbeing; economists tended to think they were not valid and social workers worried that the government would use them to find ways to mollify the underprivileged without giving them more resources or respect. Achieving widespread public license for the wellbeing approach may require a more involved and democratic process. The public is not familiar with the various aspects of the wellbeing approach and the wellbeing frameworks, the LSF and He Ara Waiora, have not explicitly been agreed to by the public.

General public and cross-sector public service discussion of these issues should be encouraged before wellbeing initiatives begin. It could be explained that not adopting a wellbeing approach is also setting values by endorsing the status quo—focusing on the traditional economic indicators that are now widely viewed as being insufficient measures of all that should matter (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009). It could also be pointed out that subjective measures of wellbeing can predict important events that traditional economic indicators miss, such as the political unrest of the so-called Arab Spring (Arampatzi, 2018).

Major wellbeing initiatives should cover everyone

The snapshot of New Zealand's wellbeing presented above paints a rosy picture. This is not true for all New Zealanders, however. If wellbeing data are only ever presented as averages, then the public may lose interest, thinking New Zealand's wellbeing is stable and at an acceptable level. By always reporting on vulnerable populations and the lower quartiles or quintiles of the general population, the areas that most need policy intervention should be clear. Reducing inequality in a range of wellbeing outcomes may also be a good strategy for improving overall wellbeing, as discussed in the 2020 World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2020).

In addition to the LSF, New Zealand has wellbeing frameworks for specific populations, such as Māori and children (Hughes, 2021). Providing insight into all important subgroups usually requires specific measures and data collection initiatives. Guidance is also required for when to use which framework, and how to deal with conflicting analyses between frameworks. In New Zealand policy proposals have had to indicate wellbeing impacts for all of the domains of the LSF since 2019 and He Ara Waiora (the Māori specific wellbeing framework) since 2021 in a side-by-side manner (Treasury, 2023e).

As stated, the Treasury's mission is to improve the lives of all New Zealanders, including future New Zealanders. The current wellbeing initiatives in New Zealand have been criticised for not doing enough for future New Zealanders by downplaying the importance of environmental contributors to wellbeing (PCE, 2021). One important issue is the use of the official 5% or the alternative 2% discount rates in CBAX. An analysis of CBAX concluded that using the lower discount rate would have made very little difference to the final outputs (Jensen & Thompson, 2020). However, the huge impact of current extreme weather events suggests that the discount rate should be revisited and potentially disastrous and irreversible events, such as climate disaster or ecosystem failure, should be included in the analyses.

Transparency

The wellbeing approach outlined above has made the wellbeing of New Zealanders more transparent to anyone inclined to investigate. This means that governments cannot easily hide setbacks for the nation's wellbeing or inequalities in domains of wellbeing between various subgroups. This transparency promotes the democratic process in New Zealand because citizens, researchers, journalists, and various organisations can question why the government is not prioritising areas that, as measured by wellbeing outcomes, appear to be in greater need of assistance. This increased transparency is magnified by the requirement for policy proposals to indicate the likely effects on all domains of the LSF. Especially when combined with CBAX, this documents the wellbeing priorities of policymakers, including making it clear what domains might worsen in order to improve other domains. Taken together, these wellbeing initiatives should improve democratic processes in New Zealand.

Given the difficulty of increasing all wellbeing domains at once on a limited budget, successive wellbeing budgets have been setting specific wellbeing indicator targets (and more recently just targeting indicators or domains for improvement). The targeting of domains is explicitly to focus on areas in which the policy can make the most positive difference in New Zealanders' lives (Treasury, 2019). Appropriately (based on relative need), the target areas in the first Wellbeing Budget included youth mental health, child poverty and abuse, and Māori language preservation (Treasury, 2019) among more traditional policy goals.

Mental health

Focussing on mental health has been identified as a cost-effective win-win because it benefits psychological wellbeing and the economy (e.g., Layard & Clark, 2014; Peasgood, Foster, & Dolan, 2019). Focusing on *youth* mental health may be even more cost effective due to preventative benefits over the life course and also responds to the increase of mental distress in youth since 2016 (especially in 2021) (MSD, 2022, p. 28):

Around 28% [of highschoolers] were experiencing levels of psychological distress that put them at risk of serious mental illness. In the last year, just under half had felt so overwhelmed they could not cope and felt that life was not worth living, one-quarter had seriously thought about suicide and one in 10 had attempted suicide.

The wellbeing reporting in 2022 highlighted this problem. Identifying and publicising policy-problems is an important success criterion for the wellbeing approach.

4. Action points

All countries could benefit from adopting these action points (with slight changes to fit their local context).

Take the environment seriously

The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment should work with Treasury to ensure the policymaking and analysis processes better account for future people and the possibility of environmental disasters.

Fix data gaps

Statistics New Zealand and other government agencies should continue to investigate ways to plug data gaps in Indicators Aotearoa and the Living Standards Dashboard. The government should set up a specific fund for research that can help fill in the values in CBAX in all of the domains of the LSF and Te Ara Waiora.

Reporting frequency and usefulness

The Wellbeing Report should be published every year and should include a reflection on previous reports analysis of wellbeing risks and resiliency.

Ongoing training and connection for policymakers and analysts

Many policymakers and analysts are still learning how to use the wellbeing tools effectively. General wellbeing and specific wellbeing tool training should continue to run for all policy groups. Selective secondments and dedicated nodes of individuals or small teams should facilitate the knowledge sharing required for all policy teams to estimate a broad range of wellbeing effects.

One-off or rolling citizens assemblies on wellbeing

A stratified sample of the country (that made sure to represent all minority groups) could be paid to learn about and evaluate the wellbeing approach and especially the wellbeing frameworks and policy analysis tools.

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