

Wellbeing in New Zealand: thought leaders' steering group

Held at the University of Waikato Management School, Wednesday 6 March 2019.

The purpose of the day was to bring together a diverse group of thought leaders to begin to identify areas of expertise, concern and interest that might be picked up and further explored. To initiate discussion, four experts were invited to speak on the subject of wellbeing from their chosen perspective. Following each of the invited presentations, small group discussions were held during which questions and issues were raised. This paper first sets out the key points of the presentations, and the group reactions.

Associate Professor Carla Houkamau, University of Auckland Business School

“The role of culture and identity for economic values: A quantitative study of Māori attitudes”

This presentation addressed the themes of Wellbeing and inequality, Culture, indigeneity and wellbeing (incorporating Māori wellbeing), Wellbeing: policy and practice

Abstract: How does cultural identity matter for Māori economic decision-making? Te Rangahau o Te Tuakiri Māori me Ngā Waiaro ā-Pūtea/The Māori Identity and Financial Attitudes Survey, or MIFAS, aims to address this question. The MIFAS is the first large-scale nationwide study of Māori aged 18 and over, that aims to correlate personal cultural beliefs and practices to economic choices. This presentation describes the theoretical underpinnings of the MIFAS in Identity Economics and explains the process by which Western methods and methodology are used to explicate the relationship between Māori identity and economic activity. Using Houkamau and Sibley's Multi-dimensional Model of Māori identity (MMMICE) as a framework and drawing from the recently collated MIFAS data set (n=7019) the paper identifies systematic differences in Māori economic beliefs and relates these to various aspects of Māori cultural identity. Evidence for differential economic values will be presented and linked to different sub-groups in the Māori population. It is argued that traditional cultural values continue to play a pivotal role in shaping Māori behaviours and attitudes despite 170 years of colonisation.

Discussion questions raised:

Hearing a Māori perspective on issues of wellbeing, albeit that such perspectives are not homogeneous, was widely appreciated by all discussion groups. It raised overlapping questions from each of the groups, which are broadly summed up in the following:

Can 'identity' be used in social research on climate change interventions and mitigation, for example, as a measure of wellbeing, receptiveness to change and impact?

How can we best address the tensions generated and value trade-offs that occur as different measures are used for implementing wellbeing policies?

What does 'success' look like and how is it related to wellbeing?

Professor Paul Dalziel,

“The Capabilities Approach to Wellbeing: Finding a place for family and business in the Living Standards Framework (LSF) Dashboard”

Summary: politico-economic based notion of wellbeing”,

Discussion questions raised:

When measuring wellbeing, what are the roles of family, of community, of the natural environment, and where do notions of ‘happiness’ fit? What are we trying to achieve?

Whose values and culture matter, and where are these described and explained?

How can we translate knowledge into wellbeing?

Professor Les Oxley, University of Waikato Management School

“Things that bother me”

Summary: There is a range of issues of concern surrounding measurements and policy developments of wellbeing. These are summed up as: Discipline-based discussions are often polarizing, righteous, limited and partial; Ministers carry too much power, lack expertise, and work to timelines that are too short to effectively take responsibility for ‘wellbeing’; The lack of New Zealand focused research on wellbeing means that wellbeing issues are not well understood for action to be sustainable; Alternative views of wellbeing and sustainability need to be understood, with ‘sustainability’ either integrated with notions of wellbeing or not used in that context.

Dr Tony Burton, The Treasury

“The New Zealand Living Standards Framework and Wellbeing Budget”

Summary:

Tony’s presentation focused on Treasury’s development of the Living Standards Framework and its translation into a ‘Dashboard’ for implementation in policy. Tony also raised targeted questions in relation to the multidimensionality of wellbeing, how to link the macro and micro issues, the development of appropriate statistical instruments, and the trade-offs between different ‘capitals’. His presentation generated many questions that were generated in a plenary session, rather than through discussion groups. Much of the discussion centered on the best ways for researchers to deliver useful and timely findings to Treasury and Government.

Next Steps

A series of follow-up events associated with wellbeing is planned, with each having a more targeted focus than the initial thought leaders’ forum. The broad purpose of each event will be to bring interested people together to identify and discuss future work. In 2019 the following events will be held, with specific dates and details to be advised:

- environmental sustainability (June)
- Individual Flourishing and connections to Organisational Wellbeing (September);
- Māori perspectives on wellbeing (December)