Our State of the State 2019 articles have explored inequities and how they affect New Zealanders’ opportunities to grow wellbeing. For a prosperous and liberal country, it can be hard to understand the scale of systemic disadvantage that exists here, and the challenge that many New Zealanders experience every day to access the rights that many of us enjoy.

We’ve described a landscape woven through with seams of wealth and advantage, where improving wellbeing should not be about growing more of the same inequitable distribution of financial/physical, social, human or natural capital. Rather, we should be looking behind the statistical averages to understand how individuals and communities would benefit from a greater share of our national resources, and at policies that explicitly address inequities by recognising that a fair future for all will only come from tilting the balance towards those who are disadvantaged.

In this final article of the series, we present six conclusions and six recommendations we believe will make a real difference to inequities in New Zealand.

Opportunities for all
Recommendations for a fairer future

By David Lovatt

David Lovatt is Deloitte New Zealand’s national leader for the public sector. His passions lie in helping public sector organisations be more successful in a rapidly changing and dynamic environment. He does this by focusing on strategy and transformation, citizen and government outcomes, innovative services and new ways of working, and the growth of new public sector capabilities.
Figure 1: Six conclusions and recommendations for a fairer future
We have to see beyond aggregate and average measures of wellbeing to look at distribution/equity measures as well. Reporting these metrics alongside averages makes it clear how wellbeing varies across population groups – for example by gender, location, ethnic group, disability or employment/economic status.

Reporting, data and analytics are very useful, as they throw light on inequities and highlight where they exist. They allow us to ask “why?” and consider whether a change in policy, practice, or process might help to address inequities. However, visibility is not action, and more than reporting is needed to change outcomes for the better.

Business can be a significant contributor to growing wellbeing, but business activity is also a source of inequity. There are guardrails, incentives and rewards that could encourage business to proactively address equity issues.

Examples where business can lead include the gender pay gap; improved procurement practices; supply chain assurance; environmental impacts of operations; and improved access to reduce digital inequities. When businesses act with purpose on these issues they can have a big impact and generate momentum to sustain a following.

Economic growth cannot be relied on to deliver improved wellbeing for everyone, as the benefits of growth tend to fall inequitably. It will require a reallocation of resources, even in the presence of growth, to address the most significant inequities that exist in our society. Transition support may be required for those who are impacted by resource reallocations.

Balanced growth – where we focus on growing all four capitals together, not just financial/physical capital – is an important contributor to overall wellbeing. Balance can only be maintained if we understand people’s preferences and trade-offs and how these change over time, and if we increase participation to tap into civic insights.

For example, most councils in New Zealand are focused on minimising rates growth, but this is just one setting on a sliding scale that could include a much higher level of social spend and infrastructure in return for higher rates. Different communities have different preferences, and these need to be understood otherwise assumptions or averages will drive decisions.

Ground-level action needs to be focused on specific inequities otherwise they’ll never go away. The old concept of “trickle down” – where resources and benefits flow to those who need them – may need to be replaced with an alternative model of “trickle up” – where directed action at a local level accumulates to reduce inequities and grow overall wellbeing.

Place-based programmes such as the Southern Initiative in South Auckland are contributing to important changes at the local level that reduce inequities at a micro-scale for individuals, whānau and communities. Such programmes will need high-level policy support and resource reallocations in order to access enough resources and be easily scalable to other locations.

New Zealand does not exist in isolation. We need to be aware of our international obligations to improve wellbeing, and consider what interventions are needed by those experiencing disadvantage within our backyard and broader community of nations.

For example, we have responsibilities that extend into the Pacific and across the globe. What could New Zealand do to enhance wellbeing for others in our regional and global community, and address inequities outside our nation’s borders?
Recommendations

A | Top-down bottom-up
Drive wellbeing growth from both top-down policies and bottom-up action. Settings and outcomes, as well as large scale resource reallocations, should happen top-down. Specific interventions and actions to improve the distribution of wellbeing and ensure inequities are addressed should happen on a local level, within communities, geographies, businesses, schools, towns and cities – anywhere inequities are tangible barriers to a fair future for all.

B | Manage transitions
Explicitly plan and support transitions that help to deliver greater equity. For example, when we reallocate health spending between population groups, provide public services in areas without other practical alternatives or invest in additional services for people who have historically been treated inequitably, we may also need to manage the impact of those reallocations on the people and communities who have “to give up something”. This may increase the cost of equity-focused policies, but it will directly address transition impacts that could otherwise be a barrier to acceptance or implementation.

C | Mitigate bias
Actively monitor and mitigate potential biases in policy and decision-making, whatever the source of the bias. Unconscious bias can erode the benefits of well-intentioned policies. The public is becoming more aware of the risks around biased data and algorithms, and there’s now a proposed Algorithm Charter to deal with this. But so much of our government agencies’ current policy “locks in” inequitable outcomes for particular population groups through accepted practices which needs more transparency, scrutiny and oversight to remedy.

D | Local wellbeing authority
Increase local communities’ delegated authority to make decisions on their own wellbeing priorities. This will require improved decision-making frameworks that enhance meaningful civic participation and the provision of better information on the current distribution of wellbeing and where inequities exist. It may also require new community engagement models that are rarely used in New Zealand. Central and local government could consider how to enable local communities to take greater responsibility for the decisions and services that most affect their wellbeing, and whether this could involve a change in the balance of responsibilities between the different arms of government.

E | Beat the cycle
Address the limitations caused by short-term political cycles by empowering government agencies to reallocate budgets and enter into multi-year commitments that extend beyond traditional budget and election horizons. Service providers such as community organisations and NGOs could then more confidently invest in long-term capabilities and resource shifts to address underlying inequities. This investment would require evidence supporting any new initiatives and support from a participatory body such as a citizens’ assembly or budget.

F | Hold us to account
Hold us all to account for improving the distribution of wellbeing by enhancing existing bodies – such as the Human Rights Commission – and their ability to participate in important conversations about equity in New Zealand, such as establishing Budget priorities. Consider setting up an Independent Wellbeing Commission that can set wellbeing distribution goals to address inequities, report on progress towards these goals and has the power to act on government policies and practices that are clearly inequitable.

Fairness lies at the heart of Kiwi values - the opportunity to get ahead regardless of where an individual is starting from. We’ve seen from this year’s State of the State articles that New Zealand has many inequities that act as a barrier to opportunity. Knowing these barriers exist won’t make them go away, but if we act with intent and visible effect then we can translate wellbeing growth into better outcomes and a fair future for all.
An overview of the series:

Article 1
Building a fair future for all: An introduction to State of the State 2019

“At the heart of Kiwi values we believe in fairness, that everyone has the right to a fair go regardless of their personal characteristics, social condition, or access to wealth or resources. Now, with the recent launch of government’s first ‘wellbeing budget,’ we consider one of the greatest risks to successfully growing wellbeing for New Zealanders: that opportunities for greater wellbeing will fall inequitably across society, and that injustice extends beyond financial capital into the social, human and natural capital domains.”

Article 2
Addressing equity in intergenerational wellbeing: Valuing community perspectives

“We must begin by understanding how wellbeing can be best interpreted into local contexts. If the role of government is to provide equal genuine opportunities for wellbeing, then we must be taking into account all the complications and trade-offs that occur when it is applied in a messy, complex, and sometimes ambiguous real-world system. While not a straightforward process, this carries the benefit of bridging the disconnect between macro-level wellbeing that influences policy recommendations and local wellbeing outcomes.”

Article 3
Civic engagement: Harnessing voices to expand choices

“There is a strong case to look at more meaningful practices to expand our current approaches to civic participation in a way that ensures all voices – and those of minority communities in particular – are considered within civic decision making. In doing so, we will increase the accountability of decision makers to the currently silent minority groups who have the most to gain from reducing the inequitable distribution of wellbeing within New Zealand.”

Article 4
Balancing the load: Principles for an equitable tax system

“Fairness is subjective and based on our personal contexts. We all think differently about whether indirect taxes like GST should be more pronounced, whether those who earn more should pay a greater proportion of their income in tax, or whether capital is or isn’t taxed more comprehensively. The spectrum of opinion means that no version of the tax system will seem truly fair to all.”
Article 5
Inclusive growth: Reframing success

“Growth is one of those goals that shows up everywhere. It is in the budget statements of nations, the annual reports of corporations and the personal development plans of individuals. Everyone is aiming for growth. The most common economic application of growth is to represent an increase in GDP – the gross domestic product of a nation. But in a wellbeing world where GDP is not the only measure of success, how do we grow and how do we address inequities while doing so?”

Article 6
Delivering better outcomes together: Policies that reflect our diverse cultures

“New Zealand is proud of its diversity and on average our prosperity is growing, but this masks the fact that many of our people do not have the same experience or opportunity of quality of life, equality and social inclusion. Minorities, immigrants, our Pasifika whānaunga, Chinese and Māori often, sadly, share a common unifying experience of being diminished because of our culture, race or ethnicity. We have a short period of time, less than 20 years, to affect a profound change in the way that our government services operate so that they are more reflective of the cultures that will make up the future Aotearoa New Zealand.”

Article 7
An inclusive digital community: Equity through design

“Digital services are a key part of how 21st century New Zealand society operates. Public and private sector organisations are increasingly investing in digital service delivery, and many digital services are contributing to our wellbeing, such as simplifying tax compliance or helping those with newborns access the right support. Until recently, little attention has been paid to whether digital services and platforms are designed for, and most importantly with, Māori. In general, even New Zealand-based digital services are prioritised, designed and developed from a Pākehā worldview. We are only just starting to consider inclusiveness in the way we build our digital community. How can we strengthen digital inclusion through te ao Māori?”
Series contacts

David Lovatt
Partner
Deloitte
Tel: +64 (4) 470 3690
Email: dlovatt@deloitte.co.nz

Adithi Pandit
Partner
Deloitte
Tel: +64 (4) 470 3871
Email: apandit@deloitte.co.nz

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