



Achieving the spiritual balance in New Zealand's Wellbeing Budget

After the submission of the world's first wellbeing budget, The University of Otago's Dr Richard Egan and The Selwyn Institute Director Hilda Johnson-Bogaerts ask: **How can you have a wellbeing budget without spiritual wellbeing?** At a time when the events in Christchurch are still fresh in the nation's collective mind, this is a game-changing question.

The 17th Century English theologian and historian Thomas Fuller was the first to note that the darkest times often come just before the light. The Christchurch massacre is a case in point. Shocking to every sense, and sensibility. Yet a key part of the recovery process has been the spiritual wave of healing that has washed over New Zealand. Where the rallying cry of 'You Are Us' shows our collective heart and soul is in good health.

Coincidentally, and serendipitously, the current Government is unveiling reputedly the world's first fully-fledged Wellbeing Budget. Ideally putting peoples' complete welfare and the environment at the heart of its policies. This includes reporting against a wider set of wellbeing indicators in future Budgets.

There is no question that policy makers are well aware of the mood of the nation. Coinciding with a coming together of events and trends locally and globally that signal a coming of age and a hunger for change.

How's Life

The concept of a Wellbeing Budget comes from the OECD's ongoing assessment of *How's Life*. Acknowledging the necessity of investing in the many factors beyond GDP that shape people's life experiences.

In December 2018, the current Government unveiled their intended *Budget 2019: The Wellbeing Budget*. The intent being to broaden the Budget's focus beyond conventional economic and fiscal policy. Using instead the Treasury's Living Standards Framework to inform the Government's investment priorities and funding decisions. Casting the net much further to engage with what actually constitutes the health of this nation.

In the words of the New Zealand Treasury Release on the subject: *The Wellbeing Budget represents an important step towards embedding wellbeing in New Zealand's public policy.*

Defining and measuring wellbeing is a challenge but raises the bar on policy possibilities and discussion.

The New Zealand Government has drawn significantly from Professor Edward Diener, a global authority on happiness, to help guide policy. At the beginning of his career, his ideas about the measurement and promotion of happiness were written off as economic 'madness'. Now they are widely accepted and part of the body of research that will help form the framework of the current and future New Zealand budgets.

A wealth of happiness

Professor Diener's 'doctrine' is set out in his internationally acclaimed book called *Happiness: unlocking the mysteries of psychological wealth*.

According to him: "Psychological wealth comes from the need to cultivate within our families and ourselves the emotions of love, compassion and gratitude."

"Decentering oneself away from extreme selfishness in service to others and the world can make the individual happier, and will likely make those around the person happier."

"If you develop a spiritual approach to life that includes positive emotions and not focusing exclusively on oneself, your psychological wealth will increase immeasurably."

This wealth 'accounted' for in the improvement of the wellbeing balance sheet. We have any number of existing measures of spiritual health including the well-established hauora with the physical, mental, social and spiritual domains. New Zealand already has a 'template' around which the debate, and decisions, can be focussed. Treasury has recognised this with its inclusion of spirituality in its new indicators framework.

Outside of The Treasury, other Government Ministries and inquiries have incorporated broader measures as part of their ongoing work and review. The current review of the Health and Disability sector, for example, would benefit from applying a more holistic lens (including spirituality) to service standards and deliveries

The Ministry of Health's *He Ara Oranga (Pathways to Wellness): the Report of the Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction*, says the desire among respondents is to effect a 'paradigm' change in New Zealand mental health and wellbeing services.

It urges that a whole-of-government approach to wellbeing to tackle social determinants and support prevention activities. They argue that this would provide a clear locus of responsibility within central government for social wellbeing, with a focus on prevention and tackling major social determinants that underlie many inequitable outcomes in our society.

Prof Ron Patterson, who chaired the mental health review, noted spirituality *emerged as a theme in our meetings all around the country*. There is an abundance of additional overseas precedents, such as espoused by the British 'think tank' New Economics Foundation, whereby spiritual and other wellbeing measures are linked to health system deliveries.

The many faces of spirituality

The challenge is that spirituality does not mean one thing; in fact, it means something slightly different to everyone.

From the research, particularly in health, we know that spirituality is important for many people – whether it be about their ultimate beliefs and values, identity, meaning and purpose – the sense of connectedness to oneself, other, nature and/or God (or something bigger than self).

So encouraging spiritual wellbeing needs to be enabling, not in any way proselytising. It needs to offer open tolerant multi and no faith approaches, across the atheist to religious spectrum. Spiritual care needs to be multi, and no faith in its approaches, allowing for the over 80% of New Zealanders who do not go to church, synagogue or mosque, yet have spiritual needs. We could learn from the many Māori and Pacific organisations who are already working in this way.

This is a unique opportunity to create meaningful environments across health, social services and so on; establishing guidelines and indicators that include spirituality to help New Zealanders live and age well.

Ensuring there is real balance in the balance sheet. Clearly, there is an appetite for major transformation and that should include the spiritual dimension, which offers a unique critique on our world that needs new thinking and action.

Other countries are trying to address this challenge.

With our current unique set of events, bicultural grounding and remarkable ethnic diversity as the motivation and frame of reference, we have the opportunity to be leaders to the benefit, and wellbeing, of all New Zealanders.