Living wage contributes to our collective wellbeing and advancement

Sione Tu’itahi

Member of the Pacific Peoples’ Advisory Panel to Auckland City Council
Executive Director, Health Promotion Forum of New Zealand Runanga Whakapiki Ake I Te Hauora o Aotearoa
I am honoured to have been invited to be part of this panel and to participate in this very important conference. May I express my sincere gratitude to the conference organisers.

I am here today as a health worker, a teacher, a community voluntary worker, a parent, a fellow national and global citizen who is concerned about our collective wellbeing, upon which our individual wellbeing depends.

As a health worker, living wage to me is a health issue – a matter of life and death. Poverty cuts off years from your life. The poorest sectors of our communities, whether in our NZ community or any other country in the global community, have shorter lives. Here in our country, research also tells us that Maori, Pacific and other groups of low-income are the ones most burdened with diseases.

As an educator I also know from research and from my own experience that Maori and Pacific children are under achieving in education. This is largely because of low-income – poverty and other such underlying causes that are largely structural.

Public policies can make a huge difference for the better or for worse. When benefits were reduced by Government in the late 1980s and 1990s, Maori and Pacific peoples suffered most. Research suggests that we might be experiencing a similar period of challenge because of policy changes.

The socio-economic gaps between groups in the country, especially between Pacific and Maori on one hand, and non-Pacific and non-Maori on the other hand, are not closing.

These inequities are not fair and are not natural. They are the result of poor decision-making, including the uneven distribution of our collective resources. It should also be remembered that health and wellbeing is a human right issue. The right to health is part of our socio-cultural and economic rights.

As a community worker, I know of parents who have to leave their children to care for one another while the parents go out and work at night as cleaners in order to make ends meet. Some of these parents have two very low-paid jobs with very long hours. Their aim is to meet their loved ones’ basic needs – food, clothing and a roof over the heads of their children. But many times they are not able to meet their families’ needs. Some resort to borrowing money from loan sharks. Some ended up gambling with an empty hope of hitting the jackpot.

I am a member of a network that contributes to addressing the poverty and enhance the capacity, strength and potentials of various communities in the Pacific, here in NZ and other metropolitan centres. When I think of these parents, I also remember millions of other parents around the world who live in poverty because of poor public policy and unfair, unethical decisions.
Address the underlying determinants of our collective wellbeing

Income is a major determinant of health and wellbeing. Without enough earning individuals and families can be locked in a vicious, downward spiral and cycle. Poor income leads to poor education, poor housing, poor nutrition and poor health. Education and housing are also major determinants of health and wellbeing. As mentioned already, income, education and housing are closely related.

Determinants are not single contributing factors that operate in a silo and linear fashion. Rather, they are parts of a system of complexity that are interconnected and impacting on each other on all levels of life – from the individual to the global. Importantly also, these factors are human constructs and natural phenomena, or a combination of both. Moreover, on a deeper level, determinants are very much influenced by societal values and worldviews. This suggests that part of the solutions might come from discussing and understanding the philosophical frameworks and schools of thought that underpin some of the structures and determinants that influence health.

Establishing a living wage, therefore, can contribute to solving poverty and improve the wellbeing of peoples and communities. It is also a long-term socio-economic investment for all parties: the employer, employee and society.

While it is not the magic bullet, a living wage can be a contribution to addressing inequities. It can be part of a systematic approach to solving the multi-faceted challenges that we are all being confronted with.

Multi-dimensional wellbeing

While economic wellbeing is important, it is only one dimension of a more comprehensive and holistic form of wellbeing. The other dimensions include social wellbeing, cultural wellbeing, spiritual wellbeing and ecological wellbeing. The challenge is to find the balance. As a global community, we are now reaping the consequences of too much focus on economic wellbeing at the expense of our other dimensions of wellbeing.

Call for a collaborative approach and rethink our underlying values and assumptions

The challenges of major changes cannot be underestimated. History tells us of tensions and conflicts between stakeholders when solutions are sought for issues such as wages or distribution of income and wealth. It is also well documented that collaborative approaches that seek common strategic directions for the wellbeing of all are not only beneficial for all but also sustainable. Such approaches are needed for a national and global community that is now acutely aware of its very finite resources.
One wise leader once said “There is enough in this world for everyone’s need, but there is not enough in this world for everyone’s greed.” Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948)

Some of the underlying assumptions that have been informing our competitive and exploitive approach to nature and to each other as nations and fellow human beings have been leading us down an increasingly unsustainable pathway that is destroying our ecology – including ourselves. It can be seen now that sustainable human progress, health and wellbeing at all levels – individual, family, local community, national and global society – can only come about when there is more collaboration, creativity and unity, and less conflict and disunity.

One wise scientist said “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

For centuries we have been largely relying on the knowledge system of the west – its science, values and philosophy – to find solutions to issues and challenges. It might be helpful and timely to consider other cultural systems, such as indigenous knowledge and spiritual and religious traditions in order to find more effective solutions to our increasing inability as human beings and global inhabitants to distribute resources more equitably, and to employ power for empowerment and progress rather than for exploitation, domination and disempowerment.

On a national and global level, we have the knowledge and we have the resources to solve poverty and other such challenges. What is needed is the courage and will to make the right decisions.

There is a great need for a unity of thought on common goals and unity of action on all levels – individual, local, national and global – because we are now global villagers and our major challenges are increasingly global. All parts of the human body, despite being different in form and functions, work towards the same purpose: the wellbeing of the whole human being. The collective body of humanity needs its various national and local parts to work together for its collective wellbeing and progress.

One wise educator said, “The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens.” He also said, “So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth.” Baha’u’llah (1817-1892)