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Submission to the Ministry of Social Development on Social Cohesion for Everyone in New Zealand

Introduction

1. The National Council of Women of New Zealand, Te Kaunihera Wahine o Aotearoa (NCWNZ) is an umbrella group representing over 200 organisations affiliated at either national level or to one of our 14 branches. In addition, about 450 people are individual members. Collectively our reach is over 450,000 with many of our membership organisations representing all genders. NCWNZ's vision is a gender equal New Zealand and research shows we will be better off socially and economically if we are gender equal. Through research, discussion and action, NCWNZ in partnership with others, seeks to realise its vision of gender equality because it is a basic human right.
2. This submission has been prepared by Aleisha Amohia, President of the Wellington Branch, and the Parliamentary Watch Committee after consultation with the membership of NCWNZ, and inclusive of NCWNZ policy and past submissions.

Introduction

3. NCWNZ welcomes the Ministry of Social Development's work programme aimed at strengthening social cohesion in Aotearoa New Zealand and building a safer, more tolerant, and inclusive society. It is clear that NCWNZ members strongly believe that Aotearoa New Zealand's diversity makes our society stronger and brings huge potential for social and economic benefits.

Social cohesion outcomes

What is important to you in achieving social cohesion?

4. NCWNZ members generally agree with the outcomes in the Government's definition of social cohesion – belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition, and legitimacy. These outcomes are a good way of capturing what social cohesion could mean and feel like.

Does the definition of social cohesion resonate with you?

5. The definition could be enhanced by explicitly attaching values to the outcomes. For NCWNZ members, social cohesion is about building reciprocal relationships and being respectful of other people's human rights. It identifies and acknowledges the marginalisation of certain groups. When defining social cohesion and establishing the outcomes, we recommend borrowing knowledge from existing work, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals¹ and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)². It's important to acknowledge that social cohesion and these outcomes will have a different meaning and look depending on the demographic group.
6. Social cohesion means a sense of belonging to a group because of a set of shared values and beliefs, whilst allowing room for the recognition of individual expressions and values. Social cohesion should mean we can also embrace our individual rights and freedoms without infringing on the rights of others.
7. Many NCWNZ members particularly liked the definition "social cohesion refers to the strength of relationships and the sense of solidarity among members of a community". Social cohesion does not mean 'sameness', homogeneity, conformity. They stated that the definition of social cohesion should also include references to fairness, equity, compassion, humility, partnership, and respect for difference.
8. Empathy is also critical to social cohesion. In Aotearoa New Zealand there seems to be a high level of indifference toward huge and growing disparities in socio-economic, health, and education opportunities and outcomes. This is partly due to a lack of awareness and understanding of lives and experiences that differ from our own, which results in apathy.
9. The use of the word 'sense' in the 'belonging' outcome indicates a cerebral (thinking) function. Social cohesion is more emotional than that, more a matter of 'feeling' than 'sensing'. 'Belonging' also requires a feeling of safety and security, including trust in the law and law enforcement.

¹ United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Sustainable Development. 2015. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

² United Nations. 1979. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women New York, 18 December 1979. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>

10. Te Tiriti o Waitangi and te ao Māori can be built into these definitions. For example, whanaungatanga³ and whakawhanaungatanga⁴ are the concepts of relationships and building common understandings. It goes beyond consultation and attempts to relate to the people around us.

Social cohesion progress indicators and success measures

What changes might show that Aotearoa NZ is becoming a more socially cohesive society?

11. COVID-19 saw many communities activated, taking the responsibility to care for vulnerable groups and mobilise to make lockdown more manageable for marginalised people. At the same time, there were many individuals and groups who protested that freedom of movement was more important than the restrictions and requests set out by Government for the greater good. A socially cohesive Aotearoa New Zealand would consider recovery from the virus essential, and prioritise collective action for the common good over individual inconvenience. Nonetheless, there should still be room for acknowledging different individual views.

What would success look like?

12. NCWNZ members have a wide range of views on what Aotearoa New Zealand becoming a more socially cohesive society might look like including:
- a. A socially cohesive society would be free of ignorance and fear. People would be able to have open and honest conversations where there is mutual respect, in environments where it is safe to explore unfamiliar ideas and challenge others. People would feel included, no matter what space they are in. There would be a change in public attitudes with less blame and punitive approaches to justice, and more empathy, kindness, understanding and support.
 - b. People would be safe to live their lives, especially women. There would be no sexual assault, rape and murder. Someone would be able to do the things that they want to do and go to the places they want to go, safely, all while knowing that others are doing the same. Our LGBTQIA+⁵ and rainbow community would be safe and protected from prejudice and discrimination. The spectrum of sexual orientations and family and relationship structures would be normalised. We would have a significantly reduced suicide rate, especially in young people.
 - c. There would be no disparities for marginalised and vulnerable communities, no injustice. Our justice system would be fair and reliable, and certainly not

³ Relationship, kinship, sense of family connection - a relationship through shared experiences and working together which provides people with a sense of belonging. <https://maoridictionary.co.nz/>

⁴ Process of establishing relationships, relating well to others. <https://maoridictionary.co.nz/>

⁵ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, asexual, or other sexuality and gender diverse identities

disproportionately affect Māori as it currently does. Perhaps prisons would be abolished. Crime would be significantly reduced.

- d. Our health system would be equitable, reliable and affordable. All those who chose to access counselling or therapy, could do so. Sexual and reproductive rights would be realised, and there would be no stigma or shame around accessing the health care and systems an individual needs.
- e. Media and political representatives would be a genuine reflection of the population of Aotearoa New Zealand. The media wouldn't contribute to ignorance and fear through careless and harmful reporting. New Zealand Sign Language would become a part of daily television and news. There may also be reduced screen time and social isolation caused by technology abuse.
- f. There would be increased, accessible education around civics and different cultures, ethnicities, religions, and genders. Students and youth will be able to mix and learn from people from different walks of life. There would be equal opportunities in education. There would also be more support for teachers to help with mainstreamed students with learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, or students who have suffered foetal alcohol syndrome.
- g. Diversity would be celebrated. There would be no racism, and more community events that bring awareness to cultural and religious diversity and practices. Disabled people would be enabled and trusted to be employed everywhere, especially in leadership positions. We would see more interconnected and integrated networks. Communities and public spaces and services would be vibrant, and designed with consideration for accessibility first, and people would use them more.
- h. Sporting environments and media would be inclusive and safe spaces for all to participate.
- i. Individuals have a level of economic well-being that enables them to engage and respond to issues, not simply react in a defensive way. There would be adequate housing, and availability of fresh, affordable, and healthy food.
- j. Te Tiriti o Waitangi education would be prioritised, along with promoting the use of te reo Māori and Mātauranga Māori. There would be a true partnership with Māori and honouring of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. One form this could take is to have a Tāngata Whenua Government and a Tāngata Tiriti Government, who must work in partnership for the betterment of all in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- k. We would be a multilingual country so we can truly communicate with our diverse population. In particular, everyone could understand and speak some te reo Māori.
- l. All individuals in Aotearoa New Zealand would have their basic physiological and safety needs met, so that they are enabled to live their lives to their fullest potential.

- m. There would be more trust and investment provided to iwi, hapū, and not-for-profit and community organisations.

Ways to build social cohesion

Do the six ways look right to you?

13. The majority of NCWNZ members generally agreed with the six suggested ways of building social cohesion and think they are important:
 - a. Fostering common values and inclusive social norms.
 - b. Encouraging and facilitating positive interactions between people.
 - c. Tackling harms to inclusion, including prejudice, discrimination, and other harmful behaviours.
 - d. Supporting people to have the knowledge and skills they need to participate.
 - e. Supporting people to have a voice and feel heard.
 - f. Reducing inequality and improving opportunities for people by providing support and resources.
14. However, it was noted that the execution of these strategies is another issue altogether. Government can provide the facilities and services to encourage social cohesion, but individuals need to feel enabled and safe to utilise them. This will require facilitation of implementation at the flax roots and community level.
15. Members said it was important that clear actions are developed to support the six suggested ways of building social cohesion, and followed through. These actions should be developed through consultation with the people, so they know that their issues and concerns are being heard and will receive a response.

What else is important for building social cohesion?

16. Many might argue that we have already achieved *Point 1* (fostering common values and inclusive social norms), although the Gender Attitudes survey series does not necessarily show that we have fully achieved that with respect to gender⁶. However, our sense of fairness does not translate into huge public support for the transformational changes required to reduce inequalities. In this definition, 'norms' should be replaced with 'values'.
17. *Point 2* (encouraging and facilitating positive interactions between people) should mention empathy.
18. Some believed *Point 2* (encouraging and facilitating positive interactions between people), *Point 3* (tackling harms to inclusion, including prejudice, discrimination, and other harmful behaviours), and *Point 6* (reducing inequality and improving opportunities for people by providing support and resources) are the most important, because achieving them will enable the other points.

⁶ NCWNZ. Gender Attitudes Survey. <https://genderequal.nz/ga-survey/>

19. Some believed that *Point 4* (supporting people to have the knowledge and skills they need to participate) is the most important, to ensure people can truly participate in society and have a place, rather than just exist as onlookers.
20. *Point 5* (supporting people to have a voice and feel heard) should acknowledge that while many do need more support to have a voice, social cohesion might require some groups of people actually speaking less and having their voice less amplified.
21. *Point 6* (reducing inequality and improving opportunities for people by providing support and resources) is slightly misguided, because providing support and resources is not enough to guarantee reduced inequality and improved opportunities. There are plenty of other systemic issues that must be solved to contribute to this. One action for achieving this would be to ensure all people have the opportunity and resources required to meet their basic needs.
22. Specifically in the context of building social cohesion in this country, there needs to be a commitment to fulfilling the obligations agreed to in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. A partnership with Māori and equity of contribution must be paramount. This could include a plan to educate about the history of Aotearoa New Zealand, and support people (particularly people of colour, indigenous people, and migrants) to learn more about their whakapapa and identity. Education is key to bridging some of the dividedness that currently exists in society.
23. Trust in each other and in our local and national governments is also fundamental for building social cohesion.

Taking Action to Strengthen Social Cohesion

Government efforts and actions

24. NCWNZ members acknowledged gratefully that the New Zealand Government already does provide or enable many free services. In particular, the messaging around 'team of 5 million' was recognised as successful for uniting everyone during unprecedented times.
25. Members also suggested a range of actions that Government can implement to encourage social cohesion. Many of these were also noted as strategies to tackle inequalities in Aotearoa New Zealand, which would, in turn, encourage social cohesion including:
 - a. Acknowledging injustices against tāngata whenua and apologise, return land to iwi and hapū, and recognise community-driven movements such as the efforts at Ihumātao.
 - b. Reviewing the concept of 'streams' within education and the other layers and complexity that is involved and caused, i.e. social classes and segregation. Provide free community education.

- c. Responding to campaigns and mobilisation being done by communities on the ground so that people gain trust in Government and feel heard. Government should be supporting school and community-driven initiatives because community leaders know what will work in their communities. This includes providing more funding and resources. Any funding and grant application processes must be simple, flexible, and non-bureaucratic.
- d. Recognising the digital divide that was exacerbated due to lockdown and resulted in our most marginalised communities being excluded.
- e. Ensuring workplaces are safer and more inclusive and enable businesses to pay their employees a living wage.
- f. Housing must be healthier, more affordable, and more attainable for first-home buyers. Rent should be fair; it was suggested that rent could be no more than 30% of an individual's income. Social housing needs improvement and vertical space should be utilised in city centre housing design.
- g. There could be better reflections of diversity in leadership positions in the public sector, and encouragement of others into these opportunities.
- h. Facilitating opportunities to have open debate with the public, and distribute relevant, factual information so that people are informed.
- i. The justice system needs to be fair, and consequences for broken rules must be applied in a just way. It will not aid social cohesion for there to be perceived differences in the way justice is delivered. It often takes too long to settle law cases - 'justice delayed is justice denied'.
- j. Make more of an effort for public consultation on all decisions, including giving adequate time for feedback and submissions. Similarly, public institutions such as Work and Income NZ and Oranga Tamariki need to review the way they engage with people in their communities and their internal structures and leadership roles.
- k. Members of Parliament need to model a commitment to socially cohesive values, and demonstrate better treatment of each other, both within the debating chamber and outside of it. If they can demonstrate social cohesion, society will have an example to follow.
- l. Government departments need to talk to each other to align their goals and processes and to develop clear and consistent policies for the people in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- m. Education curriculums could include teaching young people about diversity and valuing differences in others.
- n. Every piece of legislation must be critiqued for equity factors, such as applying a gender lens, an accessibility lens, and a Māori lens.

Conclusions

26. This investigation and public consultation into strengthening social cohesion in Aotearoa New Zealand is incredibly important. NCWNZ is pleased that the Ministry of Social Development is developing this strategy. Our comments and recommendations in this submission aim to reflect the diverse and valuable perspectives of wāhine who have been advocating for a more gender equal and socially cohesive Aotearoa New Zealand for 125 years.



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