

Problem Definition in Welfare Reform: What sort of society do we want? And how might a collective vision contribute to reducing long-term benefit receipt?

1. In considering issues of welfare reform we are dealing with, it would seem, not so much with deficient or unproductive sections of our society, as with a deficient and unproductive economy.
2. The task to be accomplished is not so much to revise, amend, and repair deficient sections of our society, but rather, to fundamentally transform the environment in which people operate.
3. Certainly no mean feat. Yet it is only by changing the nature of the human experience that we can hope to change the product or outcome.
4. To continue to define the problem as inherent in the raw material, i.e. the benefit recipient – is plainly to blame the victim and to acquiesce in the continuation of societal inequality.
5. The un-named tragedy in all this is the effect that long-term benefit receipt and social dislocation has on economic productivity and future wealth generation.
6. It is incredibly frustrating for me to note, that successive generations of our youth have come to believe that benefit receipt is a career choice.
7. Who tells them this stuff? Who gets them to believe that this is all they can aspire to? Where are the dreams of this generation? And what role does welfare reform have in providing the stuff of dreams?
8. Last year I read a paper that focused on the legacy of Maori benefit receipt and the contribution of the welfare state to this unprecedented dependency.
9. While there were many aspects of the paper that I could agree with I felt that essentially it lacked a much broader analyses of the political economy.
10. It did not even begin to analyse the root cause that underpinned the level of benefit passivity that I perceive among some of our most gifted youth.

11. In short, the paper failed to define the *collective problem* to be solved.
12. Similar to other analyses that focuses only on the subjects of long-term benefit receipt the paper overlooked the context that produced the human experience under scrutiny.
13. Unable to resolve the issue of so-called 'Maori benefit receipt', it collapsed back onto its subject where individual pathology or *effect* is a shallow proxy for *cause*.
14. A sure sign that we have yet to define the problem is to confuse *effect* with *cause*.
15. I remain concerned that at a macro-policy level, where welfare reform is under consideration that we have yet to articulate the problem to be addressed.
16. As a society, demographically, we are top-heavy with an ageing population. This is also a group that has been nurtured on a diet of self-entitlement who will be leaving the workforce and sliding most neatly onto equally self-deserving pensions.
17. Is this the 'long-term benefit receipt' that we have all come to discuss and reduce?
18. Or is it that other part of our demographic, the undeserving and the un-entitled?
19. This is also that group least likely to be consumers of our already over-burdened health dollars, least likely to consume scarce education dollars and as evidence suggests are also least likely to access social services.
20. Is this perhaps the problem that welfare reform will address? Reforms that will provide for a fairer distribution of resources, where criteria is targeted and designed to effect long-term change in an effort to stimulate the economy?
21. In order to understand the problem for which it seems welfare reform is assumed to be the answer let us now consider the following question:
22. *What sort of society do we as New Zealanders want? And, what are some of the factors required to achieve this?*

23. Effective welfare reform must be able to articulate a collective vision of where we are heading. It must also be broad enough to express the core values of democracy so that it must also seek to address structural inequalities.
24. Inequalities in tax, income, labour market, health and education across the political spectrum.
25. Merely tinkering on the periphery of welfare reform is something else altogether. From memory this activity is more correctly referred to as 'benefit cuts'.
26. The effect may well be that we reduce long-term benefit receipt, but surely the drivers are about us as a society? And if this is the case then it must be about how we grow human capital to produce the type of society we want.
27. Imbued with a collective vision and agreement on the problems to be addressed, welfare reform can stimulate the economy in ways that have yet to be achieved.
28. The untapped wealth representative of successive generations of Māori human capital is a rather poignant example.
29. Reform is about a radical overhaul of those structures in which human experience is fostered with an enduring belief in their potential to contribute to and influence society.
30. Welfare reform is essentially about the big picture, it must be future-focused and it must have a buoyant workforce to sustain it.
31. It absolutely has to be about producing an engaged labour market that is robust and relevant. It cannot be about locking our youth into sunset industries that are not sustainable.
32. Welfare reform has to be about imagining our ideal society and reconfirming a belief in ourselves and the capacity for our youth to achieve much more than we might assume.
33. So what might be a cause of benefit receipt among groups such as Māori for example?
34. To answer this question we need to also consider what it is that makes some groups more successful than others and capable of generating wealth?

35. Research shows that life-long learning and a belief in oneself is fundamental to human experience as is diet, identity and a general sense of belonging. Add to this over a decade of compulsory education and what we have is an individual equipped to be able to make informed decisions.
36. There are of course many variables in this picture most that are beyond the influence of reform. At a minimum however, any area in which there is a substantial investment of tax dollars is certainly within the realm of influence.
37. Unless you subscribe to the spurious idea that some groups have less intellectual ability than others then you may well suspect as I do, that Māori children are just not being educated to the same level as others.
38. For too long too many Māori have been leaving school and seeking employment with fewer or no formal qualifications.
39. Relative to the OECD mean, evidence suggests that Māori students perform better on average in mathematical literacy than in other domains such as literacy and scientific literacy.
40. The larger proportion of Māori students at the lower end of the literacy scale is a concern as school leavers with lower literacy skills have poorer prospects at employment.
41. When, where, and how one enters the labour market is possibly the most reliable indicator of future benefit receipt of a particular group.
42. The 'problem' or cause of long-term benefit receipt, is defined here as the under serving of Māori in education.
43. A review of the literature shows that this situation can be explained by the long-term effects of low expectations, poor quality teaching and limited access to community and family resources (socio-economic status).
44. The failure to educate Māori to the same levels as others is therefore not inevitable but in fact totally avoidable. It will however require a commitment to reform a system that privileges institutions over students.

45. Similarly, a review of the collection of *Best Evidence Syntheses* on the ministry's website, does not support the prevalent view that there is a peculiarly Māori tendency to underachievement.
46. The enduring myth that there is something fundamentally deficient with Māori and that they do not achieve in education because of dysfunctional whānau, behavioural problems and a lack of cultural fit with schools is simply not supported by the ministry's own evidence.
47. This does not mean that Māori are not herded into these categories whenever the issue of under-education is brought up. What I am saying is the evidence does not point to these areas as sufficient cause for under-achievement.
48. In spite of this, current interventions tend to reflect a conviction that Māori students and their whānau, would be much more successful, if they took on the trappings of the majority culture in ways that dismiss the contribution that we as parents already make to our children's learning.
49. Strategies to increase student success often reveal outcomes that are not directly linked to student achievement data. This strongly suggests that investment in this area can only be effective when the environment of schools is re-focused onto educational achievement.
50. Further evidence also suggests that schools that take on the role of social amelioration can actually opt out of their core activity of teaching. This alongside a tendency to believe that certain core subjects are not valued by Māori has resulted in diminished success for these students.
51. Research has consistently shown that many Māori reside in conditions that are often limited by their access to resources. We already know that too many Māori children reside in homes where the mean income is comparatively lower than that experienced by other population groups.

52. Nevertheless in spite of limited access to wealth, research also indicates that contrary to popular opinion again, Māori families have been shown to have high expectations for their children in respect to their educational attainment.
53. While these barriers coalesce for Māori students and their whānau in terms of their success in education, it is also clear that these phenomena illustrate an *effect* rather than a *cause* of under-achievement and as such are not inevitable.
54. My concerns here are specific to the effectiveness of translating the evidence into widespread reforms that are effective for Māori.
55. The implications of research that do not link wide societal impacts alongside the long-term effects of benefit receipt, produce fatalistic attitudes among policy-makers and reformists that often support deficit notions of Māori as somehow less capable than non-Māori.
56. Historically this has resulted in an interventionist policy that is driven by the need to 'change' Māori rather than taking a systems approach of identifying how systems and practices produce unequal results.
57. Reviewed in isolation, without application of a belief in the potential of Māori to develop and implement strategies that support their achievement, will only result in a two-tier society, and a continuation of practices that are interventionist in nature and least likely to provide for enduring outcomes.
58. There is broad agreement across the *Iterative Best Evidence Syntheses* that severe economic stressors and lifestyle factors that prevent whānau from being safe, healthy, and well nourished, can also serve as a barrier that limits the extent to which they can support their children.
59. These stressors have negative implications for children's achievement and well-being. Students are therefore more likely to benefit when schools work with community organisations to create links to service and referral programmes that work to meet the basic needs of these families.

60. The economic and long-term cost to us as a society of large sections of 'second-tier school leavers', ill-equipped to support themselves and their future families is unacceptable.
61. Incentivise this group into meaningful employment that can sustain not only themselves but their communities.
62. That unrealised potential is left to atrophy is not just unacceptable it is a huge tragedy that will inevitably produce large rifts in our society that will limit our future quality of life.
63. The substantive problem for us over the next couple of days at least, is not so much about how we might reduce long-term benefit receipt but rather, the type of society we want.
64. In light of this we must surely review the effect that current welfare and benefit receipt has on the human experience.
65. To be transformative, welfare reform must be enacted in the context of much wider reforms aimed at building the capability of our children to generate wealth and contribute to the political economy.
66. In conclusion we have a number of issues that require reform:
- An education system that is under-serving Māori and other Pacific groups;
 - Increasing numbers of Māori entering the labour market with little or no qualifications and skills;
 - A non- Māori population that is moving out of the labour market onto pensions; and
 - An unequal share of the tax-transfer being consumed by non-Māori, i.e. health, welfare, education etc.
67. What are trade-offs that we must make in order to achieve the type of future that we want?
68. I truly do not believe that it is a lack of knowledge that prevents us from identifying the cause of long-term benefit receipt by certain groups. What we often lack is the courage to act on this knowledge.