

Executive summary - Reframing social cohesion and societal resilience in New Zealand

New Zealand possesses a strong foundation as a cohesive, high-trust democracy, which serves as a primary driver of our national prosperity and security. Actively valuing and protecting social cohesion as a strategic asset enhances our long-term economic productivity, investment confidence, and national resilience. Shifting our strategic focus to integrate relational, civic, and environmental health alongside traditional economic metrics offers a comprehensive pathway to sustain New Zealand's competitive advantage in a complex and volatile environment.

While intertwined, social cohesion and societal resilience are distinct concepts that must be actively maintained in a liberal democracy. Social cohesion is the connective tissue of society; it is the willingness of individuals to cooperate and prosper together. It relies on both social trust (respect among citizens) and institutional trust (confidence in government, media, and democratic systems). Societal resilience is a society's capacity to absorb shocks (like pandemics or natural disasters) and adapt to long-term wicked problems (such as climate change or rising inequality).

Crucially, social cohesion is a prerequisite for societal resilience. A divided society cannot effectively organise or cooperate to navigate complex crises. Furthermore, a high-trust society directly fosters a high-efficiency economy by driving investment certainty, innovation, and productivity. In an era defined by rapid technological change, demographic shifts and global instability, the strength of a nation cannot be measured solely by its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Increasingly, as seen internationally, societal resilience is a key measure used alongside economic measures to assess a nation's strength.

Recent domestic data reveals a deteriorating social fabric, placing New Zealand's foundational resilience under immense pressure: institutional trust is dropping sharply, there is a declining sense of belonging and rising isolation, loneliness is surging, particularly among vulnerable demographics such as Pacific peoples and youth, advanced algorithms and social media platforms are creating echo chambers and prioritising outrage, making consensus on basic facts increasingly difficult. Many New Zealanders are extremely concerned about misleading online information. Rising living costs are pushing a significant portion of the population into financial distress, whilst public anxiety over physical safety is also climbing.

The risk environment and contributing factors

Unlike physical hazards, societal risks are slow-burning threats that act as multipliers of acute hazards (such as natural disasters or economic shocks). The economic consequences of low social cohesion are severe and multi-dimensional. Systemic polarisation, accelerated by widespread misinformation, weakens societal resilience, fractures local social contracts, fuels crime, and sparks extremism. Grievances and polarising issues in the online space are driving support for a range of violent extremist ideologies within New Zealand, placing young and vulnerable people particularly at risk of radicalisation. Pre-existing systemic inequality, digital exclusion, or localised demographic fractures can trigger civil unrest, leading to a complete breakdown of the national response mechanism during a major shock. Multi-generational challenges like intergenerational disadvantage, climate change, and youth mental distress act as constant systemic stressors, exposing societal fault lines and resisting simple short-term political fixes.

The digital environment has become a primary theatre for geopolitical volatility and a direct threat to domestic stability. Current platforms are optimised for an attention economy where algorithms systematically prioritise outrage, conflict, and rage-baiting to maximise user engagement. This algorithmic polarisation erodes the shared reality essential for democracy to function effectively. When a society cannot agree on basic facts regarding election results, vaccine safety, or climate events, the collective buy-in for national decision-making evaporates.

Cognitive resilience is seen increasingly as a national priority with a shift from reactive content removal to proactive strategies that include increased digital literacy and pre-bunking. Pre-bunking warns citizens about common disinformation techniques and online harm channels before they are encountered, empowering individuals to recognise emotional manipulation and logical fallacies. This approach places a heavy emphasis on shielding the population from radicalisation and the psychological echo chambers that target young and vulnerable citizens. Digital trust is the backbone of a healthy, digitally enabled society, requiring transparency, provenance, and shared accountability.

The foundations of societal resilience are rooted in the population's biological and psychological development. A life course approach demonstrates that chronic stress and maternal distress during early life can alter neurodevelopmental pathways, specifically affecting the brain's executive functions responsible for emotional regulation. When these vulnerabilities accumulate at scale, they manifest as societal-level risks, including educational failure, anti-social behaviour, and susceptibility to radicalisation. By investing in early childhood development and protective caregiver systems, the state can shift the developmental trajectory of its citizens toward positive outcomes, creating a population capable of resisting institutional distrust and systemic shocks.

New Zealand is currently grappling with a youth mental health crisis exacerbated by the digital environment. For young people with maturing cognitive resilience, the online world presents a cycle of social validation and algorithmic echo chambers that disrupt the vital milestone of identity formation. This often leads to premature identity closure, where individuals rapidly commit to closed, extremist identities in a search for belonging. This phenomenon contributes to the alarming rates of youth suicide and self-harm.

Physical third spaces such as libraries, marae, parks, and community hubs are critical public assets that facilitate the social interaction required to build bridging capital. High levels of social connection are linked to increased economic productivity and reduced strain on the healthcare system. Modern resilience requires integrating physical infrastructure with digital equivalents. India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) demonstrates how technology can reinforce social trust and community participation on a massive scale.

A high-level resilience framework

A robust resilience framework should monitor baseline health across three scales of society: individual personal buffers (financial stability and mental well-being), societal connection (social capital and infrastructure), and institutional or national governance (trust and structural buffers). New Zealand possesses a wealth of measurement frameworks; however, these disparate systems must be integrated into a single, system-level view if we are to track the nation's health effectively and in an anticipatory manner. Retrospective data, such as the Census, is insufficient for real-time monitoring that anticipates rather than responds. Thus, we must transition to utilising forward-looking lead indicators, such as real-time signals of financial distress or shifts in social media sentiment to identify emerging fractures before they reach a critical point.

An ontological gap currently exists between baseline data and actual policy implementation. To bridge this gap, the government must move from passive observation to active operational targeting, embedding resilience metrics directly into the core of government performance monitoring and budget allocations. Data must be used not just to diagnose problems retrospectively but to guide live policy decisions and structural integration.

This approach requires an all-of-society effort that embraces local communities, NGOs, iwi, and the private sector as active partners in informing and designing prevention measures rather than simply passive recipients of policy. We would also need to establish and institutionalise strategic foresight methods and futures-thinking disciplines to ensure that short-term decisions do not create long-term risks. It also needs to build vertical trust by utilising community leaders and trusted community voices to communicate complex information and inevitable trade-offs.

Short-term measures

As many of these issues are inherently cross-cutting, they are frequently deprioritised by traditional, siloed portfolio approaches. A dedicated lead within government would provide necessary accountability, drive cross-agency cooperation, and break down the data silos that currently prevent a unified national response. They must have the mandate to determine long-term monitoring metrics and oversee the deployment of capabilities to address vulnerabilities before they escalate into national security threats.

Rebuilding trust requires a fundamental shift in leadership behaviour. Public and private sector leaders must champion an inclusive national narrative that acknowledges and celebrates New Zealand's changing demographics and the benefits of diversity. This involves moving away from overambitious promises of simple solutions and instead fostering healthy discourse on the difficult trade-offs required for long-term stability. Engaging community leaders as an early-warning system is critical, as they are often the first to identify emerging crises long before they appear in official statistics. Immediate attention must be paid to specific red flags that indicate systemic distress, and empowering individuals and households to take accountability for their own digital literacy and cognitive resilience is also necessary to build a ground-up defence against modern disruptors.

Long-term measures

In the long term, New Zealand must revitalise both its physical and digital infrastructure to support social connectivity. Third spaces, such as libraries, parks, and marae, must be treated as critical public assets and funded accordingly. Simultaneously, ensuring that the next generation is equipped with the cognitive resilience necessary to navigate an information environment fraught with emerging challenges will be essential.

Strategic foresight must be formally embedded in the machinery of government. These disciplines allow policymakers to challenge assumptions, build future scenarios, and stress-test policies against potential disruptions. By normalising systems thinking and risk listening as core components of policy formulation, the public sector can transition to adaptive frameworks that prioritise long-term resilience over short-term efficiency.

A one-size-fits-all national policy is insufficient for addressing the localised fractures found in our cities or regions. For example, Auckland requires a bespoke citywide strategy that grants local agencies greater ownership of outcomes and the authority to implement relevant, trusted interventions. These localised approaches, paired with long-term investments in the life course approach and structural economic buffers, will provide the necessary foundations for an enduringly resilient and cohesive democracy.

The path to a resilient future

Social cohesion is a vital strategic asset that must be protected with the same urgency as the nation's physical infrastructure or its borders. In an increasingly volatile global environment, the internal strength of New Zealand, the trust between its people and its institutions, is the primary driver of both prosperity and security. The current decline in trust and the fracturing of the social fabric represent a severe risk that, if left unaddressed, will undermine the core of our democratic system.

By reframing social cohesion as a hard strategic asset, decision-makers can protect our democratic system, foster innovation, and ensure New Zealand remains a high-trust, cohesive, and resilient democracy capable of thriving amid future uncertainties.