

**Sir Peter Gluckman's opening remarks to the Epidemic Response Committee of the NZ Parliament**  
**30 April 2020**

Kia ora koutou katoa

I now lead Koi Tū; The Center for Informed Futures, an apolitical transdisciplinary think-tank. We have reported extensively on aspects of the Covid crisis and its aftermath.

The last few weeks have left indelible marks on the wellbeing of individuals, communities, businesses and our society. Many are expressing pride and satisfaction in how we have come together to win this first battle against the virus. But, for many, anxiety, fear, uncertainty and frustrations might be more understandable feelings, for their situations have changed in ways they could never have dreamed of.

The war is not yet won. We do not know whether we have eliminated the virus – new cases are still emerging. Is our contact tracing fast enough to cope with what the virus might bring as we mix and mingle more? What will winter bring in terms of infectivity? And what will happen to us, our social and economic institutions over coming months? Can my job survive? Can my business? And how will the global picture unfold – how big a recession will it be?

Government has done much good under much pressure, but this may have been the easy bit.

The discourse will inevitably move from a united battle against the virus, to one where contested interests emerge. Many are anxious to rapidly return to a pre-Covid 'business-as-usual' mode of operation, but the world has changed. Others see a reset in their lives ahead. But how big?

Pragmatically, several years of pain, difficulty and frustration are ahead for some, but that 'some' may be indeed many. Societal groups that were already vulnerable have had their situation aggravated. Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei estimates that from 33% of their iwi were already in a dependent situation; this will likely double and be long lasting.

Some will find opportunity in the change they experienced, but that will not be everyone. Many had assumed a stable future that they no longer have. They face vulnerability, status degradation and may have become subsidy dependent for the first time in their lives. They may feel stigmatised, lose their self-esteem and become increasingly angry and fearful. Some of these effects may not become fully apparent for some time. Of those directly affected by the severe stresses of this prolonged pandemic, up to 10% are vulnerable for depression and sadly suicidality. As the recession deepens, this number may grow.

Even prior to Covid, we have had high and growing rates of mental health morbidity especially in young people.

My focus in this commentary is on our wellbeing. I will not rehearse the state of our mental health services: the need and focus now is much broader. Our report to Prime Minister English in 2018 indicated that perhaps 20% of our population did not have optimal mental wellbeing. This will now increase substantially.

For most, the primary need now will not be formal psychiatric or psychological help. Rather it is for support services providing effective and rapid solutions within local communities. Many people are losing their sense of agency, with diminished control over their lives. Recovery requires that this sense of agency is restored to both individuals and communities.

Local communities, iwi, and individuals usually have better insights into finding practical solutions to stress than central government. Some, but not all, have found the speed in which agencies have responded refreshing, and listening rather than determining, and wonder why they cannot do that all the time.

As the pandemic continues to unfold, the focus must turn to mitigation of its effects. This requires attention to communities in contextually specific ways. Māori feel frustrated and disappointed that they were excluded from the room by decision-makers in the early stage of the pandemic. Yet Māori have shown great community spirit and wisdom in the way they have looked to address the issues they face. Their voice at this committee would be important.

For many, family and whānau responsibilities and roles have now changed, perhaps for a long time. Pasifika peoples with obligations to both their parents and their children worry that their gains of the last 30 years could be lost. Young people may feel increasingly angry and generational tensions may rise as they see a more uncertain and threatened future.

With the much broader access to devices that the community now has, properly validated e-mental health treatments can be more widely applied, but these must be evidence-based. The market is flooded with unvalidated self-help programmes. Given the implications for the individual of ineffective programmes, such programmes may need certification.

After every economic downturn there is a rise in young people wanting tertiary education as employment options fall and they need that positive path to self-esteem. This is not the time to allow our universities and polytechnics to shrink – the human infrastructure, once lost, will be hard to rebuild and will be in higher demand over next few years.

Community focused schemes to employ people, for example in conservation activities, provide another route especially if they have a developmental or educational component.

Our education system needs to look at how it might be used to develop psychological resilience in young people. A rethink is needed – one that could lead to young people being better prepared

for a future dominated by change. They need transferable social and critical skills to meet rapidly evolving labour markets.

We have no certainty as to how the future will unfold. It is important that false hopes are not created through over-optimistic claims. We do not yet have clarity on when we can safely leave Alert Level 3; most experts think it should be several weeks away, yet messaging has suggested it might be earlier and many businesses are acting on that basis. Misinterpretation and over-promising can lead to frustration.

One of NZ's strengths has been that, despite our diversity and problems of chronic disadvantage, we are seen as particularly cohesive. We have seen that strength after the Christchurch atrocities and in the early days of the lockdown. But it is going to be put to the test in coming months, not least because of the impending political cycle and potential post-pandemic reviews.

I lead a global study on the factors threatening societal cohesion. Trust, transparency and truth are key factors. In emergencies, transparency in decision-making can be lost and trust can easily be undermined. Already misinformation is potentially undermining democracy in some countries.

Technology will be needed to help manage the ongoing pandemic risk - especially through tracing apps. We are already seeing the societal, ethical, and political debates over these technologies becoming divisive elsewhere. We have failed yet to develop confidence enhancing independent oversight on the use of data by government. We need it now.

There is much talk of a broad strategic reset following Covid both globally and domestically, but this must be embedded in a consensual view of the future – a top down approach would be undesirable.

We need to think in terms of recovery of personal agency as central to the restoration of spirit and society. This will require new efforts to achieve deliberative codetermination and a diversity of inputs. This must be beyond tokenistic consultation which too often is the norm for the NZ government and agencies.

Our success to date should be applauded but the costs to individuals and society are real and create new challenges and opportunity. How we deal with these will determine whether we can really beat the virus.