

Care IS the post COVID-19 economy

Dr Jess Berentson-Shaw

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Right now, the world is full of possibility, bursting with ideas, for how we can reimagine it in light of our COVID-19 experiences. In the best of these visions, people across our communities walk together into a future, eagerly embracing the care we have experienced for people we love and know and for the people we don't but whose health and wellness is deeply connected to our own. In these visions we centre the health of the planet that sustains every single one of us.

These are exciting visions, filled with glimpses of the sort of communities we would live in, the work we would do, the pace we would live at, the creativity we would unleash, the depth of the relationships we would have with each other. It feels good, this place of care. It feels good because something that we (people, communities, even politicians) truly value is being properly recognised and centred, something we do not have right now.

True public value is deeper, more expansive and more important than the things some currently assign a "value" to.

The experience of COVID-19 has helped more of us understand the public value that caring for others is. How it is fundamental, in all its forms, to our collective wellbeing. Examples of the sort of care that carried us through COVID-19 in New Zealand include the care our essential workers showed in going to work at risk to their own health, despite being poorly paid and treated. The care that people with disabilities showed to their workmates in helping them navigate life in the new virtual work world, despite the fact that many workplaces refused to be more inclusive to disabled people before COVID-19. The care parents and caregivers gave to their children at home while still working in their other roles in the same capacity. The care our medical professionals gave to prepare for what could have been a tsunami of cases while those who were already ill stayed away or delayed treatment to keep staff free to do this work. The care iwi and hapū gave by keeping potentially sick people away from their kaumata while working with the police to help them understand their communities needs. The care every single one of us gave to people we did not know by staying home and eliminating COVID-19 from our country.

Yet little or none of this care, so essential to our wellbeing and health, these deep relationships with each other, gets counted as something of value in our current economic



thinking and models. Care is utilised, as necessary to our functioning, but not counted. And when something isn't counted, it gets little attention, little investment from people in government or in business, little work to understand the problems that arise, and no innovation to build better, more effective ways to support this valuable thing.

This is not a quirk of the economic model, it is how the economic model has been designed. The negative impacts of this design are all around us in our physical and social environments. Time to change things.

Recognising the economy of care is a solution to many of our challenges

Care work, caring for children, parents, for colleagues, for people who are ill, the public, is our economy of care. And recognising and supporting the economy of care is a key plank in helping moving us forward in the best ways from COVID-19. It is also the foundation for a remade economy that puts people and the planet first while getting what we all need to thrive.

How would things look different if we recognised and supported the real value of care to us in the post COVID-19 response?

Creating optimal societal conditions for children to be cared for and educated in is one of the most effective future focussed actions a country can take. The evidence is clear that it leads to multiple benefits in the next generation – from better health, higher education, reduced crime, and that is just the benefits people choose to measure.

A comprehensive plan for a remade economy with care at the heart of it would look for innovative ways to support more high quality caring work. The options for people in government, business and communities, who innovate on this issue together, are endless. Here are a few ideas:

- Large-scale investment in high standard, energy efficient, long term homes for caregivers/parents raising children and living on low incomes.
- Higher levels of income support for sole caregivers/parents.
- Devolution of decisions about care for vulnerable children to their hapū and whānau.
- Redesigned education systems that are more responsive to the different needs of Māori and Pacific children.
- Redeveloped urban centres, especially in our poorest communities, to enable children to get to where they need to go walking and cycling.
- A universal caregiver wage.
- Investment in early childhood and teacher and nursing education, including moving more men into the profession.
- Social procurement in the care sectors by government - this is procuring services with conditional targets around improving the lives of people who do caring and those who are cared for.

- People in business commit to new and innovative employment practices that support parenting and caregiving.
- Innovation and investment in public healthcare (i.e. the science of preventive medicine).

Many of these activities help green our economy also, as they have limited carbon implications. Some even reduce carbon use for example flexible work practices, allowing people to work at home reduce transport related carbon emission, while warm energy efficient carbon reduces fuel poverty and the carbon associated with heating and housing. In other words, if people in government in partnerships with people in business and communities recognise that care matters. If they focus on shaping policies and practices to optimise the care that is provided and the conditions it is provided in, we will help restore some of what our current economic activities have taken from both people and the planet.

How will we get there?

What I am proposing is a transformation in the way that people in government and in business, and in our community do things, with a focus on shaping the world we want for people not simply responding to what is happening in it. Such transformation requires that people work on more than just the visible policy and practice shifts, tools and budget bids. People need to work on the areas of relationships and power sharing. It will take new relationships between people inside and outside of government, in business, in iwi. Transformation also requires work at the invisible, or implicit level to shift out old ideas that are preventing change. And that is going to take new visions and new narratives about our world and what matters most and what is possible. These visions and narratives need to be shaped by those most impacted by the problems in the current system, and shared and reshared by people in powerful and influential positions. It will take public support of those new stories about care work. It will also take bravery from people in positions of power and influence to step down a new path that feels risky and unknown. They will stumble at times, because that is a precondition of innovation and risk, but it is a journey worth making to put care at the centre of our post COVID-19 economy.