INTRODUCTION

to the

Centre for Social Research and Evaluation

Te Pokapū Rangahau Arotake Hapori

2004

MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora

Contents

The pathway to understanding
Te huarahi rapu nei i te maramatanga

The Government goal of social development for all New Zealanders relies on sound policy built on robust evidence. The evidence that is called for in the 21st century must reflect the significant social transformations that have happened in New Zealand over the last 30 years. Central government interventions in people's lives must be effective and grounded in theory.

A core responsibility of the Ministry of Social Development (the Ministry) is to develop the capacity of policy makers to anticipate and respond to the needs of all New Zealanders across their life cycle as they try to make a living and care for others.

The strategic, policy and service delivery functions of the Ministry generate demand for information, knowledge and understanding about how the social world operates in New Zealand.

The Centre for Social Research and Evaluation (the Centre) is a public sector research facility staffed with researchers, evaluators, data analysts and data developers. It provides the Ministry and the Government with the expertise to conduct evaluations of Government policies, undertake original research to international standards and develop, enhance and analyse a wide range of administrative and statistical data.

> *Research contributes to better outcomes for New Zealanders by increasing knowledge of social and economic dynamics, inequalities and barriers to development.*

The role of the Centre is to collect and analyse data and develop policy-relevant knowledge about the changing motivations and expectations of individuals and groups in New Zealand. The Centre's knowledge creation helps build strategic skill in anticipating the impacts of social, demographic, political and economic change.

Research contributes to better outcomes for New Zealanders by increasing knowledge of social and economic dynamics, inequalities and barriers to development. It brings to the surface information and knowledge about major transitions in people's lives and the success factors that help people fulfil their potential.

Research also highlights the cultural, regional and local contexts in which people in New Zealand live out their lives, and it develops information from which to assess the impacts of change on different groups and populations over time.

Project evaluations describe how well interventions work in different contexts for different population groups.

The Ministry of Social Development
Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora

The Centre is part of the Ministry of Social Development, one of New Zealand's largest government departments. The Ministry provides Government with advice on cross-cutting social development policy, social services policy, and social research and evaluation in the areas of income support and employment, children and young people, families and communities.

The Ministry employs about 5,500 staff. Its national office is in Wellington and it maintains a regional presence through 11 Regional Offices that support 153 full-time and 42 part-time Service Centres in local areas.

The Regional Offices and Service Centres deliver a range of social assistance, employment and other social service supports to more than one million New Zealanders through benefits, grants, loans, subsidies, allowances and pensions.

Social assistance

Domestic Purposes Benefit	Orphan's Benefit and Unsupported Child's Benefit
Independent Youth Benefit	Sickness Benefit
Invalids' Benefit	Transitional Retirement Benefit
New Zealand Superannuation	Unemployment Benefit

Employment-related services

Childcare Subsidy	Seasonal Work Assistance
OSCAR Subsidy	Pathways to Arts and Cultural Employment (PACE)
Training Incentive Allowance	New Employment Transition Grant
Work Start Grant	

Other support services

Accommodation Supplement	Funeral Grant
Away From Home Allowance	Heartland Services
Community Services Card	Special Benefit
Disability Allowance and Child Disability Allowance	Special Needs Grant, Advance Payments
Family Support	StudyLink student allowances and loans
	War and Veterans' Pensions

The Ministry provides services to four ministers and is responsible for the policies, activities and work programmes of the Ministry of Youth Development, Office for Disability Issues, Office for Senior Citizens, and Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector, and for the establishment of the Families Commission. Services are also provided to three Crown entities.

The Ministry's contribution to social wellbeing is primarily focused on policies, research and services in four of the domains identified in *The Social Report*.

The Ministry's domains	Description of relevant domain in *The Social Report*
Sustainable employment	PAID WORK: All people have access to meaningful, rewarding and safe employment. An appropriate balance is maintained between paid work and other aspects of life.
Safety and security	SAFETY: All people enjoy personal safety and security, and are free from victimisation, abuse, violence and avoidable injury.
Adequate income	ECONOMIC STANDARD OF LIVING: New Zealand is a prosperous society where all people have access to adequate incomes and enjoy standards of living that mean they can fully participate in society and have choice about how to live their lives.
Social connectedness	SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS: People enjoy constructive relationships with others in their families, whānau, communities, iwi and workplaces. They are able to participate in society through sports, arts and other recreational activities. Contributions to social connectedness through unpaid work and caring are valued.

In this context, the Centre has developed four major themes for research and evaluation that focus on developing our ability to understand and anticipate.

The impacts of change	The impact of demographic, economic, environmental, cultural and social change as it affects and influences people's actions and responses.
Impacts of inequalities and disparities	The impacts of inequalities and disparities on individuals, families and communities.
Successful outcomes	Factors that contribute to successful outcomes for individuals, families and communities.
Critical transitions	Critical transition periods in people's lives and how these transitions expose individuals, families and communities to vulnerabilities and/or opportunities.

The Centre's role and purpose

The purpose of the Centre is to produce high-quality research and evaluation that is used to effect change in the lives of New Zealanders. Users of this research and evaluation are located both within and outside the Ministry. They include Cabinet, Government Ministers, central and local government policy makers and service delivery agencies, the international social policy community, academic researchers, private research consultants, non-government organisations, advocacy groups, educational organisations and students, the media and the general public.

To achieve its purpose, the Centre is committed to producing internationally reputable research and evaluation that is widely disseminated and recognised for its quality, timeliness and relevance to social policy development.

Research and evaluation in the Centre has both a short-term and a long-term focus. It must meet the short-term information needs of Cabinet and Ministers, as well as the policy and service delivery arms of the Ministry. It also needs to focus on enduring and emerging social and economic themes that will help to identify the policy issues of the future. The Centre's capacity to provide environmental scanning is central to the work of the Ministry.

The Centre fulfils its scanning role through identifying, collecting and analysing data on:

- demographic trends
- changes in family structures
- changes in ethnic group composition in the population
- shifts in health and education status
- shifts in perceptions and experiences of safety and security, paid work and economic standard of living.

The staff in the Centre develop and maintain robust databases and information platforms. They have quantitative and qualitative analytic skills, as well as effective project management, quality assurance and risk assessment skills. Well-established methodologies and innovative practices are both used.

The timely communication of research and evaluation findings and analysis (including interim results) is important. Identification of emerging social policy issues, development of current policy understandings, assessment of the effectiveness of policy interventions, and monitoring and improvement of service delivery depends on research findings being accessible and widely used. The Centre has dedicated capacity for the production and promotion of research and evaluation and is host to the *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, the only social policy journal currently published in New Zealand.

From data collection to knowledge dissemination – who does what?

Organisation of the Centre

There are seven specialist units in the Centre reporting to a General Manager. The Centre also provides the secretariat for the official interdepartmental co-ordinating group, the Social Policy Evaluation and Research (SPEaR) Committee.

The recently established Deputy Chief Executive (DCE) roles in the Ministry have focused the leadership of the Ministry within clusters. The Centre reports to the DCE Social Development Policy and Knowledge. This role has increased the opportunity for strategic alignment between regional social policy, strategic social policy and the Centre.

The Centre's three Principal Advisors have been included in the newly established Strategy Forum that reports directly to the Chief Executive.

Unit managers, team managers and a business support team ensure that the day-to-day business of each unit runs smoothly and is co-ordinated with the overall goals of the Centre. Principal Advisors provide intellectual leadership and expertise in particular fields and, in their new role, will complement strategic advice provided by senior managers.

The units include a Research and Evaluation Strategy unit, three research and evaluation units that are "subject specific" (ie their focus is on a particular topic area) and three units that are "function specific" (ie their focus is on performing a specific function).

Research and Evaluation Strategy unit

The Research and Evaluation Strategy unit (RESU) functions across the three areas of strategic leadership, cross-sectoral research and evaluation management, and communications.

Strategic leadership

- Establishing frameworks for research and evaluation priorities within the Ministry.
- Developing and disseminating the research and evaluation strategy for the Ministry and providing advice to the General Managers on the directions and priorities for research and evaluation.
- Establishing guidelines on ethical and partnership issues that support the conduct of high-quality research and evaluation in the Centre.
- Working across the Ministry on strategic management initiatives, and enhancing the linkages and alignment between research and evaluation, the policy agenda and service delivery.

Cross-sectoral research and evaluation management

- Providing the secretariat for SPEaR, and establishing capability and capacity building initiatives in the social sector through leadership of SPEaR.
- Leading research and evaluation projects to understand complex social issues (such as wellbeing and exclusion) and assess the impact of Government-wide social and economic policies in these areas.
- Co-ordinating input across Government to key research initiatives (such as for the Cross-Departmental Research Pool (CDRP) bids).

Communications

- Co-ordinating and promoting research and evaluation findings, and providing communications and quality assurance capacity within the Centre, as well as overseeing and co-ordinating the Ministry's research and evaluation communications initiatives and publications programme.

- Editing and producing the *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, which is published three times a year by the Ministry to contribute to the development of public debate on social policy issues.

Specific-focus research and evaluation units

There are two specialist units that focus on the "life cycle" orientation of the Ministry's *Statement of Intent 2003* and produce short-, medium- and longer-term research and evaluation. These are the:

- *Family, Child, Youth and Community unit*, where work is focused on children, young people, families and communities

- *Older and Working Age People: Research and Evaluation unit*, which focuses on social assistance, poverty, living standards, employment initiatives, work incentives, work-life balance and retirement.

Family, Child, Youth and Community unit

Children and young people, families/whānau and communities are the cornerstones of our society. The aim of the Family, Child, Youth and Community group is to inform policy concerned with the drivers of the developmental trajectories of children and young people, and the families and communities in which they are raised.

Some of the research and evaluation projects in this group in 2004 include:

- policy-focused research initiatives such as the Youth Health and Wellbeing Survey, scoping development of a Longitudinal Study of Children and Families, and the Family Dynamics Research Programme – an ongoing series of commissioned reports on Work, Family and Parenting, Family Income and Outcomes for Children, and Stepfamilies and Resilience

- policy programme evaluations such as the New Zealand Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, Youth Transitions, Family Start, Supporting Positive Parenting, Heartlands Service Centres, Pacific Peoples' Provider Development Fund and Funding for Outcomes.

Older and Working Age People: Research and Evaluation unit

Stable and adequate income and the ability to participate in society are strong bases on which to build an inclusive and prosperous New Zealand. The Ministry invests in working age people to support these goals by fostering sustainable employment and providing social assistance policies as a safety net to protect people against hard times. The *Older and Working Age People: Research and Evaluation* team seeks to improve our understanding of the:

- economic and social participation of individuals and households

- causes and consequences of poverty and income inequality and of reliance on income support

- support needs of vulnerable groups within New Zealand, including benefit recipients, older New Zealanders, people with disabilities and those on low incomes

- effectiveness of the Ministry's active labour market programmes

- barriers to sustainable employment faced by people in varying circumstances

- the nature of vulnerable employment in New Zealand society

- labour market issues facing New Zealand society now and in the future

- factors through the life course that contribute to older New Zealanders having an adequate standard of living.

Function-specific units

Forecasting and Modelling unit

The Forecasting and Modelling unit has two distinct but related cost modelling and forecasting functions. The team:

- produces estimates of the costs of specific social assistance policy initiatives and adjustments
- provides Ministers, Treasury and the Ministry with five-year-ahead monthly forecasts of benefit and other unrequited expenditure for 34 line items within Vote: Social Development, Vote: Veterans' Affairs – Social Development and Vote: Housing
- monitors and reports on variances between actual and forecast expenditure on a monthly and quarterly basis (this includes highlighting areas of risk); forecast updates are completed at least twice a year – the Budget Economic and Fiscal Update (BEFU) in April and the December Economic and Fiscal Update (DEFU) in November.

Information, Analysis and Monitoring unit

The Information, Analysis and Monitoring (IAM) unit comprises three teams:

- Information Development
- Monitoring and Reporting
- Decision Support team.

These teams deal with data development, management and analysis, and their statistical expertise is drawn on widely by other teams in the Centre and the Ministry.

Information Development team:

- supports initiatives to make more effective use of the Ministry's administrative information
- co-ordinates the production of metadata to underpin use of the Ministry's Information Analysis Platform (IAP), a data warehouse that mirrors administrative data held on operational systems and stores historical data from these systems; the IAP provides the Ministry with one centralised platform for all analysis and management reporting of data generated in the course of service provision by each of the service lines of the Ministry (eg Work and Income, StudyLink)
- uses its knowledge of business process, analysis, reporting techniques and the administrative data to:
  - improve the efficiency of reporting processes
  - customise reporting from the IAP in ways that connect with specific business issues and can be used directly by staff who do not have the same level of technical expertise.

Monitoring and Reporting team:

- monitors and reports on social trends, benefit trends, client profiles and levels of client satisfaction with various services
- provides a range of official statistics, administrative data and survey information at both a national and a regional level
- informs research, evaluation and policy in the Ministry and provides reports for use by other Government agencies and researchers, service providers and the general public
- provides advice and expertise on social statistics to other policy and research staff to ensure that social statistics can be appropriately exploited in the Ministry's project work

- uses their skills in the development of new indicators and social monitoring initiatives
- takes a leading role in the production of indicators for *The Social Report*
- produces a range of resources and reports, including:
  - reports to Ministers on trends in benefit delivery
  - Key Facts reports for media publicity
  - the Ministry's annual *Statistical Report*
  - geographical maps of the Ministry's client database
  - *Satisfaction Monitoring Reports* (Client, Employer, Call Centre, StudyLink and IT).

Decision Support team:

- analyses and reports statistical information from the Ministry's operational databases, including those concerned with Benefits and Pensions data, Employment Services data and Student Services data
- produces a range of regular and ad hoc reports for front-line managers and staff to help them work with their caseloads and meet performance goals
- provides statistical support for the Minister's Office and the Ministry's responses to Parliamentary Questions and Official Information Requests
- provides statistical support for policy review and development work, and for the work of National Operations managers.

Information Centre

The Information Centre is the information hub for research and evaluation work. It provides:

- information and knowledge management services to the Ministry, the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services (CYF) and a number of other external social sector agencies
- a reference service, including detailed topic searches as required
- a customised service for monitoring and disseminating information about new publications
- management and maintenance of the Ministry's business records, including archival management
- assistance and guidance in using information management systems, including the electronic document management system
- training to staff in the use of information management resources and record-keeping responsibilities
- management of the retention and disposal of public records and liaison with Archives New Zealand.

Auckland Metro Regional Office

The Centre has recently established an outpost in the Auckland Regional Office (Auckland Metro) in Ellerslie, which houses the Regional Commissioners, Regional Operations Managers and teams for the two Auckland sub-regions – Manukau and Waitemata.

The Centre currently supports one staff member in the Auckland office whose time is committed:

- mainly to managing market research contracts for the Centre
- in small part to developing:
  - a proactive and co-ordinated relationship with the metropolitan area
  - efficient and accurate information flows to researchers in the Centre.

SPEaR

The Centre has a leadership role in co-ordinating social research and evaluation across the social sector. SPEaR has a mandate to oversee the Government's social policy research and evaluation purchase, and it implements this leadership through the Secretariat role based in the Centre.

The role of SPEaR

A key interface between the Centre and SPEaR is the *Social Research and Evaluation Priorities Sub-Committee* of SPEaR. This sub-committee is specifically accountable for social research and evaluation priority setting across Government and is seeking to advance the following five key goals:

- **Knowledge Building** – developing systems and criteria for prioritising social research and evaluation across Government

- **Investment Alignment** – informing the key funding mechanisms in the sector[1] of SPEaR's priorities and seeking alignment amongst these mechanisms

- **Communications** – promoting SPEaR's priorities across agencies to build alignment with the *Improving the Knowledge Base* (IKB) themes

- **Demonstration Projects** – identifying potential areas for interagency collaboration and fostering developments that model effective integrated process

- **Monitoring** – monitoring the shifts achieved through this work over the short, medium and long term.

The SPEaR committee has an ongoing dialogue with the Strategic Social Policy Senior Officials Group (SSPSOG) around the development of evidence-based policy. Where there is a clear need for research and evaluation to strengthen understanding and provide evidence, SSPSOG identifies priority cross-sectoral policy issues.

The IKB project underpins the work of SPEaR. The IKB exercise identified seven knowledge theme areas or knowledge gaps, and Government uses these to guide the direction of research and evaluation. They include:

- the changing nature of work
- developing human capabilities – knowledge and skills
- disparities between groups – how to change the picture
- enhancing positive social outcomes – developmental risk and protective factors
- measuring and understanding social wellbeing
- social connectedness
- social and cultural identities.

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[1] Such as FRST, CDRP, BRCSS, and the SPEaR Linkages Programme.

Types of research and evaluation in the Centre

As the previous sections suggest, the Centre is involved in a wide range of activity. Conventional research and evaluation activities sit alongside forecasting, modelling, data development and management, and managerial and administrative roles. This section clarifies the nature of the research and evaluation work that the Centre undertakes.

The term "research" is used in the Centre in a broad sense to cover data collection, analysis and synthesis, as well as more specialist activities such as forecasting, modelling and evaluation. This broadly conforms to Mayer's (2000) typology of policy research that includes:

- strategic research
- basic descriptive research on whole populations
- research designed to uncover causal relationships
- evaluation of policies and interventions.

However, the term is also used more specifically to refer to discrete projects that more closely resemble conventional academic models of scholarly research – where principles of research design govern data collection and analysis. In this more restricted sense, "research" is used as a counterpoint to "evaluation" or "forecasting" or "modelling" in order to highlight the more specialist nature of these other activities. It is in this more limited sense that research is discussed below.

Research

The Centre responds to short-term policy demand and provides:

- ongoing collection and analysis of benefit data and a team of specialists to support this work
- data, tables and descriptions to other groups and units for inclusion in reports
- analysis and synthesis for policy making
- analyses of data from existing sources to inform policy options.

The Centre also meets more medium-term (1–3 years) demands driven by strategic questions as well as larger and more complex policy programmes. It provides:

- a strategic focus on social development issues
- programmes of research on particular topics to anticipate and meet demand, eg changing family dynamics, impacts of Sickness Benefit and Invalids' Benefit change
- environmental scanning that identifies emerging issues.

Medium-term to long-term (2–5 years and 5 years or more) research activities are also supported by the Centre. These include:

- meta-syntheses of existing knowledge
- large-scale environmental scans
- survey development and interpretation
- in-depth qualitative studies
- longer-term projects that favour the development and exploration of new methodologies
- conceptual and theoretical knowledge building prior to policy development.

A shift in public sector demand for longitudinal data collection and analysis is creating a need for longer-term research projects and the Ministry is responding to this demand. For example, the Ministry is currently exploring a collaborative project with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health to develop a longitudinal study of children.

Evaluation

The Ministry's evaluation activity is designed to provide information about how policies and programmes are making a difference to social outcomes, and how they can be improved to better address the needs of individuals, families and communities.

Evaluation work ranges in scope from single-focused evaluation projects aimed at assessing specific policy initiatives to suites of evaluation activity encompassing large complex programmes over a number of years. We are placing increasing emphasis on continuous evaluations that can provide information about the effectiveness of programmes and initiatives in a timely manner and that can be used to generate improvements while the programme is still under way.

Evaluation is closely linked with both policy and programme delivery. It is essential to strategic development and decision making in a number of fundamental areas.

- Meta-synthesis, in relation to what works in responding to specific social development challenges, assists in defining potential policy and programme responses available to Government.
- The clear specification of intervention logic and definition of outcomes required for evaluation planning supports effective implementation planning and service delivery.
- Formative evaluation informs ongoing improvements to the way we deliver new initiatives.
- Impact and outcome objectives tell us about the extent to which we have improved outcomes for our clients and met the objectives of the *Statement of Intent*.

Research and evaluation informs policy

Research and evaluation are both used to inform advice to the Minister for Social Development and Employment, and through the Minister to the Government as a whole, on the mix and targeting of policies designed to improve social outcomes.

Information about the nature and dimensions of social issues as well as the effectiveness and impact of policies can make an important contribution to the development of the Government's strategic directions, and to decisions about the allocation of resources between competing priorities.

In the case of new or experimental programmes, we are using evaluation results to support Government decisions with regard to continuing particular programmes and initiatives and to decide whether the design of programmes should be changed to enhance their effectiveness.

Research and evaluation inform programme development and delivery

At the conceptual level, research is used to scope the demand for new programmes and policies as well as to develop knowledge about areas or groups of interest. At the service delivery level, programme managers use research and evaluation findings to improve the ways in which they deliver programmes and meet the needs of their clients. Regional managers are also able to take research and evaluation evidence into account when funding and supporting initiatives to improve social outcomes in their regions.

Research and evaluation informs the Ministry's external stakeholders

Published research and evaluation reports inform external researchers, academics, community groups and non-government organisations and the international social policy community about the work of the Centre and the Ministry and can be used to raise awareness, stimulate debate and encourage change in the conceptualisation of social issues as well as service practice.

Ethical frameworks for research and evaluation

The Centre engages actively in consultation and research and evaluation with communities, stakeholders and clients. This engagement is increasingly governed by good practice principles informed by protocols in health research and other institutional contexts where ethics procedures have been the norm for a long time. Guidelines for research and evaluation with participants, clients and communities are currently under development.

Forecasting

The forecasting role is complex and includes environmental scans, exploration of interrelated changes occurring in social, demographic and economic dimensions, and benefit data collection and analysis. New fiscal implications of policy initiatives and adjustments are incorporated.

Benefit forecasting in the Ministry:

- predicts changes over time (time-series forecasting)
- includes the study and application of judgment as well as quantitative (statistical and applied economics) methods.

Modelling

The modelling role involves creating computer programs and spreadsheet models that simulate the effects of current and proposed social welfare programmes. The output from the models estimates the impacts in both people and financial terms.

The effective marginal tax rate (EMTR) model is maintained and developed within the team. It is used to assess the impact of social policy regimes on "in the hand" income for different family types. It is particularly useful for showing marginal changes due to policy proposals.

The team has built a microsimulation model using the Ministry's IT database as the population. This model allows us to see the total effect of policy change at the unit record level based on the various assumptions employed, as well as determining the aggregated fiscal impact.

Further development of models, including microsimulation, is an area of focus for long-term strategic investment.

Data analysis

The Ministry provides direct services to more than one million New Zealanders. The records of these transactions are captured in administrative data, and these data are:

- entered into centrally held administrative databases by service delivery staff in local offices as the principal record of dealings with clients
- processed by payment systems that ensure timely, accurate payment of social assistance
- mirrored on the Information Analysis Platform (IAP)
- made available on-line to service delivery staff and national office staff as tailored statistical summaries, tables, caseload reports and group profiles via the IAP
- accessed by specialist staff for further collation and interpretation to meet specific business needs and for research and evaluation purposes.

This confidentialised administrative data analysis gives a rich statistical picture of social change and trends over time.

Data collected by Statistics New Zealand are also pivotal to data analysis in the Centre.

Factors that shape research and evaluation in the Ministry

Competing demands

Competing demands influence research and evaluation direction and activities in the Ministry. The Centre's work programme reflects the way in which the Centre balances these demands and decides to proceed in one direction rather than another.

In this section, eight specific demands are described.

Sources of demand

The demand for research and evaluation in the Ministry comes from different sources. Ministers, Cabinet, policy groups and service delivery agencies may all request research and evaluation, and all of these sources can be ad hoc and short term, as well as more proactively planned and longer term.

In seeking to advise Ministers, Cabinet and policy advisors, however, the Centre also initiates research and evaluation and tenders for funding to support activities that the Centre itself has identified as important. Competing time frames and demands create tensions when there is a limited capacity to undertake new work.

The Centre seeks to manage these tensions by ensuring that policy and research and evaluation work is co-ordinated and aligned with the overall goals of the Ministry.

Strategic alignment

Through its outcome-based planning approach, the Ministry has developed a Statement of Intent (SOI) that sets out high-level strategic goals. This follows a "life cycle" approach to social development, with a specific focus on children and young people, working age people, older people, families/whānau and community/hapū/iwi. The twin goals of the Ministry are to provide policies and programmes that enhance social protection and to create social investment opportunities for these groups. These goals are reflected in research and evaluation work that is focused on inequalities and disparities, the factors that contribute to success in people's lives, the key transition periods in people's lives, and the impact of macro-level social, economic, environmental and political change on how people live.

Horizons – short-term versus longer-term research and evaluation

A Government Ministry such as the Ministry of Social Development requires a range of research and evaluation work at different scales for different purposes to meet different time frames. There is a tension in finding a balance between these competing demands.

In general, the Centre balances the portfolio of work undertaken so that the short-term needs of clients can be met while not neglecting the need for data collected over much longer time frames. The tension lies in addressing the urgent and immediate questions without losing the capacity to address longer-term issues.

Orientations – participation versus protection and investment

Social participation is based on the premise that if people are offered adequate social protection and enough social investment is made on their behalf, then inclusive participation in the economic, social and cultural life of communities should be a possibility for all. The competing tensions here are whether to emphasise:

- the development of a research portfolio that emphasises conceptual understanding of the nature and benefits of social participation and wellbeing; or

- factors that contribute to good outcomes through social investment; or

- the monitoring and control of social protection strategies such as benefits.

In general, the Centre seeks to reflect the stated emphasis in the SOI of tilting the balance towards policy that supports and reflects a social investment approach.

Roles – service delivery focus versus cross-sector leadership

The focus in the Ministry on social protection leads to a research and evaluation emphasis on data collection and analysis for benefit delivery and employment-related policies and services. The Government-wide focus on social development, however, requires leadership and contribution to a much broader social research and evaluation agenda. Social participation depends on factors that come within the responsibilities of a range of government agencies such as Housing, Health, Education, Justice and Youth Affairs. A co-ordinated and shared approach is necessary to optimise understanding and activities.

In general, the Centre seeks to develop capacity for research leadership across the social sector, while building and maintaining internal focus and capability. The tension is mediated through clarifying the two roles and developing an explicit understanding of the extent to which the Centre needs to attend to both these functions in different ways.

Methodologies – conventional versus innovative

The tension here lies between developing the capacity and capability to undertake exploratory and innovative research and evaluation that demonstrates a leadership role across the social sector and/or relying on a more conventional range of social science and econometric approaches. As a general principle, the Centre emphasises the need for all research and evaluation to be informed by strong theoretical underpinnings, and for findings to be robust. A no-constraint principle in relation to methodologies and approaches creates opportunities for innovative approaches and methods to be developed as required.

Populations – target versus mainstream

The "life cycle" approach of the SOI targets age-related categories such as "children", "youth", "working age" and "older people". In addition, however, Ministry research and evaluation needs to maintain an awareness of other particular populations and sub-groups. Some of these responsibilities derive from constitutional commitments under the Treaty of Waitangi, while others have specific requirements set out in strategy documents such as the Disability Strategy.

Some of these populations, such as Māori, Pacific and "other" ethnic groups, are categories distinguishable by culture and ethnicity. Other groups are characterised by commonalities of gender, sexuality or the experience of disabilities or sickness.

Research and evaluation information is collected about all of these groups but statistical collections are often not large enough to ensure robust analysis of all variables. Particular and stringent ethical requirements and research costs also discourage field research in some areas.

There is an ongoing tension between focusing on mainstream populations and targeting research and evaluation to specific minority populations and sub-populations. The Centre encourages research and evaluation that highlights the needs and responses of small, as well as larger, populations and communities.

Groups – individual versus collective focus

An ongoing issue is the policy focus on both individuals and collectives. Social protection policies – enacted through the service delivery arms of the Ministry and CYF – are generally directed at individuals, whereas social investment policies also often seek outcomes in relation to collectives.

There are particular challenges surrounding family and community research and evaluation, which requires different methodologies and strong resourcing if it is to be effective.

The Centre seeks a balance between these competing demands. The new emphasis in the SOI on families and communities is clearly acknowledged and the FCYC group seeks to develop appropriate methodologies and skills to meet this need.

Summary

The decisions about which research and evaluation projects should be developed in any given time period rely on the Centre being able to assess these demands against each other and develop a portfolio that includes short-, medium- and long-term work that is responsive to ministerial, policy and practice information and that also leaves room for leadership, innovation and initiative.

Major ongoing publications

Research News

Social Policy Journal of New Zealand

Living Standards 2004

SPEaR Bulletin

Working papers

These publications can be found on the Ministry's website at www.msd.govt.nz