

REALISING THE POTENTIAL OF THE FIRST 2000 DAYS: A SOCIAL INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY

Drawing on insights from a recent Harkness Fellowship, Aimee Hadrup outlines key shifts needed for social investment to realise the social and economic benefits of intervening upstream to ensure all children have a good start in life.



AIMEE HADRUP

Investing early in the life course is the most effective way to get upstream of our most pressing social challenges. To quote the late Professor Richie Poulton, who led the ground-breaking longitudinal Dunedin Study, “The best scientific research in the world now tells us the greatest social good will be achieved by investing in a child’s earliest years.” Unsurprisingly, the reintroduction of social investment is generating fresh interest in the foundational stages of life as a prime opportunity to increase the impact and effectiveness of public sector investment. But how do we approach the ‘first 2000 days’ as a social investment priority to realise this potential? And what can we learn from other countries about place-based approaches to improving early life outcomes?

What does the first 2000 days mean in practice?

The first 2000 days of a child’s life, from preconception to around age five, is a period of rapid development that sets the foundation for everything that follows. The developing child is shaped by their family’s wellbeing, which in turn is influenced by their community, neighbourhood conditions, and the policies that affect them. Neurodevelopmental science tells us that nurturing care and supportive environments around children help build the architecture of the brain, while chronic stress on families can derail child development.

Actions we take to better support families in the first 2000 days yield immediate benefits for children’s developmental trajectory, and the benefits continue to accrue over a

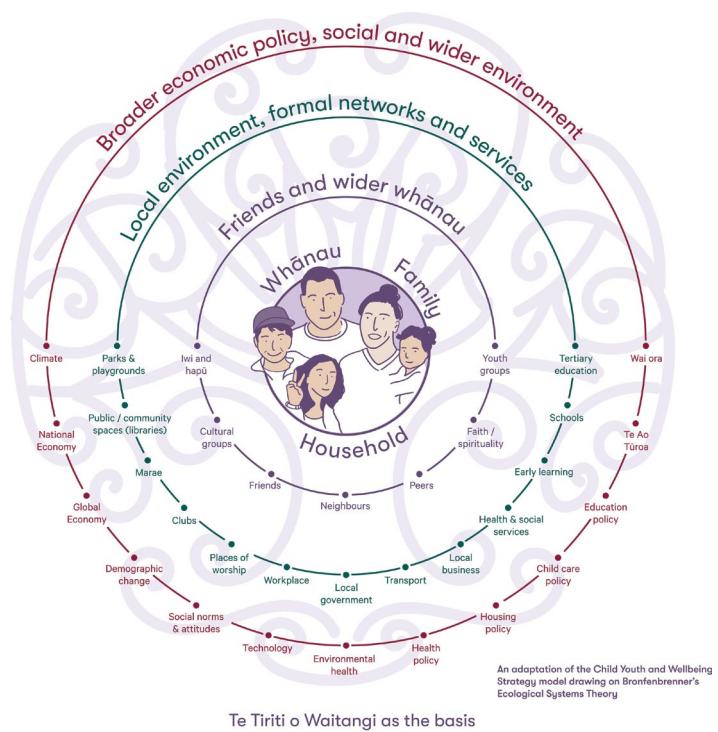


FIGURE 1: SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL VIEW OF THE MAIN INFLUENCES ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND WELLBEING.

lifetime. It follows that the return on investing in the early years is compelling. A recent UK report, *Prioritising early childhood for a happier, healthier society*, estimated that a greater focus on investment in early childhood could generate £45.5 billion in value added for the national economy each year.

The challenge of implementing investment in the first 2000 days

The simplicity of the notion of investing in the first 2000 days belies the challenge of what this means in practice for the public service. No one intervention is enough on its own to move the dial, particularly for children and families that are facing adversity. No single agency ‘owns’ the first 2000 days; investment in the early years is fragmented across a wide range of agency silos, and there is little visibility of the nature of these siloed investments at national or local levels. Seeing beyond the narrow frame of government-funded service provision can be challenging, leading to missed opportunities to partner with local government, iwi, philanthropy, and the private sector to do things differently.

Improving outcomes in the first 2000 days requires investment and collaboration across a range of different actors to create a system of support that is integrated, coherent, and focused on what makes the biggest difference for children and their families. This is particularly relevant for those experiencing the greatest social and economic disadvantage. Focusing on ‘place’ makes this possible.

Place matters: Learning from community-led approaches

In October 2023, I embarked on a Harkness Fellowship to learn from the United States’ early years-focused, place-based initiatives and world-leading academics at Harvard, Stanford, and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

The United States is well ahead of us in understanding the infrastructure needed for community-led approaches to support better early-life outcomes. There is widespread appreciation across government, philanthropy, the academic community, and the non-government organisation (NGO) sector that investing in the enablers of place-based collaboration is crucial for getting things right in the early years. This is not because the United States has more sophisticated policy or investment approaches; rather, community-based approaches have emerged in response to even higher levels of fragmentation caused by an array of federal, state, and philanthropic investments that ‘don’t talk to each other’ and run the risk of being incoherent for families and communities.

Community leaders, early childhood advocates, and savvy funders have turned to place-based approaches as a way to bring together disparate parts of the local ‘early childhood ecosystem’ into a coherent whole.

Upgrading the “operating system” for the first 2000 days

Since returning to Aotearoa earlier this year, I have been reflecting on – to quote Minister Willis – the “operating system” needed for social investment to be successful in creating “more and better fences”. I am cautiously optimistic about the stated intent for Social Investment 2.0 (the revamped model first introduced by Sir Bill English under the previous National-led government, that takes a systematic approach to improving how government invests in social services) to have more of a focus on government working in partnership with communities, including iwi and NGOs, and to increasingly devolve the delivery of social services.

As Social Investment 2.0 takes shape, three main upgrades to the operating system are necessary to achieve this aspiration:

1. Shift from programmes to place

We would be wise to avoid a sole focus on interrogating the

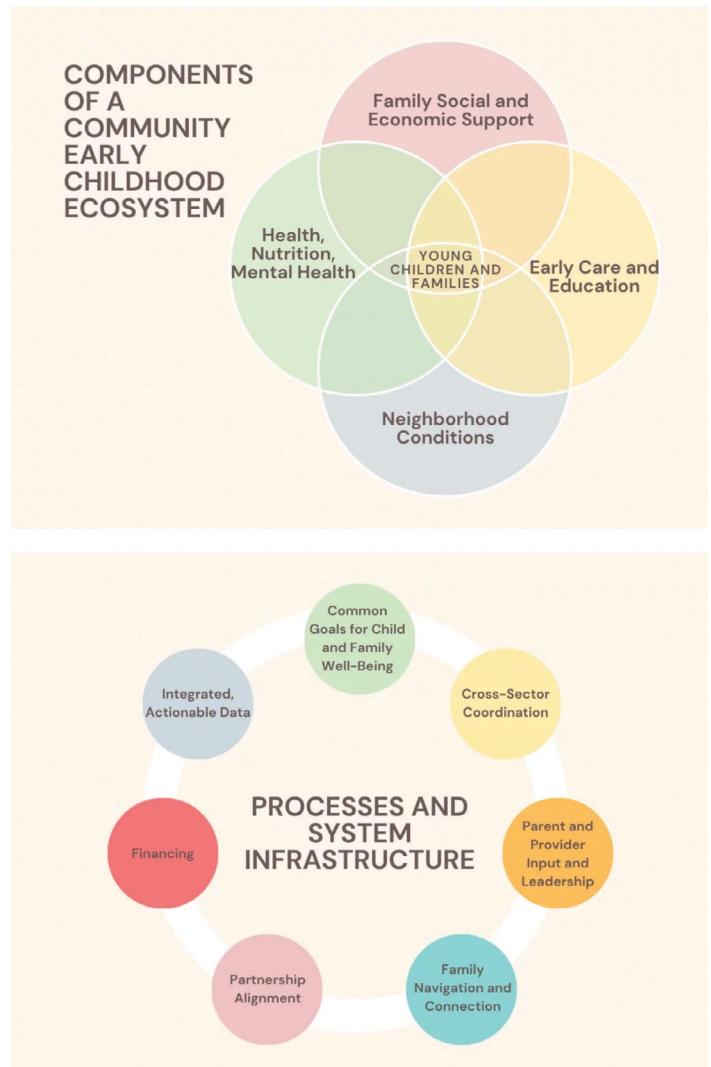


FIGURE 2: KEY ASPECTS OF A COMMUNITY EARLY CHILDHOOD ECOSYSTEM APPROACH. REFERENCE: FROM PROGRAM TO PLACE, JOAN LOMBARDI

effectiveness or ‘Social Return on Investment’ of discrete interventions. No ‘silver bullet’ intervention, programme, or service is enough on its own. Instead, we need to understand the portfolio of investments across the early childhood ecosystem in communities – including those that sit outside of central government – and create the permissions and platform for this to be (re)configured in ways that make a tangible difference to people’s lives.

We can learn from the United States’ place-based collaboration efforts about how to accelerate and scale this approach, such as Strive Together. This national network provides coaching, resources, and rigorous approaches that enable communities to develop their own roadmap for changing systems to improve outcomes for children and families at scale. Independent evaluation has demonstrated that this investment in place-based collaboration supports communities to achieve better outcomes faster.

2. Use data analytics to power up community-led transformation

Social investment's focus on the use of data analytics can provide invaluable intelligence to guide impactful investment in the first 2000 days, if we leverage the sense-making capability in communities. I was particularly inspired by the work of UCLA's Early Childhood Ecosystems Transformation Accelerator, where neighbourhood-level data analysis was used to convene parents, families, community leaders, and organisations to co-create strategies to build a future where all children thrive.

As the team at UCLA told me, "neighbourhoods are the key units of change". We need to leverage the power of tools like the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) to get down into neighbourhood-level analysis and plug that into the collective intelligence and sense-making capability that sits in communities. This provides a meaningful opportunity to triangulate IDI-derived insights with other forms of evidence, including longitudinal cohort studies (such as the Growing Up in New Zealand Study), practice-based evidence, lived experience, and indigenous knowledge systems.

3. Shape the solutions with those not currently well-served

Social investment is predicated on the idea that what we are doing isn't working for the families it most needs to work for. To get different outcomes, we must do things differently. For us in South Auckland, that has meant a focus on creating the spaces for local whānau – residents of communities such as Papakura and Manurewa who are raising young children – to design what different looks like.

It makes sense that the people closest to the issues have the best line of sight to what matters most and what is

About Harkness Fellowships

The New Zealand Harkness Fellowships are intended to enable outstanding mid-career New Zealand professionals in any field of study or vocation except health policy, to undertake a Fellowship programme that best suits their professional and personal objectives. The Fellowships seek to reinforce New Zealand-United States' links by enabling actual or potential leaders and opinion formers in New Zealand to benefit from new ideas, practices, and new contacts in the United States. Applications for 2025 will open later in the year. For more information, see: <https://harkness.org.nz/>



going to make the biggest difference. In the United States, parent councils and other fora for involvement in design and governance are commonplace. Initiatives like United for Brownsville actively invest in growing local parents' leadership for early years system transformation, and there is strong accountability back to the priorities for change that local parents have determined. These kinds of inclusive practices are crucial to giving social investment approaches the best chance of disrupting the inertia of the status quo and achieving significantly better outcomes, now and later.

Conclusion

Right now, where a child is born and where they grow up dramatically influences their later life outcomes. Investing in the first 2000 days is a strategic imperative that can be realised by taking a social investment approach. By shifting our focus to investment in place, leveraging data analytics, and unlocking local leadership, we can transform early childhood outcomes and achieve long-term social and economic benefits. Let us seize this opportunity to invest in our youngest citizens and secure our future prosperity as a nation. **PS**

Aimee Hadrup is a New Zealand Harkness Fellow. She has a background in public health, with extensive experience across the commissioning, implementation, and evaluation of prevention-focused initiatives. Aimee is passionate about building public sector capability for locally-led ways of working and developing mechanisms that enable whānau, iwi, and communities to actively transform Aotearoa's early years system. She currently leads the Tamariki Wellbeing team at The Southern Initiative, a place-based innovation team within Auckland Council dedicated to social and economic transformation in South Auckland. She is also a member of the IPANZ Board.

Join us for Aimee's webinar on this topic on 16 October 12-1pm. Register via the IPANZ website.