

NEW NORMAL

Same inequities or engaged Te Tiriti partnership?

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Abstract

As the government shifts its focus from COVID-19 elimination to addressing the longer-term social and economic repercussions of the pandemic, it is critical that Māori are able to partner and lead in decision-making. In the new normal of a post-COVID Aotearoa, the transformational vision of just relationships set out by Matike Mai is more relevant than ever. Responses that do not locate Māori at their centre will maintain, or deepen, the inequities that existed prior to the pandemic. To meet the challenges ahead, we need to draw on Aotearoa's dual knowledge systems and the richness of mātauranga Māori. Rather than a centralised, top-down approach, we need diverse sources of expertise, experience and leadership, with communities as the locus of decision-making, orientation and direction of recovery.

Keywords

COVID-19, Te Tiriti, mātauranga, science, wellbeing

Introduction

As the government shifts its focus from COVID-19 elimination to addressing the longer-term social and economic repercussions of the pandemic, it is critical that Māori are able to partner and lead in decision-making. The failure to equitably include Māori in strategy discussions throughout the pandemic was widely criticised, particularly in relation to tangihanga restrictions and the Public Health Response Bill. Māori public health specialists openly challenged a one-size-fits-all approach to pandemic recovery, while others questioned the government's exclusive authority to make

decisions in the best interests of Māori communities. At the time of writing, there were 27 active cases of COVID-19, all in managed isolation and quarantine (Ministry of Health, 2020). With 22 deaths nationally, mortality levels in Aotearoa New Zealand are among the lowest worldwide (John Hopkins University, 2020). However, if community transmission takes hold, as we have seen in other countries that had earlier brought the virus under control, Māori and Pacific communities will be most at risk of infection and death (Steyn et al., 2020).

The acute impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous

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peoples, including Māori, extends far beyond immediate health threats (“Coronavirus impact on world’s indigenous”, 2020). Emerging international evidence suggests the social and economic impacts of the pandemic will be longer and more intense for people living in precarious conditions. In Aotearoa we know that previous economic recessions hit Māori and Pacific communities the hardest, with consequences across generations. Before COVID-19, one out of every four tamariki Māori was living in poverty (Stats NZ, 2019) and over 40% of all Māori were living in areas of high deprivation.

Even with the government’s \$50b COVID-19 budget plan, Treasury forecasted that unemployment would peak nationally at 9.6% in June this year (Whyte, 2020). At 8.2% Māori unemployment was just shy of this leading into the pandemic (March quarter), and economists predict that levels will surge over the next two years. Unsurprisingly, Budget 2020 was firmly focused on job creation and getting the economy back on track. Among the suite of investments, the government has thus far earmarked \$900 million for specific Māori initiatives, including a \$200 million Māori employment package, \$400 million for Māori education and \$137 million for extending Whānau Ora (McLachlan, 2020; Treasury, 2020). Several of the Budget initiatives will help address short-term employment and training needs in the regions where the impacts will be deepest. But the opportunity to take a long-term transformational view that enables Māori to not just survive, but thrive, was arguably lost.

Transforming power relations through Te Tiriti

Worldwide, there is a growing recognition that the fixation with efficiency and profit that has characterised the late capitalism of the past four decades is a significant contributor to this global pandemic, and other serious environmental threats (Aldred, 2020). The privileging of efficiency over resilience has hollowed out the capacity of societies and governments to respond to change, and increased harm among those rendered most marginal through colonisation, exploitation and marginalisation. These effects have arisen, in part, from the removal of the public goods required to guard and protect societies against worst-case and unforeseen scenarios, and the concentration of capital and power among elites.

In Aotearoa the growing awareness that these sources of social injustice threaten social sustainability and cohesion has focused attention on the

constitutional arrangements that underpin the operation of key societal institutions. A decade ago the government embarked on a constitutional review, and the subsequent report, published in 2013 by an expert panel, advised the Crown to continue to pursue a national dialogue. In the same year the Iwi Chairs’ Forum independently promoted what became the Working Group on Constitutional Transformation, under the leadership of Professor Margaret Mutu and Dr Moana Jackson.

The report by the Working Group Matike Mai Aotearoa was published in 2016. It involved hundreds of hui throughout the motu and discussions with thousands of participants, complemented by written submissions, focus groups and interviews. Matike Mai articulates a collective vision of new constitutional arrangements intended to honour the rights, contributions and aspirations of all people of Aotearoa. The basis for constitutional authority incorporated understandings of the independence of hapū and iwi, as well as their interdependence through whakapapa. The report proposed independent powers for Māori and the Crown to make decisions for their peoples, while acknowledging their interdependence under *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*. *Te Tiriti*, along with *He Whakaputanga o Te Rangatiratanga o Niu Tīreni* and the United Nations *Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People*, underpinned this conceptualisation of shared power:

We call those spheres of influence the “rangatiratanga sphere”, where Māori make decisions for Māori and the “kāwanatanga sphere” where the Crown will make decisions for its people. The sphere where they will work together as equals we call the “relational sphere” because it is where the Tiriti relationship will operate. (Matike Mai Aotearoa, 2016, p. 9)

In the “new normal” of a post-COVID Aotearoa, this transformational vision of just relationships is more relevant than ever. To be able to “work together as equals” requires more than consultation and non-performative acts of Crown responsiveness given the systemic racism that is part and parcel of our colonial history and its unresolved injustices and inequities. The Crown needs to match the radical generosity of Māori and bring to the table a genuine commitment to power and resource sharing.

The importance of local decision-making

While there is immense pressure to fast-track economic recovery, responses designed by and for largely Pākehā constituencies will maintain, or deepen, the inequities that existed prior to the pandemic. It is crucial that the decisions informing our recovery and rebuild are based on evidence that is fit for purpose. Evidence takes many forms and, in times of crises, the values and knowledge systems of dominant groups are particularly privileged. To meet the challenges ahead, we need to draw on the richness of mātauranga Māori—Māori knowledge and its distinctive forms of enquiry and ways of knowing—alongside subject and disciplinary knowledge. The opportunity to draw on dual knowledge systems significantly increases the social actors involved and the breadth and depth of the response that is critical in determining positive Māori futures and a resilient nation. Rather than a centralised, top-down approach, we need diverse sources of expertise, experience and leadership.

Throughout COVID-19, Indigenous communities have repeatedly demonstrated innovative modes of distributed leadership and a deep capacity to care for each other, empowered by the strength of their connections and knowledge of kin and kin-like relations. The response by Ngāi Tūhoe exemplified a wider iwi and Te Ao Māori approach that contextualised and complemented, rather than simply mimicked, Ministry of Health guidelines. Using their own infrastructure, information and resources, Ngāi Tūhoe were able to rapidly assess need, formulate strategy and develop a public face to avoid friction at checkpoints set up on highways to prevent potentially infected travellers from entering Tūhoe territory. According to iwi chair Tamati Kruger, once the call to action went out across the iwi, the collective response was clear: “They immediately said: ‘We must take responsibility. We must show strong leadership, we must demonstrate care for our communities and support the national effort to get rid of Covid-19’” (as cited in Oram, 2020).

The iwi strategy was inclusive, catering to both Māori and non-Māori residents within the rohe, as well as Ngāi Tūhoe living in cities in other tribal domains. Despite the rigours of lockdown, the communities of Tūhoe were protected and supported, and emerged with a reinforced understanding of their relationship with the natural environments, and a generous willingness to share their insights:

We are so eager to engage in these conversations, to contribute to the rebuilding of a very, very much

stronger New Zealand society, a society that is now acutely aware of its relationship with nature and its obligations to be a far wiser caretaker of our natural resources. (Kruger, as cited in Oram, 2020)

The adaptive capacities exemplified by Ngāi Tūhoe and others have always existed within Te Ao Māori but, for many New Zealanders, the pandemic placed them in their purview for the first time. Māori communities have long experience in local and social infrastructures (especially marae), and well-established networks for dealing with the impacts of ongoing colonialism, natural disasters, pandemics and mass death. When grounded local solutions have been properly resourced, outcomes have been positive for everyone. We need to learn from these examples and build this evidence systematically into our response with co-determined strategies and solutions.

As our Te Tiriti partner, the government has an important role to play. But everyone will lose out if community agency and local intelligence is not acknowledged, resourced and utilised. Knowledge applied successfully to practice is one form of community-held evidence, with Māori and Pacific communities having expertise in local solutions. We have a unique window of opportunity within which to take stock of these potentials, with the knowledge that optimising them requires communities to be the locus of decision-making, orientation and direction of recovery.

Re-imagining our futures through a Māori lens

The recovery cannot be a return to the inequalities of the normal. Rather, the opportunity is to collectively and courageously re-imagine our futures and address unjust and unsustainable inequities.

In so doing we need to address what is wrong through an unrelenting focus on equity but also amplify and extend what is strong. We should learn through our more respectful treatment of te taiao, support mana motuhake in diverse communities and households, and strengthen the foundations for whānau flourishing. With worldviews that are inherently long term and holistic, Māori are well positioned to lead circular economies. Māori models of regenerative agriculture and ecotourism can help shape a globally distinctive Indigenous sector that has intergenerational and environmental well-being at its core.

Our structurally youthful Māori and Pacific populations are a taonga, a demographic gift that must not be squandered in the post-COVID reset. Proactive investment in their potential will

not only benefit their wider whānau and future whānau but, in areas like Gisborne and Northland, is critical for futureproofing regional economies.

Research in many diverse but interconnected fields must be a critical part of these understandings and Rauika Māngai (2020) have recently released a reworking of Vision Mātauranga (VM), the vehicle through which Crown funding bodies have understood, and restricted, their responsibilities to Māori. Distilling wide experience of Māori in the science sector, *A Guide to Vision Mātauranga* complements Matike Mai and presents a transformational approach to best practice for knowledge generation in Aotearoa. The critical features are unreserved acknowledgement of, investment in and engagement of Māori knowledge, people and resources on the basis of an “engaged Treaty relationship” throughout the science sector. This will require significant development in the science sector and its infrastructures in terms of mapping activities, establishing researcher competencies, VM assessment standards and mātauranga Māori centred measures of science excellence. It also envisages considerable advancements of the Māori science sector with the creation of mechanisms for Māori control of mātauranga, a national research agenda and new research funding streams, along with capability and capacity building processes.

If the pandemic has taught New Zealanders anything, it is that our well-being, as individuals and collectives, is intimately connected to the well-being of those around us. To do well, we must be well. To be well, the whenua and the wai must be well. At the heart of our well-being are connections with each other and our environments, and the collective concept of a good life.

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Glossary

Aotearoa	Māori name for New Zealand; lit. “the land of the long white cloud”
hapū	subtribes that share a common ancestor
hui	meetings
iwi	tribal kin group
mana motuhake	autonomy, independence, authority
Māori	Māori knowledge
marae	tribal meeting grounds

motu	country, land, nation
Pākehā	a person of predominantly European descent
rangatiratanga	self-determination, autonomy
rohe	area, region
taiao	world, Earth, natural world, environment, nature
tamariki	children
tangihanga	funerals, rites for the dead
taonga	treasure, protected natural resource
Te Ao Māori	Māori worldview
wai	water
whakapapa	genealogy, ancestry, familial relationships
whānau	family, extended family
whenua	land

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