A Focus on the How not the Who

localism in Aotearoa through a community-led lens

Abstract
Emerging localism discussions in Aotearoa must look further than a structured devolution of roles and responsibilities from central to local government. New operating models are needed that build from local wisdom and leadership to actively involve and empower local communities and iwi/Māori as genuine partners in decision- and solution-making for their places. Taking a ‘learning by doing’ focus to incentivise and support local stakeholders to better work together is essential. Future localist success will require greater power sharing and concerted trust building at all levels.

Keywords community-led development, locally-led change, collaboration, community empowerment, participatory democracy

The growing discussion around localism is both timely and important to New Zealand’s future well-being and success. It is recognised that traditional top-down ways of addressing social, economic and environmental challenges need to change. No matter where you sit on the political spectrum, there are outcomes we all collectively aspire to and care about: an end to child poverty; thriving cities and regions where housing is affordable; improved water quality and healthier environments; communities being equipped and able to deal with both natural disasters and the realities climate change is increasingly thrusting upon us.

With around 80% of all services and programmes planned, commissioned and/or delivered from the centre in Aotearoa, it shouldn’t be surprising that as a nation we have come to expect that central government needs to lead from the front to ‘fix’ things. However, fuelled by both party politics and the national media, the government blame and credit-taking games have become something of an Achilles heel and a distraction. We need to focus both on who has the mandate, power and resources to do things and on how we work together across sectors and layers of government, with community and with Māori to enable true transformative change, both locally and nationally.

Having worked in the community change space for more than two decades, it’s clear to me that the biggest potential for change comes when top-down and bottom-up meet somewhere in the middle.1 The

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magic happens when trusted relationships enable everyone’s expertise, energy and resources to be harnessed, with the results including:

- innovative solutions and enhanced service delivery that are both responsive to local context and tailored to support both needs and emerging opportunities;
- empowered citizens and communities who feel valued and connected, leading to increased social capital and resilience;
- improved coordination and integration of local planning and investment processes; and
- strengthened relationships and confidence to plan, work, innovate and co-invest together in ongoing ways.

In their book *The New Localism*, Jeremy Nowak and Bruce Katz chronicle the structural shift in the way 21st-century problems are solved: bottom-up rather than top-down (led by cities), multi-sectoral rather than exclusively government (driven by networks), and interdisciplinary rather than specialised (drawing from diverse expertise and experiences). Their work focuses on cities, and cites the gains achieved when trusted relationships are strengthened and woven together. This enables local contexts in which change in our communities occurs, as do the relationships and opportunities afforded through recent Treaty settlement processes. An authentic Kiwi localist approach needs to promote, grow and deepen more authentic partnering that intentionally brings together iwi/Māori and broader community aspirations and plans. In the words of Sir Tipene O’Regan:

> We can now afford to dream and we have the resource and the human capacity to grow our dream. What we cannot afford to do is fail to dream. At the heart of that dream must lie the constant process of continual reclamation of the remarkable compact we commemorate today. Whatever the actual intent and mutual understandings of the parties to the Treaty of 1840 – or, indeed, the misunderstandings – it has provided us with both an historical foundation and a heritage on which we can stand our future. (O’Regan, 2019)

In this regard, the Ruapehu Whānau Transformation Plan provides an example to learn from. Guided by the teachings of Koro Ruapehu (their maunga/mountain), who is said to ‘look after every living thing in his shadow’, local iwi have initiated and facilitated new processes involving everyone in their 4,000-strong community to collectively identify goals and solutions to improve outcomes for local whenau and the community as a whole. This has brought together community leaders, elected members, agency representatives and local supermarket owners to talk, work and take action together. And in Ōpotiki, iwi, local government, community and business partnerships have enabled significant long-term collective planning for locally-led...
Within a localism paradigm, greater decentralisation of power, decision making and resources to local government needs to be accompanied by corresponding increases in community engagement, participation and activation. Inspiring Communities’ experience in community change suggests that localism discussions and debates need to attend to the broader range of factors that support long-term community transformation.

In our work, we’ve seen that four key dimensions need aligned attention and investment to enhance local well-being outcomes. This means that personal, relational, structural and cultural elements must be progressed together to enable transformational community change – as represented in Figure 2.

For example, changing legislation or structures or allocating more money and decision making to a regional or local level (the structural quadrant) won’t of themselves be enough. Equal attention is also needed to the:

- **personal quadrant:** building skills and capabilities of local leaders and citizens so that they are equipped and confidently able to step up and authentically participate and lead in both local decision making and action taking. Localism requires citizens to be more than passive participants in community engagement processes. Instead, active citizens are valued as co-production partners alongside government and others in a ‘doing with’ approach rather than doing for or to;

- **relational quadrant:** complex issues have multiple root causes and drivers and require joined-up, collaborative responses. Building capacity to collaborate, investing in relationships and developing effective long-term partnering mechanisms within and across sectors and communities are essential;

- **cultural quadrant:** as a result of doing things together and seeing results at first hand, local levels of trust, confidence, possibility and optimism build. New norms and ways of engaging and working together become established (the local ‘how to’), speeding up next-phase local problem solving and collective action taking.

Power is another element that has a significant impact on collaborative change processes and, as such, it sits at the centre of the quadrants frame. Power dynamics influence what things happen and how in communities and whom for and/or with as a result. Localist or community-led approaches by nature require a purposeful redistribution of power to enable local people to be more equal partners in decision making and taking. As the UK Commission on the Future of Localism has observed:

> Fostering localism is a marathon, not a sprint. The change that’s required cannot be achieved through policy and legislative levers alone. National government must set the conditions for localism to flourish, devolve power and resources to local areas and strengthen the capacity of our community institutions. But we must also change practices, culture and behaviour within local government. It is crucial that we focus on building strong relationships between local government, civil society, local businesses and people around a shared interest in place. Only then will we create the environment for local initiatives to thrive and unlock the power of community. (Commission on the Future of Localism, n.d., p.9)

As it stands, moving functions and services from central to local government doesn’t mean that local people and communities will necessarily have any greater say over or stake in outcomes than they do now. Local communities have good reason to be sceptical. In the UK, where austerity has driven much of the localism agenda, massive central government cuts to local council budgets have brought corresponding slashing of local service delivery, with communities (and councils) left reeling as a result. In many instances localism has resulted in ‘double devolution’ – from central government to local government, and then from local

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**Figure 2**

### TRANSFORMATION WITHIN COMMUNITIES – DIMENSIONS OF CHANGE –

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quadrants of Change</th>
<th>POWER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The attitudes, behaviours, actions and value-sets of individuals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relational</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The connection, ties and trust between people and organisations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structural</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The systems, structures and formal ‘rules’ that govern communities, families, organisations, government and society as a whole</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The culture of a community is the unwritten ‘rules’ of the game – the way we do things around here.</td>
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Adapted from Lederach, Neufeldt and Culbertson, 2007
government to neighbourhoods and households (Painter et al., 2011, p.4).

While we need to learn from the UK’s devolution experience, there is a broader range of imperatives that we need to keep in our sights to enable positive change here in Aotearoa. Alongside issues of power sits trust. If localism is to work, it is essential that communities in Aotearoa are able to trust in processes that promise them greater local leadership and autonomy. Currently, trust is far from assured. Recent qualitative and quantitative research by UMR Research noted that 30% of New Zealanders were in favour of localism (more local services being provided and devolving things to communities is not cost efficient), health and safety (communities are unable to do things like build a playground that will meet new legislative standards and requirements), and professional capture (elected members and staff assuming they know what communities want and/or taking on the role of expert).

So, what and where to next? Current intentions to strengthen the well-being focus of both local and central government provides greater mandate for and expectation of joined-up approaches at both central and local levels. It is important to recognise that in many cases, a localist approach doesn’t actually require central government to change anything. Controlled by local decision makers and 30% against, with a further 40% either neutral or unsure (UMR, 2019).

Despite the effective community engagement and empowerment rhetoric espoused by most local councils in New Zealand, good practice has frequently fallen short of policy promises. And communities have noticed. Two key measures in the Quality of Life Survey have tracked the public’s perception of their influence on council decision making and confidence in their council making decisions that are in the best interests of their city or local area. Results across both measures have remained low over the last decade, with 2018 results across the six cities surveyed showing a drop in confidence in council decision making from 38% to 33% over the 2016–18 period.8 It’s not just citizens and communities who have trust issues with local councils. As Christchurch mayor Lianne Dalziel noted in her address to the 28 February 2019 Localism Symposium in Wellington, local government trust in communities has also reduced. Again, there are likely to be multiple factors at play here, including questions of economies of scale (that
noting that place-based initiatives need freedom to achieve outcomes through co-created processes, projects and approaches that best fit local contexts; one-way siloed accountability approaches that report back to either ministers or mayors are no longer appropriate;

- more flexible funding available for central government agencies based in regions to help seed and feed early-stage locally-led innovation and response; this capacity has significantly eroded over the last decade and is sorely missed at local levels;

- capability building at both local and central government levels to help support and enhance more authentic community engagement, partnering and participation outcomes in and alongside local communities;

- commitment to ‘barrier busting’ by a designated senior officials group so that emerging challenges can be navigated in real time and inform ongoing development of community well-being policy at the national level.

As Minister for Local Government Nanaia Mahuta told the Local Government New Zealand conference in July 2018:

Local government has a critical role in delivering on these outcomes for all New Zealanders. I understand that project localism will build that proposition. This in my mind is not merely a matter of decentralisation. Local leadership delivers on well-being. There is an opportunity for new thinking about how a circular economy, social enterprise, procurement, economic development partnerships deliver better outcomes. This will be a game changer but not because it separates out localism and local solutions but because it reinforces coordination and collaboration. (Mahuta, 2018)

The author was deeply involved in helping shape and advance intersectoral collaboration in Waitakere City (west Auckland), which was recognised nationally for its innovation. For more see Craig, 2004 and Craig and Courtney, 2004.

For example, in 2016 Inspiring Communities, Local Government New Zealand and the Institute for Governance and Policy Studies co-hosted a Start Local seminar involving 160 people from across sectors and localities. Ten top tips for starting local and building resilient communities were noted: see http://inspiringcommunities.org.nz/c_resource/start-local-seminar.


See https://www.doc.govt.nz/oour-council/current-projects/urban-development-

See the New Economics Foundation’s Ladder of Participation, which builds from Sherry Arnstein’s earlier version.

The 2018 Quality of Life project is a partnership between Auckland, Hamilton, Wellington, Porirua, Hutt, Christchurch and Dunedin city councils and Greater Wellington Regional Council (covering around 62% of New Zealand’s population): see http://www.qualityoflifeproject.govt.nz.

For more on Hokonui Highways see Phillips, 2017.


The Wellington Co-Op model is based on a similar Christchurch initiative, Food Together (http://foodtogether.kiw!), who have generously shared their ‘how to’ and experience.

For example, a 2014 evaluation found that before joining the Co-op, 33% of people were eating three or more servings of vegetables a day and two or more servings of fruit a day. After becoming members, 62% were meeting this Ministry of Health guideline.


https://predatorfreenz.org/map/national-map.

Note that investment should and could equally support and deepen existing collaborative efforts where they are underpinned by a localist intent and framework.

References


UMR (2019) ‘Localism: qualitative and quantitative research’, research findings presented by Mark Elliott at the 28 February Localism symposium, Wellington http://www.lgnz.co.nz/assets/Localism/05c21e7c11/Presentation-6-Marc-Elliott.pdf