

# A Focus on the How not the Who localism in Aotearoa through a community-led lens

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## 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

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**T**he 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.

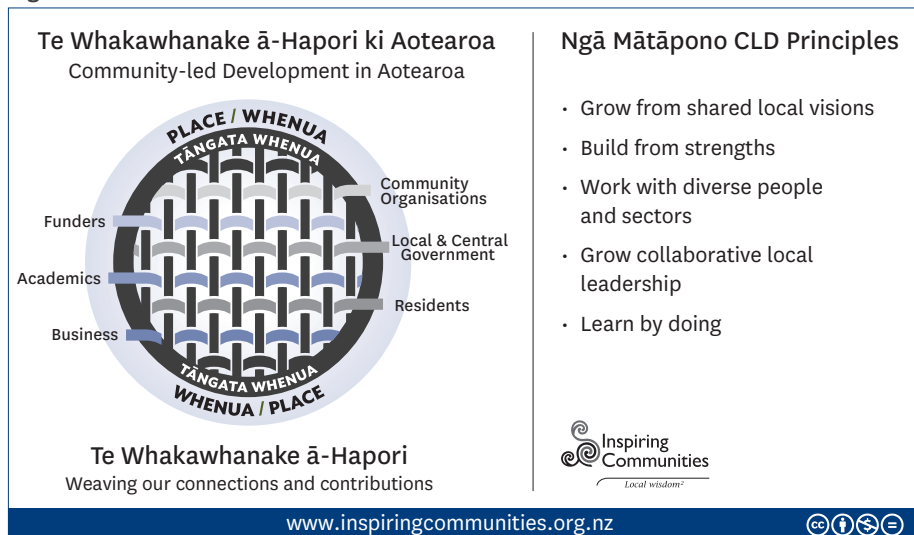
With around 80% of all services and programmes planned, commissioned and/or delivered from the centre in Aotearoa, it shouldn’t be surprising that as a nation we have come to expect that central government needs to lead from the front to ‘fix’ things. However, fuelled by both party politics and the national 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.<sup>1</sup> The

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Nelson-based **Megan Courtney** is a founding member of the Inspiring Communities team: see [www.inspiringcommunities.org.nz](http://www.inspiringcommunities.org.nz). Megan spent 15 years working in local government, with her former Waitākere City Council roles focused on facilitating and brokering sector, place-based and citywide partnerships to improve community outcomes. She has also developed practical partnering tools and resources and policy guidance for those working at the collaboration coalface.

Figure 1



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 thriving places like Pittsburgh and Copenhagen are making by taking a place-based systems approach to improving well-being outcomes (Nowak and Katz, 2017). Preston in the United Kingdom, too, is being internationally lauded. Ranked the most improved urban area in the UK to live and work, its self-proclaimed localist economic agenda has helped drive a significant drop in unemployment and boosted local confidence, pride and vitality. ‘Practical policies to build wealth for the

whole community collaboratively with a number of partners’ being acknowledged as playing a key role in its success (Partington, 2018).

Complexity and innovation sciences equally point to the imperative that sustainable change requires supporting diverse sectors, people and communities to shape the solutions that affect them. Community voices and knowledge, along with local capacity to act and co-invest, need to be better recognised and enabled here in Aotearoa. For the last decade, Inspiring Communities – a team of specialists in community-led development – has argued that community-led development provides a really useful addition to New Zealand’s national policy, investment, system and practice frameworks.

Community-led development is based on the premise that all communities have the ability to thrive. While providing neither a recipe nor a silver bullet (they don’t exist), community-led development offers a place-based principles approach (see Figure 1) so that the contributions of everyone connected to a place are harnessed and woven together. This enables local visions, priorities and aspirations to be realised. One could say that it’s localism by another name. Thus, community-led development provides a useful lens for framing what a localist approach in New Zealand could look like and some of the pathways needed to get there.

To date, some of the emergent localism dialogue has leaned heavily on central and local government examples from the likes

of Switzerland, Germany and the UK. While we can learn from their lessons and models, our starting place here is inherently different. *It’s our local* that we need to plan forward from, starting from where we are and have been.<sup>2</sup> In Aotearoa New Zealand the Treaty of Waitangi ensures that the histories and world views of tāngata whenua shape relationships, actions and outcomes in local communities. Māori tikanga (values and practices) influences the 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<sup>3</sup> 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 whānau 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 Ōpōtiki, iwi, local government, community and business partnerships have enabled significant long-term collective planning for locally-led

social and economic transformation, particularly around aquaculture and tourism development. It is expected that long-awaited confirmation of central government co-investment in required local infrastructure upgrades will enable this project to take its next big steps in 2019.<sup>4</sup>

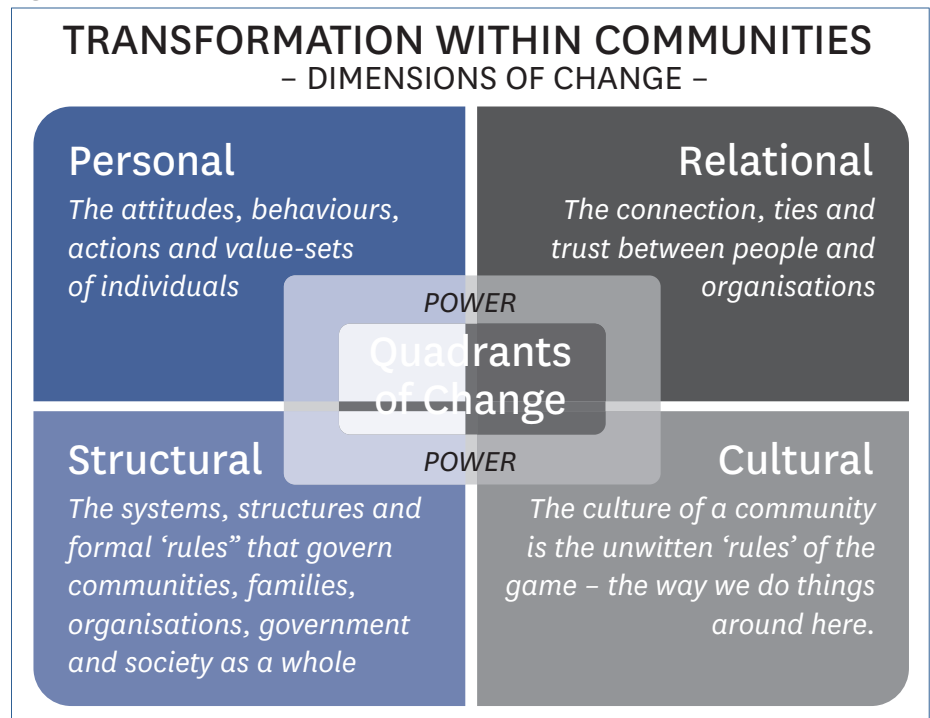
Alongside iwi/Māori, local government could and should play a larger role in leading and directing community well-being efforts. However, our observations of local government practice in the last decade would suggest that simply moving a wholesale range of functions and powers from central to local government will not automatically generate localist success. 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;<sup>1</sup>
- *relational quadrant*: complex issues have multiple root causes and drivers

Figure 2



Adapted from Lederach, Neufeldt and Culbertson, 2007

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

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

more than nine tonnes of fresh produce to 1,400 Wellington homes each week, more cheaply than families can buy it at the supermarket. This collaborative community-led approach is supported by 400 volunteer hours per week (annual value \$320,000), resulting in an estimated \$560,000 annual saving for low-income family budgets, as well as delivering a range of health, nutrition and social capital benefits.<sup>10</sup>

The call for New Zealand to be predator free by 2050 has also sparked significant new collaborative investment and action at multiple levels, involving communities, iwi, private businesses, philanthropists, innovators, educators, schools, scientists, and local and central government.<sup>11</sup> While alignments are being progressed across key agencies working at the national level, it is recognised that the success of Predator Free 2050 will ultimately come from local effort – everyone working in their own patch towards the national objective. Diverse collaborative efforts involving over 1,600 groups are now underway all over Aotearoa, as seen on the Predator Free NZ map.<sup>12</sup>

What localism in New Zealand could most benefit from is more concerted investment in trialling, joining up and learning from diverse localist initiatives around the country that are intentionally focused on making progress around locally defined well-being outcomes and priorities.<sup>13</sup> This could usefully be supported by some key commitments at multiple levels, including:

- provision of targeted incentives to support well-being convening and collaboration processes – noting that local leadership may be initiated from any number of potential partners, not just central or local government;
- mandate and resourcing for central government agencies to be more actively part of follow-on well-being collaboration processes, especially those linked to council long-term plan and well-being indicator processes;
- ensuring dedicated resources and capacity support so that local communities can be active partners in both well-being collaboration processes and next-step doing phases;
- exploration of new co-investment and shared local accountability mechanisms,

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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.<sup>6</sup>

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

many cases, a localist approach doesn't actually require central government to change anything. It's happening now. Take, for example, the Hokonui Huanui initiative in Gore, where local agencies (central and local government agencies and community) have been working and planning together to create a pathway from 'learning to earning' for young people in their district.<sup>7</sup> Similar locally-led youth employment initiatives have also been underway in other local and regional communities for some time, with philanthropy frequently providing catalytic co-investment<sup>8</sup> alongside (but sometimes ahead of) government partners.

Across the Wellington region, collective efforts to ensure that low-income communities have better access to affordable, healthy food is generating positive impacts on health, well-being and family budgets. Led by Wesley Community Action and Regional Public Health, the Wellington Fruit and Vege Co-operative<sup>9</sup> has established partnerships with 11 community hosts (teams) across the region. Supported by local volunteers, community packing hubs are distributing

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)

for starting local and building resilient communities were noted: see [http://inspiringcommunities.org.nz/ic\\_resource/start-local-seminar](http://inspiringcommunities.org.nz/ic_resource/start-local-seminar).

- 3 See <https://www.ruapehuwhanautransformation.com/our-story>.
- 4 See <https://www.odc.govt.nz/our-council/current-projects/harbour-development/Pages/default.aspx>.
- 5 See the New Economics Foundation's Ladder of Participation, which builds from Sherry Arnstein's earlier version.
- 6 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>.
- 7 For more on Hokonui Highways see Phillips, 2017.
- 8 See <http://www.toddfoundation.org.nz/youth-employment>.
- 9 The Wellington Co-Op model is based on a similar Christchurch initiative, Food Together (<http://foodtogether.kiwi/>), who have generously shared their 'how to' and experience.
- 10 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.
- 11 For more on The Predator Free NZ approach see <https://www.doc.govt.nz/nature/pests-and-threats/predator-free-2050/goal-tactics-and-new-technology/>. As an example of how Predator Free intentions are being shaped and embedded regionally and locally in Taranaki see <https://predatorfreenz.org/5126-2/> and <https://www.trc.govt.nz/environment/working-together/pf-taranaki2050/>.
- 12 <https://predatorfreenz.org/map/national-map/>.
- 13 Note that investment should and could equally support and deepen existing collaborative efforts where they are underpinned by a localist intent and framework.

- 1 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.
- 2 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

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