

Working in Partnership: Evaluation and the Whanau development project

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Abstract

The Whanau¹ Development Project (WDP) is a three-year initiative of the New Zealand Government that gives effect to its “Reducing Inequalities” and “Capacity Building” policies for Maori. The WDP, and its participatory-focused evaluation, put into effect a Ministry of Social Development (MSD) partnership approach to engaging Maori communities and improving social service delivery generally.

Twelve initiatives in six regions have been set up through local Maori decision-making and based on local aspirations and priorities for whanau. They range from whanau-based organic food gardens to skill development, youth support and mentoring programs.

Each community has identified WDP goals based on their particular focus for whanau development. In parallel, the government has two high level goals for the WDP. MSD has contracted out the evaluation but is working collaboratively with the evaluators, PHP Consulting Ltd. The control of the evaluation is being shared, satisfying the two key stakeholder interests (individual communities and government) in providing information about progress towards both sets of goals.

Prior to local level evaluation plans being agreed, two-day training sessions were provided within the six regions to introduce evaluation concepts, to clarify government and community expectations about evaluation of the WDP, and to build capacity and encourage participation in evaluation at the local level.

This presentation will look at how evaluation can support community and stakeholder participation in decision-making.

¹ Maori – extended family.

Introduction

The Whanau² Development Project (WDP) is a three-year pilot initiative of the New Zealand Government. It is one of a number of initiatives that give effect to its 'Reducing Inequalities' and 'Capacity Building' policies for Maori³. The (WDP), and its participatory-focused evaluation, put into effect a Ministry of Social Development⁴ partnership approach to engaging Maori communities and improving social service delivery generally.

The government has two high level goals for the WDP. These goals are to support and strengthen the capacity of Maori communities, particularly through education, health, housing and employment through better co-ordination of strategies across sectors; and to restore trust in government by working in partnerships with communities, providing strong social services, building safe communities and promoting community development. More specifically, it was intended that the WDP would work towards identifying and supporting programmes that would provide support to and develop families and whanau, with the objective of reducing whanau uptake of remedial social services. It was hoped that some understanding could be gained from the pilot about useful approaches to whanau based social services.

In parallel with the government goals, selected communities have identified WDP goals based on their particular focus for whanau development. Twelve initiatives in six regions have been set up through local Maori decision making and based on local aspirations and priorities for whanau. They range from whanau based organic food gardens to skill development, youth support and mentoring programmes. Control of the evaluation has been shared with the aim of satisfying the two primary stakeholder interests (individual pilot communities and government) in providing information about progress towards both sets of goals. Prior to local level evaluation plans being agreed, two-day training sessions were provided within the six regions to introduce evaluation concepts, to clarify government and community expectations about evaluation of the WDP, and to build capacity and encourage participation in evaluation at the local level.

The evaluation of the WDP is due to be completed in October 2003. This presentation explores some early experiences of a participatory approach to evaluation with Maori pilot communities and reflects on the conference theme of 'How can evaluation support community and stakeholder participation in decision making?'

Political Context and Community Implementation

In the lead up to the 1999 General Election, the New Zealand Labour Party signalled, in its pre-election manifesto, a significant commitment to reducing the social and economic inequalities that exist between Maori and the rest of New Zealand society. One of the key policy platforms underpinning this commitment was a focus on building the capacity of Maori communities, with a view to better enabling them to identify and address their own needs. The incoming Labour – Alliance Government followed through with this commitment, with significant investments made in initiatives that were 'by-Maori-for-Maori', where government would work with communities to develop local solutions to local problems, rather than imposing uniform solutions designed at the national level. Implicit in this approach was an emphasis on Government-community co-operation, where government provided resources and expertise, while communities provided direction, local level perspectives and commitment to the implementation of initiatives designed at the local level.

The WDP, managed by the Ministry of Social Development, emerged from this community driven approach to policy intervention and is in line with the government's social development approach. At the national level, the Ministry sought to establish a project that would strengthen and support whanau structures in order to ultimately reduce uptake of remedial social services by participating whanau. It was also hoped that, as part of that process, the Ministry would gain a better understanding of useful models for social services for whanau.

While each of the 12 community initiatives across the six regions differs in focus, depending on that community's aspirations for whanau, there are some common aspirations including:

- a wider recognition of the importance of whanau identity;
- shared knowledge and skills between generations, between older people and their grandchildren, between parents and their children; and

² The word '*whanau*' like '*family*' has many meanings. Its basic reference is to a cluster of families and individuals descended from a fairly recent ancestor, however it is a term applied to an increasingly wide variety of categories and groups (Metge, J. 1995).

³ Maori are the indigenous people of New Zealand. 'Closing the Gaps' and 'Reducing Inequalities' policies are intended to reduce the social and economic inequalities that exist between Maori and the rest of New Zealand society.

⁴ The Ministry of Social Policy and Work & Income New Zealand merged to form the Ministry of Social Development in 2001.

- the importance of whanau and whanau involvement in services for younger people such as employment, education or crime prevention services.

The location of pilot communities reflected the need for geographical spread across the country; the need to balance a variety of community characteristics such as urban/ rural, large/ small; the need to capture a diverse range of social issues; and the ability and willingness of communities to participate.

Each participating community was given the opportunity to define “whanau development” in its own community context; establish its own goals for whanau development; assess its own needs; and design and deliver its own services in response to those needs.

Whanau Development Project Stakeholders

The government and the participating ‘Maori communities’ are the two key partners in the WDP. However, both comprise separate stakeholder groups.

The government stakeholder is the Ministry of Social Development’s Policy Group, which was allocated the three-year WDP funding from the Closing the Gaps Cabinet Committee. The Policy Group had responsibility for establishing and managing the initiatives during the pilot period, to commission an evaluation of the WDP, and for subsequently advising the Social Equity Cabinet Committee (formerly the Closing the Gaps Cabinet Committee) about the project outcomes. As part of its oversight role, the Policy Group provides local level implementation support to WDP communities through an independent project manager, Kahui Tautoko Ltd (KTL). An independent project manager was selected in the hope that the relationship would be characterised more by trust than by a more formal purchaser/ provider relationship. The Ministry’s Evaluation Unit is responsible for managing the evaluation of the WDP and for providing advice to the Policy Group on evaluation aspects. The evaluation work has been contracted to independent evaluators, PHP Consulting Ltd (PHP).

A range of Maori communities are involved in the WDP. This reflects the diversity of Maoridom, government’s need to contract with established social service (umbrella) organisations with which it already had a relationship, and yet government’s focus on engaging and benefiting local Maori. The Maori pilot communities:

- may or may not be traditionally based (e.g. whanau/ hapu⁵ versus urban pan-Maori organisations)
- may be one group (in terms of geographic location) within a selected region, or several groups
- may be an existing organisation, or one formed for the WDP.

The contracted umbrella organisations may have had a continued involvement in the WDP, or just initial involvement until a locally based group took over the primary community focus and relationship.

The evaluation of the Whanau Development Project

Consistent with the overarching principles of the WDP, the Ministry of Social Development considered that a participatory evaluation, contracted to independent evaluators, with specific expertise in Maori community dynamics, was the most appropriate approach to achieving formative, process and outcome evaluation of the project.

It was hoped that a participatory approach would allow stakeholders, as far as possible, to share control and to have a multi-dimensional perception of their needs. In addition, it was believed that active participation of partners and stakeholders in the evaluation would build ownership, encourage joint actions based on mutual understanding of performance issues and successes, and would contribute to strengthened future planning and action. This is supported in the related literature (Patton, 1997; Stufflebeam et al, 1971, Wadsworth, 1997).

It was also felt that a participatory evaluation process would contribute positively to the relationships between participating providers and communities and the Ministry. In particular, government wanted to ensure that communities were given a major role in decision making in issues affecting them to enable trust in government to be strengthened/restored. It was an opportunity to ensure that evaluation tools and techniques were considered appropriate for the communities as each was unique.

The approach for the WDP evaluation fits with a definition of participatory (or collaborative) evaluation offered by Rossi et al (1999:444):

“An evaluation organized as a team project in which the evaluator and representatives of one or more stakeholder groups work collaboratively in developing the evaluation plan, conducting the evaluation, or disseminating and using the results.”

⁵ The term ‘hapu’ can be understood as groupings of whanau, linked by genealogy.

The participatory approach to the evaluation favoured by the Ministry was consistent with providers' and their communities' expectations of shared control over all aspects of the project. However, within this context, providers and communities clearly articulated a number of factors that posed limitations on the extent of their involvement in the evaluation. Principally, these were resource limitations. Within a confined set of resources, providers and communities were, without exception, more focused on investing in project implementation rather than project evaluation. Alongside this, a lack of evaluation expertise within the community was a (lesser) concern that was also articulated.

Training in evaluation for communities

In response to the lack of evaluation expertise identified across all participating communities, the Ministry provided training in the basics of evaluation. This contributed towards meeting the government's obligations to resource capability gaps that emerged during the life of the WDP. It also gave pilot service providers and communities, specific training in evaluation concepts, processes and techniques with the view to enhancing their understanding of what participation in the WDP evaluation might involve. In addition, it gave service providers and communities the opportunity for a mid-point review and crystallisation of their individual project objectives.

The training team used the Snyder Approach⁶ as a basis for the 1 – 2 day training sessions with the pilot communities. This is a participative approach which seeks to involve all stakeholders and is generally conducted using methods of action research. These methods provide both action outcomes in the form of improvement, and research outcomes in the form of increased understanding.

In embarking on the evaluation training, it was soon apparent that, in all but one community, evaluation was viewed as a process designed "to check up on us". This was not an unanticipated reaction as the literature suggests much research on Maori in the past has tended to emphasise negative statistics, and has been perceived by Maori as of little use due to a paucity of information in relation to ways to effect positive change (Jahnke & Taiapa, 1999). The need for appropriate approaches to investigating the lives of Maori people has long been emphasised by Maori academics and other scholars (Smith, 1999).

In this context, key to the success of the training was the trainers' decision to present and validate technical concepts and processes with a Maori philosophical view. The trainers drew parallels between a Maori parable and the evaluation process as a process of learning for continuous improvement. This was called *Te Oriori mo Tu Teremoana* (a lullaby composed for an unborn Maori chieftain) and it expressed a grandfather's hopes and dreams for his yet to be born mokopuna (grandchild). He hopes his unborn mokopuna will acquire, apply, and ultimately act as a custodian of knowledge, transmitting that knowledge in order to benefit future generations from his prior learning. These parallels with Maori philosophy resonated with communities, and significantly added to their level of comfort about the evaluation as a tool to support improvement of their initiative, rather than a tool to convey criticism. This part of the evaluation training was the most well received by all communities, and reaffirmed for the Ministry the importance of evaluators having a mix of both professional evaluation skills and an ability to interact with communities on their own terms.

In addition, the training was set within tikanga Maori (Maori cultural protocol). Each training course began with a mihimihi (welcome) and a karakia (blessing) and ended with a poroporaki (farewell). This allowed trainers to reinforce the understanding that the training was not only intended to be a participative process but honoured and worked within and alongside the knowledge and traditions of the people involved in the WDP.

Resultant roles and expectations - evaluation planning

As part of both the training and the wider evaluation planning processes, communities took the opportunity to define their preferred roles in, and associated expectations of, the evaluation. Across most communities, these have been:

- involvement in the evaluation planning process, including setting community evaluation goals, selecting achievable indicators, reviewing the Ministry's evaluation goals, and approving community level evaluation plans;
- maintaining oversight of local level relationships, including facilitating evaluator access to local stakeholders; and
- reviewing, and having opportunity to comment on, all evaluation reports.

The Ministry continues to support, in principle, the participatory approach to evaluation of community driven initiatives. The level of community participation originally envisaged by the Ministry has not, and is unlikely to occur, principally because communities have targeted most time investment towards project implementation

⁶ <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/snyder-b.html>

rather than project evaluation. However, the Ministry maintains the view that the invitation to participate has been instrumental in building on existing relationships. In those evaluation processes where communities have elected to participate, most notably the evaluation planning process, communities have narrowed their focus to a discrete area that is of most importance to them: “*what is it we want to know, and why do we want to know it?*” For most communities, this is focused on outcomes for recipients of whanau development services, but it has also included a range of other areas of interest, including quality of the community-government relationship, organisational outcomes, and in some cases, a “political barometer reading” of wider community perceptions of the whanau development provider.

Setting evaluation goals, objectives and questions

The government, as owner and sponsor of the WDP, established its evaluation interests relatively early in the process. At a general level, these were around information on:

- the outcomes resulting from the project (as identified by the participating communities and by Government) e.g., uptake of remedial social services;
- constructive approaches to whanau development in Maori communities; and
- the effective management of relationships associated with the project.

The community participants, however, required a significant level of support, through both the evaluation training and the evaluation planning processes, to develop and articulate their evaluation interests. In effecting the partnership approach, communities were assured that their interests sat alongside Government’s. As a consequence, once communities had achieved a level of confidence in participating in the evaluation planning process they did not feel constrained to simply accept Government’s interests as their own. Rather, communities took a significant further step in seeking to assess the evaluation interests of the Ministry as the owner-funder in the project.

The key benefit identifiable in the evaluation planning process was that communities offered the evaluators a true sense of the values, aspirations and imperatives underpinning whanau development in each of their community contexts. This provided material to focus the evaluation and, in turn, generate meaningful information for both the community participants and the Ministry as they each seek to understand how best to build relationships and understand and implement different approaches to whanau development.

Patton (1997) highlights a number of principles of participatory evaluation, some of which underpin the WDP evaluation. These are that the evaluation process involves participants learning evaluation logic and skills; that all aspects of the evaluation are understandable and meaningful to participants; and that the evaluation facilitator recognizes and values participants’ perspectives and expertise and works to help participants recognize and value their own and others’ expertise.

A number of the principles highlighted by Patton are not reflected in the WDP evaluation approach. The participants do not *own* the evaluation. While the pilot communities have been given the opportunity to develop their own programmes and become actively involved in the planning of their evaluation, this is being facilitated and conducted by a team of evaluators on behalf of the government. While it could be argued that the evaluation supports participants’ accountability to themselves and their communities – it should not be overlooked that this accountability is primarily for the purposes of informing the government.

The evaluation allowed two sets of goals and objectives for the evaluation of the project to be developed. From a pragmatic viewpoint, the early evaluation plans required a significant rationalisation of the (dual) evaluation objectives and questions, as the plans were too unwieldy to implement and risked placing a burden on the communities themselves. The level of resource that communities would have needed to dedicate to the evaluation did not reflect the relatively small scale of the project.

The refined evaluation plans comprised a national level plan and a plan for each community participating in the project (12 in total). The refinement process focused all parties on key and common information needs, within an overall evaluation framework. The new evaluation framework was developed in order to be relevant to all parties and located the interests of the stakeholders and their interactions with each other.

Progress of the evaluation

The project is now over two years through its three year life, and the evaluation is nearing its midpoint. Early in the evaluation planning, both the Ministry and the evaluators realised that the level of investment required to adequately plan the evaluation of a single project being operated quite differently across 12 sites around the country, and within 12 communities - all with very different community dynamics - had been somewhat underestimated. As a result, much effort has been brought to bear on managing a diverse range of community and political relationships and importantly, on developing evaluation plans that are both manageable to implement and meet the needs of the key stakeholders.

To date, the evaluation planning and training have been completed. An implementation evaluation has also been completed and the focus now is on an interim outcome evaluation which is due to be completed in October 2003.

How well can evaluation support community and stakeholder participation in decision making?

The WDP has been a pilot which genuinely attempted to engage Maori communities in decision making relating to the particular issues that face their communities. The participatory approach to the project has demanded, and to some extent achieved, processes that facilitate community and stakeholder involvement in decision making during the establishment and implementation phases.

The WDP evaluation has reflected this participatory approach to working with the communities involved. Some key areas where this has already occurred include the overall approach to the evaluation, the training in evaluation offered to communities, the active participation in the evaluation planning process and the reviewing of draft reports.

The training in evaluation was received positively by the majority of participants in all areas. Some of the feedback given was:

"We needed to know all this stuff when we were thinking about our project...it's like the cart's running and the horse is back in a paddock in Kaikohe!"

"We've always been involved in evaluations...we've always been looked at. This is different, we want to be involved in this."

"I have respect for the government's approach to this...as someone who works in community development I know that these opportunities do not come up very often for communities...we are committed to making it work."

One of the spin-offs from the training in evaluation has been the opportunity to communicate and debate government goals with community members at 'grass roots' level. For example, two communities in particular emphasised to the evaluators that some of the government goals for the WDP were aligned to their own existing work. The communities contended that any success arising from the WDP funding should not be solely attributed to this, but should be considered in light of the whanau-based development work already taking place within their communities.

The communities selected to be involved in the WDP were all at very different levels of knowledge and skill and consequently, even allowing for the evaluation training they all received, they differ in their ability to participate fully in the evaluation⁷. This will inevitably impact on decision making. For example, groups which were established prior to the WDP funding may have been in a better position to implement programmes quickly, and may have had systems already in place to collect information. This may enable the evaluation to provide a better representation of their activities and progress, which may in turn influence future decisions made by policy makers.

Those communities whose initiatives were well established at the time of the training in evaluation may have been in a better position to take advantage of it. For example, the opportunity to reflect on whether project activities were aligned with project objectives is likely to have influenced any subsequent decisions relating to programme improvement. For communities which had not begun to plan their projects (indeed some had had little or no project planning experience), the evaluation training may have been more difficult to anchor against their own experience.

The evaluation planning and training processes have provided valuable formative information to the Ministry's Policy Group about the WDP. Any future decisions relating to whanau based approaches to service delivery generally, or to partnerships with communities, may be based on information generated by this evaluation. Policy makers will also be looking for information relating to whether (and if so how) this project has increased the capacity and capability of Maori communities in terms of: building local leadership, infrastructure and resilience; developing local support for initiatives; reinvigorating local communities. The likelihood of the ongoing sustainability of any gains made under the WDP will also be of particular interest.

⁷ Training in Evaluation for the Whanau Development Project: A report to the Ministry of Social Development, Wellington, New Zealand. Prepared by Helen McNaught and PHP Consulting Ltd, August 2002.

While it is too early (and indeed not appropriate) to convey to this group the preliminary evaluation findings, it is fair to say that the project poses significant challenges to the Ministry in terms of its decision making on the future of the pilot project. The fundamental differences in the nature of the community defined needs and the resulting services delivered by each community-based provider render the outcomes findings difficult to compare across the different sites. In the future, it is hoped that the evaluation of the WDP will generate information to inform decisions relating to the value of the community driven approach to project definition, needs assessment, service design/delivery, and the overall benefits (or otherwise) of pursuing policy development, service design/delivery and evaluation from a participatory approach.

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