

COVID-19 Impact Insights Paper #6

Exercising rangatiratanga during the
COVID-19 pandemic

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Tino rangatiratanga – self-determination, sovereignty, independence, autonomy – is critical to understanding Māori authority. Wellbeing is significant to both individuals and communities, and collective expressions of tino rangatiratanga is both a contributor to a range of wellbeing outcomes, and a positive part of wellbeing for iwi, hapū, and whānau.

Māori, particularly through these collectives, have been exercising tino rangatiratanga in the face of challenges throughout history. Māori knowledge, skills, and resources were vital to protecting the wellbeing of communities and whānau during the COVID-19 pandemic. Historical events, such as, the devastating impact of the 1918 influenza epidemic, and Māori responses to it, were at the top of mind for many Māori, when COVID-19 reached Aotearoa.

Recognising this history, a number of Māori communities identified flaws or gaps in the nation-wide pandemic responses, from the beginning. While effective at preventing the spread of COVID-19 in Aotearoa, the government's pandemic response was challenged by Māori. Serious concern was expressed that the government's approach to COVID-19 lacked an equity lens, lacked acknowledgement of Māori rangatiratanga and their positions as Te Tiriti o Waitangi partners. As a result of this, evidence indicates that major opportunities to consider a range of Māori views and leadership, as well as some serious inequities such as those experienced in the current health system, was missed.

The government's authority to make decisions in the best interests of Māori communities was questioned, but **an inherent sense to protect the communities runs deep. This sense of protection has been to the benefit of Aotearoa, serving both Māori and non-Māori people, multiple times throughout history.** Māori responded to COVID-19 through a plethora of actions underpinned by tikanga and matauranga Māori. Much of this was built on established networks and relationships that enabled agile, effective and adaptive activities aimed at protecting communities.

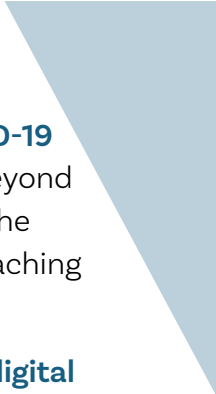
“Tino rangatiratanga is the practice of living according to our tikanga and recognising Māori self determination in all aspects of life, unimpeded by the Crown.” (Devine et al., 2022)



“A national programme, while necessary, will lead to exacerbated health inequities. While things are being done for the general population, they don’t have an equity lens, which is essential from the beginning.”
(Reid, 2020)

- Marae across Aotearoa developed pandemic plans that **adapted tikanga and kawa** to the challenges that were presented. This was seen in hapū and marae committees temporarily closing their marae; in new approaches to tangihanga, despite the huge personal and spiritual impacts this had; and in many changes to the way people interacted in face-to-face settings, to prevent the spread of disease.
- Some iwi, hapū or whānau groups took the very practical and visible steps of **creating checkpoints** to limit the movement of people and control the spread of COVID-19, just as they had done a century before to control influenza. Almost 50 roadside checkpoints were developed, resourced and led by Māori, staffed by volunteers, and often operated with co-operation of NZ Police. The checkpoints provided an additional layer of protection for entire communities, including Māori and non-Māori residents. Checkpoints were also invaluable for communicating information, and contributing to a sense of trust, between government agencies and community.
- As the pandemic progressed, **Māori responses also evolved**, demonstrating tino rangatiratanga through identifying and managing risk unique to their own communities. Māori-led actions continued to protect the community, such as through establishing Te Roopū Whakakaupapa Urutā, a National Māori Pandemic response group of Māori health experts, to focus on the wellbeing of Māori and provide a Māori voice; advocating, promoting and actively supporting COVID-19 vaccinations; and opting to keep all Kohanga Reo closed, to continue protection of their communities. Through Whānau Ora Commissioning Agencies, Māori were engaged and able to guide the allocation of Government funding, made available to support Māori.
- Many hapū, iwi, marae, and Māori organisations and community groups **organised and delivered resources** to members of the community, including to Māori and non-Māori, on the largest scale seen in recent history. Many initiatives were supported by Māori and non-Māori businesses, and priority was given to vulnerable members of the community, such as the kaumatua (elders), low-income earners, as well as those who live rurally, or had pre-existing health conditions. Kai, information, resources, and other essential items needed by whānau were sourced and distributed to communities, including direct donations and other financial support, providing transport, and linking whānau with government support. The distribution of resources to whānau was made possible by the rapid mobilisation and leverage of existing networks, to identify where the areas of need were, and to access and distribute resources.





“... we did what it takes and we still do and we’ll continue to do that because that’s what Māori providers do. That’s what Māori do. Even when you’re not in this game, it’s kaupapa Māori, it’s tikanga, it’s kawa.” (Ali Hamlin-Paenga, CE, Ngāti Kahungunu Whānau Services, 2022)

- Māori networks played a critical role in **conveying COVID-19 related information** to communities throughout and beyond the lockdown period. This included ensuring access to the government public health messages, and prioritising reaching parts of the community that can be hard to reach.
- Māori innovated through the **use of online spaces and digital technology**, to build and maintain connections, share knowledge and support. Māori used networks to support and strengthen communities through a range of media and forums, such as online mental health services, social and spiritual initiatives, phone calls checking in on people, and pop-up clinics in smaller rural communities. Digital platforms provided a way for people to keep busy, to learn different skills, to connect with others or for pleasure and amusement. Online innovations enabled Māori to maintain whanaungatanga through the promotion of specifically Māori material.

The expressions of Tino Rangatiratanga evident throughout the pandemic show the exercise of rangatiratanga today as everyday acts to protect and support communities. Many Māori groups had the knowledge and skills to support and deliver for their communities. In this way, the pandemic responses have shone a light on how future government decisions regarding health and wellbeing can be built upon by including Māori as Te Tiriti o Waitangi partners and decision-makers for outcomes of all people living in Aotearoa.

- **Iwi and Māori communities should be recognised as self-reliant and strong in the face of myriad adversities, not vulnerable.** To recognise and realise these strengths, and to uphold its Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations, the New Zealand Government needs to deliver systemic and structural changes that mitigate against the existing inequities and institutional racism that underpin many Māori disparities in health and wellbeing.
- **Tino rangatiratanga should be recognised, respected, and supported.** The Government has a duty to protect tino rangatiratanga, and to do so, should recognise and honour tino rangatiratanga across policy and practice, and ensure that Māori have the resource and mandate to enable rangatiratanga to be enacted.



- **Opportunities to build true partnership abound, but the government and its representatives will need to trust and be trustworthy in their approaches.** To support health and wellbeing outcomes, Government must ensure that specific Māori needs are addressed, and deliver this by partnering with Māori, listening to Māori, and supporting Māori to do what they know is right. We particularly urge Government to normalise high trust, collaborative, flexible and sustainable contracts and commissioning models.
- **High quality research and data will support iwi and Māori responses and will help build the trust needed for partnership.** Incomplete data makes it challenging for national and local government to understand how communities are affected, and lack of access to data can restrain the activities of Māori organisations and providers. Greater emphasis needs to go into sharing relevant information, and supporting Māori research and researchers to address these concerns, including upholding Māori data sovereignty.

