

SYSTEM RESET

Regenerating the marae economy

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Abstract

What role can marae communities play in a post-COVID-19 lockdown “reset”? This situation report looks at the opportunity of unlocking innovation within marae kin communities through developing food system enterprises. It considers the idea of regenerating gardens and associated initiatives. It argues that gardens that once fed local kin communities may not only provide kai for locally resident members but also be developed at new scales and so provide for kin members wherever they live. There is also the opportunity to re-engage with, and harness, community knowledge of growing, of gardens, of ancestral landscapes and related mātauranga, and to share all this with multi-located marae community members who have been disconnected from these foundational layers of community kōrero for one or more generations. Resetting the economic and cultural agenda from a marae community perspective is important now more than ever given the uncertainties that have emerged since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords

marae, innovation, community leadership, food and resource sovereignty

In a short time, COVID-19 has come to dominate just about every facet of our existence. Communities are reconsidering many aspects of their lives and thinking about what the unfolding unemployment and other crises mean to them now and in the long term. To one extent or another, coping with uncertainty is an issue for all, but it is the unusualness and uncertainty of the present situation that provides seed beds for new opportunity to take shape.

For Māori kin communities who are mainly rural and small, the COVID-19 pandemic was worrying for the speed at which it could take hold and for the potential devastation that it could effect on those most vulnerable. Historic memory of epidemics and pandemics sent shivers down the collective spine as hapū today recalled the

high fatalities and prolonged periods of disease in marae communities. Think typhoid in the 1870s to early 1900s; smallpox in Northland in 1913; influenza between 1890 and 1894 (and earlier for Ngāti Whātua pā in Tāmaki/Auckland; Walker, 1990, p. 80) and again, severely, in 1918–1919; as well as measles, tuberculosis and other outbreaks (Lange, 2018; Pool, 1973; Rice, 2018). Compared to their urban, non-Māori counterparts, Māori suffered considerably worse in all cases.

It was no surprise that marae communities acted quickly in response to the threat of COVID-19, with many setting up road checkpoints to ensure no one would bring in the potentially lethal virus (“Far North Māori,” 2020; Foon & Hunt, 2020; McLachlan, 2020). These efforts showed what was important: smart thinking from the

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ground up, active leadership and a determined commitment to prevent needless calamity. That marae communities did not experience the anticipated sickness or worse from COVID-19 in its early months was greatly comforting, but it was also indicative of concerted, decisive, collective effort (inclusive of police and others) and being bold.

The same ideas apply in a post-COVID-19 lockdown context. It would be wrong, however, to simply pounce on the coattails of the pandemic and think we must take action only because of it. We must of course heed the health guidelines and protect ourselves and communities against the virus. But the broader objectives of pursuing a marae community sustainability agenda should be paramount in the minds and actions of its people irrespective of external threats. COVID-19 should help to channel effort and “reset”, rather than determine, community agendas.

COVID-19 has, therefore, reminded us of the importance of collective effort, of community cohesion and support of one another, especially of our most at risk. It has reminded us of the importance of long-term thinking and strategies to ensure the wellbeing and safety of our people. It has reminded us about other fundamentals as well: whānau, whenua, kai security and financial security. Nothing should be taken for granted.

Without doubt we are in the midst of a significant watershed moment. But these crises will not define us. It is their aftermath and what we do that will define us; not now, but in the eyes of our mokopuna. It is they who will look back and see what we have done in response.

It is time, therefore, to truly reset, and reset from a perspective that is often overlooked or is silent within the neoliberal agenda of development; an agenda that privileges the majority view, mindset and values, and undermines the Indigenous local. And for Māori the voices that are often ignored because they are the small-scale are those of marae. Treaty claim settlements and other government laws and policies do not naturally focus on marae as the community heart, even if intended benefits or engagements are for them. Instead, iwi and post-settlement governance entities take much of the attention from a Crown perspective, yet it is kainga—inclusive of their whānau and hapū—that are a focus of Article Two of Te Tiriti o Waitangi | the Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand’s founding document. Ironically, it is Article Two balanced against Article One from which Treaty principles derive and which in turn influence law and policy concerning Māori.

It is time now when marae communities and their leaders can (and do) take a central role in shaping a path for their people, both local and non-local kin, and in partnership with local and central government and wider communities. They know their people best. They know their land and they know its beating heart (see, e.g., Mutu, 2017, pp. 179–181).

If we are to re-centre the fundamentals of whānau, whenua, kai and finance, what does that actually mean in a marae community? Related to that is how we can harness the potential and opportunity of enterprise that may seed new jobs and look after Papatūānuku in ways not yet imagined, or not yet progressed.

Solutions to these questions—to the human crisis, the economic crisis and the pre-pandemic environmental crisis—are already here. The taniwha who has lain dormant is again stirring because of crisis. The taniwha may also kick-start an old world approach that supports 21st century “change agents” such as those with attributes of customary leadership—rangatira, pōtiki and/or kaumātua—who can unify community strength and who can create something transformational for that community.

Here I am talking about developing community enterprise that is culturally based, environmentally sensitive and economically smart, and all of this within the frame of kaitiakitanga and innovation. The combination of these things will see orange returned, revived and revitalised. Marae community enterprise may also show to other communities and our nation at large what is possible; it may also demonstrate that benefits may accrue regionally and nationally, economically and socially.

I am not talking about doing the same old thing, or what we might call “business as usual”, post-COVID-19. The unusualness of now has seen an improvement in our environment and carbon emissions (Henriques, 2020; Towle, 2020), but these outcomes should be deliberate rather than by accident.

We managed this ngāngara, the coronavirus, by stamping it out through hard, fast, drastic action. The same applies to developing solutions: tackling the challenges we face, being fearless yet careful, calculated yet courageous.

With whānau, whenua, kai and finance at the core of a marae community response, the taniwha may be unleashed so that the potential of marae lands can be realised, such as by transforming them into gardens of taonga and other species. It is also much more than just developing them for

local benefit. It means providing much-needed foods to marae community members who live near and far.

The Pā to Plate enterprise (www.pa2plate.co.nz) currently being developed with Taitokerau marae communities shows us what is possible through marae-based growers and the developing online ordering portal for the descendant consumers (Kawharu, 2018). “Whānau first” is a priority of most, if not all growers, whereby foods from māra are distributed to local people. Surplus then becomes available online. A Pā to Plate survey of approximately 200 people from Northland found that an overwhelming majority (97%) would purchase kai from lands at “home” (marae); similarly, 94% said they would be interested in purchasing food from the ngāhere at home, if they had the opportunity to. Survey respondents enthused:

It will be awesome to be able to provide for our tamariki mokopuna instead of buy snack packs, pies, lollies. To feed our kaumātua/kui who are unable to buy or purchase huawhenua hua rakau me te miti.

I love the idea. It will give whānau opportunity to work together. Better utilise our marae and help our people.

I think it would be great to have food grown by my own hapū, marae. No GE. No nasties or unknown in our kai, keeping our locals healthy making or creating employment for our people.

I think Pā to Plate would benefit Māori people. Also we would connect with our own cultures’ beliefs and wairua [spirit], so I think it could also be a learning tool for our people. Tautoko!

Growing gardens is hardly new though. We need to also revive other food sources in our waterways and forests. Indeed, this is a community-defined goal of Pā to Plate. But this also means more than just growing food. It means cleaning up waterways and restoring the health of native forests by repairing the damage wrought by possums, invasive weeds and diseases. Replenished ecosystems may then see foods and medicines re-entering the marae community economy again, like freshwater koura, tuna, kawakawa, kumara hou, and other things that are likely no longer part of community-wide daily lives. The opportunities for improving regenerative outcomes through improving kaitiakitanga practices are significant where there is commitment and courage, where challenges are tackled (human

and environmental) and where partnerships with local people, Western scientists and governments are activated. It is a whole-of-community approach, driven by marae communities.

Fundamentally, Pā to Plate shows us that we can build a circular economy between the home marae people and their relatives and wider public, who are encouraged to return food scraps and labour to marae communities. On the back of such tautoko, they may then develop novel composting systems and other “return to land” systems to regenerate and rehabilitate Papatūānuku. And then the cycle begins again (Gravis, 2020; Kawharu, 2018). This is our own Indigenous “take” on the notion of a circular economy, similar to the circular economy emphasis on product life cycle, product reuse and recycling (Lacy et al., 2020, Ministry for the Environment, 2020). And while the circular economy and regenerative agriculture as approaches to resource use are trending today, not least given the effects of climate change and the need to adapt and mitigate them, their value propositions or antecedents have nevertheless underpinned kaitiakitanga for generations.

How is this so? Kaitiakitanga is about utu or reciprocal duties of care, duties of communities to their land and waters (i.e., to regenerate, revitalise or rehabilitate the environment) and, in return, communities will see lands and waters provide hua. Kaitiakitanga was traditionally important from community economy, security and sustainability perspectives. It is a balanced relationship where the effects of people’s use of lands and waters correlates to the life-giving capacities of the environment (whilst also acknowledging the effects of natural events and disasters).

The opportunity of kaitiakitanga now, therefore, in marae communities’ developing food systems is to regenerate not only lands and waters, but also people (e.g., growers) and knowledge (e.g., mātauranga). This idea is important now more than ever given the uncertainties of employment for many, the disruption to food systems, and more.

At its heart, the Pā to Plate food system plots a pathway that is also about incentivising and creating jobs amongst a marae community right the way through the value chain. It is also about reconnecting people to kainga, kai and culture. The opportunity to bring healthy kai, heritage kai and old customary sources of kai back into the food chain, and at the same time bring back kōrero of growing, gardens, lands and waters into the daily lives of a now largely urban diaspora, is also significant.

Imagine also building enterprises associated with the geographic uniqueness of marae-centred gardens, like community kitchens, like processing and warehousing hubs, like associated heritage centres and tourism sites that offer real life experiences. There might also be kai kitchen coffees, maybe even locally grown coffee or tea—taking advantage of the favourable climate shifts now affecting New Zealand. Unleashing the taniwha could revive and develop new maramataka based on old world knowledge of seasons and patterns of growth and maybe enable new or hybrid food species to enter our food chain.

COVID-19 has shown to humanity everywhere that community cohesion and connection are vitally important. This means supporting “the local” authentically, not tokenistically. We need to be brave and fearless, allowing communities and their leaders themselves to design novel investment platforms from their lands for intergenerational benefit. These platforms will then connect those who are still living locally, and support those who have left for the cities one or more generations ago.

Treasury (2020) tells us that the extreme uncertainties of the future mean that “economic forecasting becomes less about predicting likely outcomes, and more about illustrating salient possibilities” (para. 12). The role of comprehensive marae community development built around a garden economy must be factored into this picture.

Then the taniwha will rest again until the next time it awakens to confront challenges of the future.

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Glossary

hapū	subtribe
hua	fruits, resources
hua rakau	fruit
huawhenua	vegetables
iwi	tribes
kai	food
kainga	marae communities
kaitiakitanga	collective guardianship
kaumātua	elder leadership, elders
kawakawa	traditional medicinal plant (<i>Macropiper excelsum</i>),

kōrero	conversation, talking, discussion
koura	crayfish (<i>Paranephrops planifrons</i>)
kui	elders
kumara hou	traditional medicinal plant (<i>Pomaderris kumarahou</i>)
Māori	Indigenous peoples of New Zealand
māra	gardens
marae	complex of buildings around a sacred open meeting area
maramataka	calendars
mātauranga	customary knowledge
miti	meat
mokopuna	grandchildren
ngāhere	bush
ngāngara	reptile
Ngāti Whātua	confederation of four tribes occupying the lands between the Hokianga Harbour and Tāmaki (Auckland) in the North Island of New Zealand
oranga	health and wellbeing
pā	settlements
Papatūānuku	earth mother, the land
pōtiki	entrepreneurially minded thinking
rangatira	vision leadership
rongoa	medicines
Taitokerau	the Northland region of New Zealand
tamariki	children
taonga	heirloom
taniwha	metaphorical guardian
tautoko	support
tuna	eels (<i>Anguilla dieffenbachia</i>)
utu	reciprocal duties of care
whānau	families
whenua	lands

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