

Meta-analysing community action projects in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract The current Labour Government in Aotearoa¹ New Zealand has overseen a revival of interest in devolved community decision-making and a burgeoning of locality-based community action and community development projects. This paper reports on a meta-analysis of ten community action projects. The activation, consolidation and transition or completion stages of the projects were examined to identify commonalities in structures and processes that either enhanced or impeded the projects meeting their objectives for social change. The importance of processes for critical reflection, the analysis of power dynamics between stakeholders, and recognition of the social, cultural and historical context of a project's genesis will be discussed.

Introduction

Community action, a strategy for creating community-based change towards social and environmental policy objectives, is growing in popularity with governments internationally and in Aotearoa New Zealand (Casswell, 2001; Social Exclusion Unit, 2001; Allen, Kilvington and Horn, 2002; Wood, 2002). Devolution to community-based decision-making has been a policy response in light of evidence that social service provision initiated purely within central government has not adequately addressed many social and environmental needs (Department of Internal Affairs, 2002). Community² involvement in initiatives to address community need is being heralded as a more effective way of addressing these needs (Cabinet Office, 2000).

1 Aotearoa is the Maori name for New Zealand.

2 The focus on the role of 'the community' raised questions about who and what is 'the community'. Issues of representation are raised as well as notions of communities of interest (see Panelli, 2001, or Valentine, 2001, for useful discussion on this).

Community action is an approach to addressing specific social and/or environmental needs on a scale that is local and accessible to the participants. While being inherently interconnected, community action projects can be distinguished from community development projects by the very specific focus taken (e.g., improving river water quality or school suspension rates). Actions are aimed at changing particular behaviours, practices and or policies through a participatory and educational process involving a range of community, voluntary sector and central and local government stakeholders. Community development is more focused on enabling the wider community to address a broad range of issues in a holistic manner – ‘community development increases the likelihood that community action may take place around specific topics in a community’ (Ministry of Health, 2003).

A key feature of community action projects is developing the skills and analysis within the community so that there can be fundamental and long-term change to problematic systems and structures (McCreanor, Moewaka Barnes and Mathews, 1998; Holder, 2000). This approach to social change has the potential to create activities that are responsive to the diverse needs of community sectors and to changing circumstances (Casswell and Stewart, 1989; Moewaka Barnes, 2000).

Aspects that enhance community projects have been identified by Laverack (2001) and Labonte (1990). Laverack provides a useful overview of the ‘operational domains’ of community empowerment. He highlights participation, leadership, organizational structures, problem assessment, resource mobilization, asking ‘why’ questions, links with other people and organizations, and programme management. When viewed as practices these domains suggest key process indicators that can be explored as projects develop, for example, building leadership, creating participation, or assessing problems.

Knowledge of these process indicators or effective change practices can be incorporated into community action projects through the use of community action research. The Public Health field in Aotearoa New Zealand draws on community action research to enhance projects through the use of formative evaluation. This form of evaluation assists in the establishment, implementation, monitoring and review of community projects by feeding knowledge of ‘best practice’ into the project as it develops (Conway *et al.*, 2000). The evaluator takes on the roles of ‘critical friend’, mentor and broker.

Informed by this area of growing knowledge, researchers at the Centre for Social and Health Outcomes Research and Evaluation (SHORE)³ set out to question whether effective components of community action research were

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evident across a diverse array of community-based projects. This investigation, the meta-analysis of community action research projects in Aotearoa New Zealand⁴ aimed to identify the barriers and enhancers to achieving specific social and environmental change objectives through community action research projects. Ten diverse projects were selected and the commonalities and differences in the practices adopted by these projects were examined. Our use of the term *practices* incorporates activities and structures used to form projects, as well as processes used to develop projects.

This paper describes the qualitative meta-analysis methodology used in the study, discusses the findings structured under the projects' phases of activation, consolidation and completion or transition, and proposes a set of key principles found to be fundamental to the success or failure of the ten community action projects studied.

Meta-analysis as a way of building knowledge about community action

Meta-analysis at the most general level is a research method to compare, combine or synthesize the results of previous research. Hunter and Schmidt (1990) termed meta-analysis the 'analysis of analyses'. It is undertaken so that more rigorous conclusions can be drawn than those based on the findings of individual studies. It usually, but not always implies a statistical approach to reviewing and summarizing existing research findings (Florax, de Groot and de Mooij, 2002; Cochrane Collaboration, 2003). Nijkamp and Pepping (1998) describe meta-analysis as 'essentially a mode of thinking and may comprise a multiplicity of different methods and technique' (p. 1488). In adopting the term meta-analysis for the research described in this paper the intent was to undertake a rigorous and systematic analysis of past community action research projects.

In addition to identifying and analysing the practices that enhance or hinder community action, the meta-analysis provided an opportunity to examine the varied practices for supporting and funding community action across government sectors in Aotearoa New Zealand. We were able to explore the matrix of relationships, both the vertical relationships within projects (of funder, fund holder, evaluator and community project team) and the horizontal relationships across projects (between funders, fund holders, evaluators, and community project members) that influence community action projects. Our analysis of dynamics, barriers and

4 The project was funded for the period September 2001 to July 2003 by a New Zealand government funding scheme for research that would build knowledge across government sectors. See http://www.shore.ac.nz/projects/projects_9.html for a copy of the full report.

enhancers to change took into account community discourses as well as social and political contextual factors influencing community policy and funding practices in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Case studies to explore how change is facilitated through community action

Representatives of seven⁵ government ministries were involved in selecting the ten community action research projects that would become the case studies. To ensure a diverse set of case studies were selected, the following two-tiered selection criteria were developed:

First tier criteria

- 1 The project was community based with a research/evaluation component.
- 2 The formative evaluation was well documented.
- 3 Projects had been running for more than two years or had reached completion.
- 4 Community representatives, the researchers and funder were available, willing to participate, and knowledgeable about the history of the project.
- 5 Of the ten case studies, three were Maori specific and three were Pacific specific.

Second tier criteria

- 1 The case studies spanned sectors (funders), population groups and issues.
- 2 The case studies represented urban/rural localities and were geographically spread.
- 3 Diverse models for community action research were represented (e.g., community initiated/government agency initiated, departmental evaluation/external evaluation, single/multiple funders, projects shaped by different political and socioenvironmental contexts).

In hindsight the criteria appear naively optimistic. Despite assurances from the representatives of the government ministries that numerous projects had been funded that met the criteria, delving into the details of project histories indicated otherwise. Few projects incorporated formative evaluation and well-documented examples were rare.

5 The Interdepartmental Reference Group was comprised of representatives from the Ministries of Health, Pacific Island Affairs, and Social Development; Te Puni Kokiri; and the Departments of Conservation, Internal Affairs, and Child, Youth and Family.

Additionally, in the course of the selection process it became evident that ministry representatives held a range of understandings about community action and formative evaluation. It eventuated that we were unable to identify ten community action research projects that had involved formative evaluation and even fewer with a documented evaluative record of the challenges faced, actions taken and outcomes achieved. Most evaluation reports documented what happened but not the context and basis of the decisions taken to create those actions, and thus gave little insight into the reasons why one path was taken and not another. Attempts to trace key personnel within the funding agencies also revealed a high turnover of staff in this role in government ministries.

In the absence of enough documented community action research projects we revised the criteria and selected ten community action projects that had incorporated some form of reflective practice. The implications of this were that we were no longer able to focus on the documented lessons learned from incorporating the knowledge of 'best practice' into projects via a formative evaluation process. It became an analysis of lessons learned through a variety of reflective practices (documented and oral). Consequently the primary research question driving the meta-analysis 'How is change facilitated through community action *research* projects?' became 'How is change facilitated through community action projects?'

The ten projects selected are listed in Table 1. Although the criteria relating to the evaluation of projects were not met for all projects, other criteria were met. The case studies were diverse in terms of location, the focus of the projects, ethnicity, and the government sectors that funded them. Seven of the ten had some form of documented evaluation.

Methods

The meta-analysis used a multiple methods approach drawing on grounded theory techniques. Theory developed from 'a continuous interplay between analysis and the data' (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, p. 273). Data were gathered and analysed and returned to participants for feedback in a series of iterative stages.

For each case study relevant project and evaluation documents were collated and semi-structured face-to-face interviews were undertaken with project members, evaluators and funders.⁶ The interviews with research participants gathered data on the history of projects, the local

⁶ The case studies developed for the meta-analysis are informative, providing a useful account of the historical, environmental and social context in which the community action projects operated (Greenaway *et al.*, 2003a, 2003b).

Table 1 Community action case studies

<i>Name of project</i>	<i>Initial focus</i>	<i>Demographic</i>	<i>Sector</i>
Moerewa Community Project	Alcohol and the community	Rural, Maori	Public Health
Waitomo Papkainga Tracker Project	Youth development	Rural, Maori, Youth	Social Welfare
Pacifica Healthcare	Community garden	Urban, Pacific	Public Health
Peaceful Waves/Matangī Male	Education for non-violence	Urban, Pacific	Public Health
Whaingaroa Catchment Management Project	Integrated Catchment management	Rural	Environment
He Rangihou New Day Project of Opotiki Safer Communities Council	Alcohol, drugs and young people	Rural, Maori, Youth	Public Health
Roughcut Youth Development Project	Employment training	Rural, Youth	Community Development
Christchurch Youth Project	Young people and crime	Urban, Youth	Police and Local Government
TAIERI Trust River Catchment Project	Catchment and community health	Rural	Environment and Public Health
PACIFICA	Governance and management	Nationwide, Pacific	Employment

contexts, the practices used by groups to document their decision-making and actions, and the *reflective practices*⁷ used to establish if and how change had occurred through their projects. We also facilitated a workshop with evaluators from the projects and liaised with peer advisors to the research project as our analysis developed.

Factors that enabled or limited community change were identified in each case study. Common and contrasting practices used in the projects' phases of activation, consolidation, and completion or transition were then examined across case studies and the common barriers and enhancers to change identified.

This was a qualitative meta-analysis based on the review of documentation and post fact interviews and was not designed to make causal extrapolations about the practices that led to particular actions or outcomes. The scope or boundary of the analysis was quite clear in order not to attempt a meta-evaluation.⁸ We did not undertake an evaluation of the projects, nor evaluate the project evaluations, or attempt to assess the impacts or outcomes of the projects.

7 See Sankaran *et al.* (2001), Smith, Willms and Johnson (1997), plus Reason and Bradbury (2001) for discussion on reflective practices in action research.

8 See <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/arp/meta-eval-bib.html> for a good discussion on meta-evaluation.

In order to answer the question 'How is change facilitated through community action projects?' we addressed a number of lower level research questions. The findings section is structured as responses to these research questions.

Findings: How change was facilitated through ten community action projects in Aotearoa New Zealand

To address our research question we identified the practices that projects had used to meet their objectives for change, and the barriers and enhancers to effecting these practices during the phases of activation, consolidation and completion/transition of the projects. We also identified how the trajectories of projects were influenced by the formation of critical relationships and coalitions, and by the approaches adopted to reflect on and review a project's progress. From this analysis we were able to conclude that there are key practices and principles that facilitate change through community action projects.

What processes and activities did the projects utilize to create change?

While diversity is an inherent feature of projects working to create change through community-based decision-making, there are practices and perspectives common to them all. Effective community action identified in this meta-analysis required:

- building skilled leadership;
- accessing adequate resourcing;
- enabling infrastructural development;
- creating committed strategic support and advocacy from both government agencies and community organizations;
- enabling effective coordination;
- vision building;
- skilled facilitation of people and processes;
- networking to build relationships, communication and knowledge;
- accessing mentors;
- effective planning; and
- making opportunities for critical reflection.

Projects benefited from the support of people with community development expertise and the skills to foster a project environment in which the above practices are nurtured. This expertise and skill was accessed from people in a variety of roles, including: community development advisors, fund contract managers, mentors from an umbrella organization, project coordinators, evaluators, advisors from a fund-holding organization, and trustees.

What were the barriers and enhancers to creating change?

Activation phase

The activation phase of the project was hindered by a lack of clear purpose. When the objectives of the project and processes for working together had not been clarified across all stakeholders and clearly communicated, projects struggled with confused understandings and misinterpreted actions. Involving all key stakeholders at an early stage led to greater ongoing stakeholder support for the project. Useful activities undertaken in the activation phase included stakeholder and needs analyses, community profiling, visioning, plus strategic and action planning. Informal and formal partnerships or networks were formed and opportunities for collaborative work identified. Most projects appointed a paid coordinator and formed governance, management and/or advisory group structures. Important questions for projects to reflect upon during this phase included:

- How have the needs or issues been identified, who was involved in identifying them?
- What is the history and context that created the issues?
- How have the issues been tackled in the past? What makes now the right time to address the issues again?
- What administration structures are most appropriate for the project?
- What are the most appropriate tools for planning and review?
- How will stakeholders know when and if the objectives of the project have been achieved?

Consolidation phase

The consolidation phase involved identifying the skills and information required to make desired social/environmental changes. Building a resource and knowledge base on matters pertinent to the various projects' objectives was critical to this phase. Activities and processes that developed skills, built interest and participation in the project, managed conflict and fostered a project culture were also critical.

Consistent with international findings the projects were limited by short-term funding (Blaxter, Farnell and Watts, 2003) and by funder reporting mechanisms that did not enable critical reflection or the telling of the project's story. An additional challenge projects faced was that of balancing long-term planning and strategy development with short-term action to give a project a profile within the community.

Activities found to be effective during this phase included: shoulder tapping 'movers and shakers' to get them involved in the project; planning communication pathways; forming subgroups or work streams; clarifying

tasks and roles; involving the funding organization in ongoing planning; using other organizations' networks to share information; involving local talent to give the project a profile; and finding mentors, advocates and training opportunities. Some important questions for project members to reflect on in this phase were:

- Are a variety of practices being used to enable diverse groups of people to participate?
- What barriers are there to communication and how can these be addressed?
- Where can community development skills and knowledge be accessed?
- How could the project become sustainable in the longer term?

Completion/transition phase

The end of a funding cycle was challenging for all case studies and no project had a clear strategy for sustaining the project in the longer term. A few projects ended but most transitioned into an alternative organizational form.⁹ Where projects had prioritized and planned for multistakeholder collaboration, opportunities for combined resourcing of initiatives sometimes eventuated, opening pathways for sustaining the work of the project.

It was evident in all the projects that the individuals and organizations involved had developed new ways of relating and/or new skills and knowledge for addressing the issues at hand. Skills and knowledge gained through the case study projects was applied in community initiatives beyond the immediate project (community capacity building). In a few instances the projects had influenced the policy agendas of participating government agencies.

Activities found useful for the transition or completion of the project included: organizing an event to commemorate the transition or completion; ensuring all stakeholders were aware of any imminent cessation, down-sizing or review of the project; and planning for closure or transition well ahead of time to manage the community implications of the change in status. Some key points for reflection at this phase included:

- How do stakeholders know if the objectives of the project have been achieved?
- What are some implications for policy arising out of the project?

⁹ Some became purely service providers and others became broader community development projects.

- How will organizations sustain and build on the skills and knowledge that have been developed from participation in the project?
- What new directions and opportunities are there for the project and its members?

How did the relationships between evaluators, funders and community groups create change?

Fundamental to all ten projects was the importance of *building relationships that are transformative* (Ledwith, 1997), that is, relationships between individuals and organizations that enable existing understandings and ways of working to be challenged and which required new ways to be trialed and adopted.¹⁰ Projects were enhanced when the *power dynamics* influencing the relationships between stakeholders were acknowledged and addressed throughout the course of the project.¹¹

This analysis strongly supports arguments that the development of community capacity requires changing the dynamics of relationships between and across governmental and non-governmental organizations. Where government agencies had strong and effective relationships and worked together on particular issues, major enhancement for the community action projects was evident.

Some members of projects struggled with notions of accountability when the project's funder or members of the fund-holding body held different perspectives of the issues being addressed than those held by project members. Some projects had multiple levels of accountability and drew on diverse forms and notions of community. A continuous process of negotiating power imbalances between groups or people and within and across organizations was common to most of the case study projects.

Something I have a real difficulty with is around community accountability, how we keep faith with the grassroots people we work with while satisfying the people in positions of power that we are also accountable to. It's not such an issue with our major funders as with the local authority which sponsors our umbrella organization. Some of the councillors believe strongly that ratepayers' money should not be spent on social issues, so they don't support our work. . . they also believe we're doing nothing because they don't understand what we're doing or see that it's making any change. Within a local geographical community there

¹⁰ See also Blaxter, Farnell and Watts (2003) for further detail on the skills required for this to occur.

¹¹ Although often ignored in recent debates about community capacity building, a range of practices have been developed for analysing the power structures that influence communities. These generally draw from the work of Freire (1972).

are so many different communities with different cultures and subcultures, different and conflicting interests and different degrees of power (Interview – Project Coordinator).

Projects benefited where funding organizations acted as a project advocate, committed to achieving the outcomes of the project. Negotiating the funding contract and setting project objectives as part of an open process, led to realistic expectations being set for the projects. It also increased the likelihood of points of connection being found between the philosophies and practices of the community organization and the goals of the funding agency. In some instances members of community organizations rejected funding or strongly stated their terms of engagement with a project in order to ensure their vision was honoured.

Complex funding structures created complex relationships within the projects. In some cases there was a fund-holding organization that played an intermediary role between the funding agency and the project leaders. The capacity of this organization to manage the funds as well as maintain credibility with both the government agencies and the community organization was critical. Projects were greatly enhanced when there was a skilled project or contract manager in the fund-holding agency who had formed strong relationships and was able to advocate for and advise the members of the project team.

Projects were enhanced by the presence of people with knowledge of community development processes, information to share about the experiences of other projects, skills in visioning, planning, and negotiation with key stakeholders, and effective relationship-building practices. Knowledge and skill levels varied. However, there were key roles identified as important, including the evaluator or researcher, a mentor in an umbrella organization, and the funding advisor or project coordinator. Projects struggled when there was not ready access to skilled people. The presence of a skilled person in at least one of these roles enabled the transfer of knowledge between the funding organization and the project members. It also enhanced networking and collegial support of the project.

One of the things that I've understood is that it takes an awful lot of time to get from the starting point to the strategic action plan. . . The first lesson is patience, trust the process, people get there in the end if the right people are involved, but there are no shortcuts (Interview – funding official).

Two common statements from various informants were – 'you have to trust the process' and 'you've got to know when the timing is right'. Almost all of the meta-analysis participants approached community action as a developmental process. However some of the funding officials acknowledged that

this perspective often sits uncomfortably alongside their focus on outcomes tailored to the three-year political cycle.

'Trusting the process' infers a need to understand that community projects go through cycles and that significant moments or opportunities occur at a time and pace determined by the dynamics of a project. Prescribing particular actions and timeframes at the outset may not be as effective as working through a flexible though focused process.

So what I started to understand... when you're funding community action, is you are actually purchasing a process... Community action contracts are always fairly light on content. They are just focused on process goals or process timelines (Interview – funding official).

To build and operate on a basis of trust was upheld as an ideal by numerous project stakeholders. For funding agencies this required trusting developmental processes, trusting the accountability mechanisms that community organizations had instigated, and respecting and acknowledging the skills and professionalism of community workers.

Evaluators also had to trust the process of engaging with community workers, particularly in situations where evidence-based strategies were unknown. The evaluators' role became one of supporting and evaluating the effectiveness of innovative strategies as a knowledge base accumulated.

What were the reflective practices utilized in the ten selected projects?

Reflective practices, where used, contributed significantly to the development of community action projects and to building knowledge in the communities and organizations involved. Reflective practice was used effectively in day-to-day problem solving, planning, gathering of information for decision-making, reviewing work already undertaken, documenting how the work is being done, and to question why certain decisions were made. Various forms of action reflection cycles were integrated into project planning. These included participatory research processes, formative evaluation, informal review discussions, and story telling.

In several community projects an action research model was used whereby problem solving incorporated the deliberate practice of moving through cycles of reflection informed by action, and action informed by reflection (Lewin, 1952). Other projects incorporated a clear research strand that helped to inform the decision-making and planning of the project (in one case this was a formative evaluation). Other projects developed distinctive cultures of reflection leading to action through less formalized means, such as regular review meetings with key people in the community to ask questions about what is working, what is not working, and why.

For the Maori-specific projects, reflective practice was driven by a holistic worldview consistent with concepts of connection between the past, present and future. Story telling enabled spiritual, cultural, mental and physical aspects of a project to be incorporated into a reflective process. The story-telling process located project issues clearly in the context of the community and also helped to identify, prepare for, and address the impact of these issues on the community. The Maori-based projects in the study consistently reflected on dealing with the effects of colonization on a culture and people, the results of powerlessness, and general alienation from inherent cultural strengths.

When we looked across the matrix of relationships involved in the three phases of community action projects the importance of organizational learning at the institutional level was emphasized. In order to facilitate community action and community action research, government funding organizations needed to develop their own institutional capacity (knowledge and resources). There was also a need for cross-fertilization of evaluation practice and the opportunity for evaluators to discuss and critique evaluation methods, especially where they operated as sole practitioners.

How did these reflective practices inform the actions taken in the course of the project?

The utility of reflective practices was apparent not only in the cases where it was particularly strong but in the cases where it was absent. Where reflective practice was not used, projects could lack focus, the project logic could be unclear to participants, and it became difficult for members to plan and act strategically. This lack of clarity created confusion and tension and in some cases made it difficult to communicate the vision of the project to potential stakeholders. Projects where little attention had been given to identifying measures of success struggled to build their funding base or the collaborative relationships required to take the project beyond its initial funding term.

Critical reflection enabled questions to be asked throughout the life of the project about who will benefit and who will be disadvantaged by the actions taken. It also assisted the setting of realistic goals in light of the constraints they faced and the existing opportunities. Through reflective processes the context and history of the issues projects were addressing could be understood, kept to the fore and strategically accounted for in the planning of projects.

Structured opportunities to meet and share experiences with other community action projects were highly valued. Such meetings were seen to provide support, motivation, the chance to reflect on the project by telling the project's story to others, and the opportunity to learn new strategies.

Reflections on doing a meta-analysis of community action projects

The meta-analysis was designed on the premise that it was possible to identify commonality of enhancers and barriers across community action projects. This commonality was of process and not of activities. The processes that enabled change through the community projects created a myriad of different activities, but similar outcomes (such as relationship building, participation, and increased social cohesion). Consequently, commonality of process does not mean that there are predictable paths (activities or planning) that all community projects should take.

While identifying commonalities was a key objective, we were wary of missing the cases where difference was apparent and important. We constantly questioned ourselves about where differences lay across the projects. Our gaze on difference was primarily in the area of ethnic difference. Differences between Maori-specific, Pacific-specific and mixed ethnicity projects existed more in priorities and form rather than in the type of processes that were important for creating change. For example, it was evident that clarity of purpose and a common understanding of how actions related to objectives were critical to the success of all projects. As the Maori projects in the meta-analysis gained strength it was apparent that practices increasingly drew on the local context, experiences, cultural values and *tikanga*¹² in order to reinforce identity and provide a strong and consistent sense of purpose.

Conclusion

The meta-analysis of community action projects revealed overarching principles and practices critical to the development of effective community action projects. The achievement of specific social and environmental change objectives through community action required power dynamics between stakeholders to be recognized and relationships between individuals, groups and organizations to be transformed.

Transformation involved creating structures for collaborative action and learning, along with power sharing and fostering of developmental practices. These structures and practices created the conditions within which change could occur. Critical reflection was necessary to achieve clarity in the project's purpose, and for the logic of actions with respect to objectives to be clear to participants. This practice also enabled the history, social and political context of issues to be addressed and factored into the design of projects.

12 Tikanga are Maori customs and traditions.

The meta-analysis method proved to be a useful tool for elevating our analysis of community action projects beyond the case study level to reveal insights not only about the project themselves but common factors that enhance or inhibit community action projects at the various levels of funding, evaluation and coordination.

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